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Embedded narrative in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* 1.9–10

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Embedded or interpolated narrative (i.e. a story/stories inserted within a story/stories) is a major component of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, but so far it has not received much scholarly attention¹. This article will apply to *Met.* 1.9–10 *inter alia* recent narratological theories and findings in this area² with the intention of elucidating the salient characteristics, varied impact and numerous functions of the passage itself and also of facilitating appreciation of similar embedded narrative elsewhere in the *Metamorphoses*.

A summary to provide context is a necessary preamble. At *Met.* 1.2–4 Lucius on his travels encounters Aristomenes telling a story to an incredulous companion, says that he is prepared to believe the tale himself and persuades Aristomenes to tell it to him too. Aristomenes then relates how on a business-trip to Thessaly he met Socrates, an old friend presumed dead, who was in a beggarly state. He took Socrates to the baths and an inn and discovered that he had been reduced to this wretched condition by Meroe, an old inn-keeper who had put him up after he had been robbed and who had entangled him in a disastrous relationship. When Aristomenes criticizes him for preferring an old whore to his family, Socrates quietens him in case Meroe overhears, explaining to a sceptical Aristomenes that she is a witch and listing her magic powers. He then (at *Met.* 1.9–10) tells how she turned an unfaithful lover into a beaver (because when hunted beavers evade capture by biting off their genitals³), a rival inn-keeper into a frog, a lawyer who had spoken against her into a ram, and condemned to permanent pregnancy a lover's wife who insulted her, and when the townspeople decided to stone her to death for such conduct, she magically im-

1 See especially J. Tatum, "The Tales in Apuleius", *TAPhA* 100 (1969) 487–527 and S. Stabryla, "The Functions of the Tale of Cupid and Psyche in the Structure of the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius", *Eos* 61 (1973) 261–272. Cf. also G. N. Sandy, "Petronius and the Tradition of the Interpolated Narrative", *TAPhA* 101 (1970) 463–476.

2 See G. Genette, *Figures III* (Paris 1972) 238–243; T. Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose* (trans. R. Howard, Ithaca 1977) 66–79; M. Bal, "Notes on Narrative Embedding", *Poetics Today* 2 (1981) 41–59; M. Berendsen, "Formal Criteria of Narrative Embedding", *Journal of Literary Semantics* 10 (1981) 79–94; A. Jefferson, "Mise en Abyme and the Prophetic in Narrative", *Style* 17:2 (1983) 196–208; M. Bal, *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (trans. C. van Boheemen, Toronto 1985) 142–149; B. Duyfhuizen, *Narratives of Transmission* (Cranbury, NJ 1992) esp. 105–132, 203–233.

3 For this belief in antiquity see G. F. Hildebrand, *L. Apuleius Opera Omnia* (repr. Hildesheim 1968) I 39, D. S. Robertson/P. Vallette, *Apulée Les métamorphoses* (Paris 1940) I 10 and A. Scobie, *Apuleius Metamorphoses (Asinus Aureus). I: A Commentary* (Meisenheim am Glan 1975) 99.

prisoned them in their houses until they relented, and then conveyed one night the *coetus auctor*, the instigator, in his locked house to the top of a mountain one hundred miles away and threw the house down outside the gate of the town there. On hearing this, Aristomenes is alarmed in case they have been magically overheard and suggests that they get back their strength with a sleep and leave early to get as far away as they can. Later that night their locked door is hurled to the ground (along with Aristomenes and his bed) by Meroe and another witch who have come for revenge. Meroe plunges a sword into Socrates' neck, reaches down into the wound and pulls out his heart, while her friend staunches the wound with a sponge, and then the pair of them urinate on the terrified Aristomenes and depart. When he tries to leave, the porter won't let him out, and when he tries to hang himself (convinced that he will be charged with murder), the rope breaks and he falls on top of Socrates, who wakes up, apparently in good health. Thereupon the two friends leave, but when they stop for breakfast and Socrates tries to drink from a stream, the wound in his neck re-opens, the sponge rolls out and he drops dead. Aristomenes buries him and goes far away into voluntary exile, terrified for his life.

A particularly noteworthy characteristic is the complexity, which is engaging, and amusing too⁴. So Lucius while travelling to Thessaly on business meets Aristomenes, who narrates how when he was in Thessaly on business he met Socrates, who had been journeying through Thessaly after a business-trip⁵, and there he and Socrates encountered two witches who caused them great trouble and were connected with supernatural metamorphosis (just as there Lucius will encounter two females with magic associations (Pamphile and Photis) who will cause him great trouble and be connected with supernatural metamorphosis). Similarly (as told by Apuleius) Lucius tells a story told to him by Aristomenes in which Aristomenes at 1.9–10 tells the five stories told to him by Socrates, and during the fifth story Socrates reveals that at least part of it was told to him by Meroe⁶. So too in the course of a narrative by the believing Aristomenes directed at an unbelieving companion and the believing Lucius he recounts these five tales which were aimed by the credulous Socrates at the initially incredulous Aristomenes and turned him into a believer; they also made the formerly sceptical Aristomenes alarmed and cautious, but did not have that effect on the credulous Lucius (who subsequently sought out experience of magic and embraced contact with its practitioners)⁷.

4 So in *Met.* 1.20 Lucius says of Aristomenes *lepidae fabulae festivitate nos avocavit* (the text used is that of R. Helm, *Apuleius. Vol. I: Metamorphoseon Libri XI* (Leipzig 1913; repr. Stuttgart/Leipzig 1992)).

5 *Met.* 1.2, 5f., 7.

6 *Met.* 1.10 *ut mihi temulenta narravit proxime*. For similar complications over narrators cf. Duyfhuizen, *op. cit.* (n. 2) 196.

7 Tatum, *op. cit.* (n. 1) 499 suggests that Lucius' interest in magic is actually stimulated by Aristomenes' reminiscence.

The structure of the interpolated narrative at 1.9–10 is complex as well. The five anecdotes break down easily into two balancing groups – the longer account in chapter 10, and the four shorter ones in chapter 9 (which are linked by their brevity, allusion to animals and ring-composition⁸). The five are also arranged so as to form an interlocking tricolon diminuendo (the first three all concern the supernatural mutation of a male enemy into a creature) and tricolon crescendo (the last three all recount magic punishments for people who spoke against Meroe in some way).

Another major characteristic is the careful integration of the inserts. With regard to the inner logic of the narrative they proceed naturally from the prior situation and exchange between Aristomenes and Socrates: by illustrating Meroe's supreme abilities as a sorceress they would overcome Aristomenes' scepticism and persuade him to stop abusing her in case she manages to overhear by supernatural means, and they would also explain and exonerate Socrates' total subjection to her. To smooth the transition further, Socrates' stories are given various verbal and especially thematic links with the frame narrative. So, most noticeably, looking backwards, *amatorem* at the start of 9 recalls *ament* near the end of 8, and *deformo* applied to the inn-keeper and lawyer in 9 echoes its application to Socrates and his wife in 6; while the list of magic powers involving metamorphosis in 8 is picked up by the magic feats involving metamorphosis in 9f., and the inn-keeper in 9 takes up the setting of Socrates' speech and several references to inns and inn-keepers in 4, 5, 7 and 8⁹. The prospective ties are even more extensive. For example, these yarns about revenge on people (including a lover) who cross Meroe are followed by that same actor's revenge on Aristomenes and her lover Socrates for crossing her; Meroe's successful employment of sorcery at night against an enemy behind barred doors at the end of 10 is immediately repeated in 11ff.; the magically locked doors in 10 are succeeded by doors locked by ordinary means and then magically unlocked in 11 (with repetition of *fores*, *evello* and *perfringo/frango*); and the throwing down of the house at the end of 10 (*proiecta domo*) is mirrored in 11 by the throwing down of the doors, the cot and Aristomenes (described as *deiectus* in 12 and *proiectus* in 14)¹⁰.

The inserted anecdotes have considerable impact thanks to the preceding narrative as well as *per se*. It is hard to resist eavesdropping, and chapter 8 makes it easy to picture Socrates in the room at the inn furtively imparting all this to his friend. Socrates' fear of and remarks on Meroe's abilities in witch-

8 The animals are the beaver, the frog, the ram and the elephant. At the start and end of 1.9 there is reference to words and to a lover or lovers of Meroe (*amator suus*) having intercourse with other females, and *genitalium* is recalled by *utero*.

9 Further connections are: the suffering caused by Meroe to wives (6, 9) and adulterers (7, 9), testicles (6, 9) and liquid (7, 8, 9, 10).

10 So too for the *caupo* in 9 compare *stabuli* in 15 and *stabularios* in 17; liquid (9, 10) recurs in 13, 14, 17, 18 and 19.

craft, especially at the end of 8, create anticipation of some remarkable examples to follow, and that is immediately built on with a quick series of short accounts. Their brevity contrasts markedly with the hitherto expansive narrative of Aristomenes, and with all their incident they arrive at a point when there is not much action, so that they represent a surprising new development and stand out.

As for the tales themselves, there is cumulative impact when they are taken together, and they are also striking individually. The reader is gripped from the start of 9 by the rapid and effortless transformation of the lover into a beaver, soon followed by the decidedly nasty touch of the self-castration. Then comes the darkly comic and graphic (note the onomatopoeic *roncis raucus*) detail of the inn-keeper swimming in his own wine and greeting his former customers as a courteous frog. That is succeeded by the surreal picture of a ram pleading in court and the bizarre vignette of the woman monstrously swollen by an eight year old unborn baby. The final story represents a real climax, especially because of its much greater length, the extension of Meroe's targets (in two feats rather than one) to inanimate objects and a whole town, and the extraordinary act of carrying her enemy's sealed house one hundred miles away to the top of a mountain. The attention is also taken by contrasts with chapter 9 in detail (the sudden focus on the group rather than the individual, and the abrupt change of place at the end) and in pattern (whereas in the four earlier cases the enemy was quickly identified and magically punished by Meroe, here initially punishment is proposed for her, and then the retribution is actually forestalled, through magic, and only at the end is the enemy identified and paid back by means of witchcraft). Thus the particular relevance of this yarn is delayed and comes unexpectedly (up till then the point had seemed to be Meroe's great power over her fellow citizens). In addition, the revenge on the *coetus auctor* is in itself arrestingly extreme: he is transported far away, at dead of night, when he would be asleep, so that he would wake up to find himself somewhere totally alien, and also inhospitable (the mountain itself is jagged and waterless, and he would be shunned as a sinister stranger outside the town there whose sudden arrival is inexplicable); and, as his house is still magically sealed up, he would die there, slowly. Add to this the fact that all this superstitious guff is put into the mouth of a narrator called Socrates.

The primary, ostensible function of the embedded narrative is to corroborate Socrates' claim in 8 that Meroe is highly adept in sorcery (so adept as to be able to overhear the two men from afar and to enslave Socrates in a relationship). To this end the narrator in quick succession cites a full five (vivid and striking) instances of various kinds of actual magic operations which affected many people (individuals and a whole town) and inanimate objects too, alludes to numerous witnesses (*ut cuncti numerant* in 9), claims inside information from the witch herself in 10, depicts her at the start of the very first story as mutating her lover with only one word, and subtly elevates her in 10 by comparing her to

Medea. For these same considerations 9–10 would also seem to be aimed at engendering belief, or a suspension of disbelief, regarding the whole of Aristomenes' recital (especially 11ff.) on the part of his sceptical companion of 1.2f. and Lucius and Apuleius' readers too¹¹. At the same time, by way of reinforcement, Apuleius does much in the frame narrative to induce acceptance of the interpolated narrative. Most notably he surrounds 9 and 10 with corroborating credulity and awe: in 8 Socrates exhibits great fear of Meroe, lists numerous abilities which he maintains she has and claims many witnesses for the acts at 9–10, while in 11 the hitherto sceptical Aristomenes is immediately convinced and terrified.

Met. 1.9f. also has a retardatory function, generating suspense. So many stories, particularly the longer fifth one, arrest the development of the frame narrative, constituting a pause, and leaving one to wonder how events will proceed and what will happen to Socrates and especially Aristomenes after he abused in chapter 8 Meroe who (as we learn in 9–10) is a potent and revengeful sorceress.

The number and nature of those anecdotes has a substantial effect on atmosphere too. In chapter 8 witchcraft made an initial, brief appearance in Aristomenes' account. It is in fact absolutely central to that account and is much expanded in the specific, detailed, graphic and horrific recital at 9–10, which foregrounds and dwells on the theme, makes the story now take a really dark turn and builds up a strange, ominous and nightmarish mood.

The inserts have a bearing on characterization as well. The depiction of Socrates as a man totally cowed by Meroe receives strong reinforcement from his credulous statements at 9f., and his helpless inertia acquires fuller elucidation there. More significantly, the picture of Meroe is developed into something decidedly formidable. Her credentials as a witch are considerably enhanced by means of much concrete illustration. As well as being invulnerable (10 shows her protected by magic powers and the whole town), she is also seen to be very dangerous, vicious and vindictive (not brooking the slightest transgression or even mere rivalry). In particular a malicious sense of humour is brought out by the grim point and symmetry in the reprisals. So her unfaithful lover for misuse of his genitalia is punished with loss of his genitalia as a beaver (with the self-mutilation representing an especially unpleasant touch). There is the liquid connection in the change of the rival inn-keeper into a frog who ends up swimming in his own wine rather than serving it. The abusive lawyer is aptly transformed into a ram, an animal noted for its belligerence¹². The lover's wife, who insulted Meroe, for not sealing her lips has her womb sealed. So too in 10 for not

11 Cf. A. Scobie, *More Essays on the Ancient Romance and its Heritage* (Meisenheim am Glan 1973) chapter 3 for suspension of disbelief and the *Metamorphoses*.

12 See Plaut. *Bacch.* 1147, Ovid. *F.* 4.101, Apul. *Met.* 9.34, and cf. also Scobie, *op. cit.* (n. 3) 100 and A. Borghini, "Gli avvocati, gli eruditi e l'ariete", *AFLB* 29 (1986) 57–62.

sealing his lips the *coetus auctor* has his house sealed, and this man who instigated the meeting that led to Meroe being made an outcast from the town and the decision to kill her by throwing stones at her is moved to the top of a stony mountain and has his house thrown down outside the town there.

The embedded stories also prepare the way for what follows in Aristomenes' account, make an important contribution to motivation and perform a pivotal function with regard to plot. The sensational and horrific action at 9–10 leads in to the action of a similar nature when Meroe turns up at the inn, and the witch's domination in the five tales as a major and potent actor ushers in her role as protagonist at 11ff. (see also the ties with the subsequent narrative noted above). In addition, those stories provide logical justification for the two friends' decision in 11 to get as far away as they can from such a sorceress (after recovering from their weariness with a short sleep), for the appearance of Meroe in 11 (9f. intimates that she is so adept that she has overheard them, and so vindictive that she wants revenge on them), and for Aristomenes through dread of this terrible witch doing nothing to help Socrates and not even crying out at 11ff.¹³ With regard to plot, as a direct consequence of the anecdotes at 9–10 Aristomenes in fear of similar retribution proposes flight to Socrates, and that results in the arrival of Meroe intent on vengeance for their intended departure, and for their slandering of her (represented *inter alia* by the five yarns). So the embedded narrative ultimately sets in train the actual punishment (and helps explain its great severity in Socrates' case) and all the subsequent adventures of the two companions.

A related function is foreshadowing. There is a clever and complex mixture of both genuine and false foreshadowing in these flashbacks (prolepsis within analepsis). As one sees at *Met.* 1.9–10 so many punishments for people (in particular men) who offended the vengeful Meroe (in three cases by speaking against her), one is led to suspect that Aristomenes will be paid back for speaking ill of her in 8; and at 11, when Aristomenes suggests that they should leave early and get far away from Meroe, and Socrates assents, one suspects even more that Meroe will seek revenge on Aristomenes, and also on her lover Socrates (especially after the story in 9 of the erring lover transmogrified into a beaver). These suspicions are confirmed by the arrival in 11 of the witch set on vengeance for such misdemeanours. However, the interpolated narrative inclines one to anticipate for the two friends similar magical retribution, particularly transmutation into another animal (which figures in three of the five anecdotes), but in the end there is no magical punishment at all for Aristomenes, and Socrates suffers something much worse than Meroe's earlier enemies – a living death followed by actual death. On the other hand, picking up 9f., there is some sort of metamorphosis (Aristomenes describes himself with his cot on top of

13 For Aristomenes' dread see 11, 12 and 13. There is black humour in this backfire of Socrates' attempt to convince his friend of Meroe's magical potency.

him as *de Aristomene testudo factus* in 12, and Socrates becomes a living corpse), and there is sealing up (of doors in 14 after the witches leave, and (cf. 18) of the wound in Socrates' neck), and there is movement to a distant place caused by Meroe (Aristomenes' exile mentioned in 19)¹⁴. Aristomenes' narrative does not finish until 19, and until that conclusion teasingly¹⁵ the reader is kept uncertain of the precise nature of Meroe's retaliation and its exact relationship to the reprisals at 9–10.

Simultaneously and dexterously, there is also foreshadowing with regard to the narratee Lucius¹⁶: the five tales all anticipate the dangers for him of witchcraft and witches, three of them prefigure Lucius' magical change into an animal, and in the fifth the lengthy journey due to sorcery looks forward to his wanderings as an ass. So too within the *Metamorphoses* as a whole Socrates' tales provide some early and striking examples of recurrent themes (magic, marvel and metamorphosis) and an early and striking statement of a major overall message (the dangers of sorcery and of association with its practitioners¹⁷).

14 So too the self-castrating beaver of 9 looks forward to the threat of castration for Aristomenes and the actual mutilation of Socrates in 13, and the inn-keeper submerged and swimming in his own wine (9) prefigures Aristomenes soaked in urine (13) and *vino sepultus* (18). There are also inversions and ironical twists: the sealed womb of 9 is picked up in 14 where Aristomenes describes himself as *quasi recens utero matris editus*, the people carefully shut in against their will in 10 are succeeded by Aristomenes carefully shutting in himself and Socrates of his own free will in 11, the magical locking of doors in 10 is followed by the magical unlocking of doors in 11; and Aristomenes' remarks at 9f. (and the rest of them) mean that Meroe has in fact failed in her bid to shut him up (cf. 12).

15 Compare the tease in the Medea simile in 10. Initially it seems that the point of the comparison is simply the rapid deployment of magic by vengeful witches affecting whole houses (of Creon and Meroe's fellow citizens). But by the end of the chapter one realizes that in fact the reference to the destruction of Creon and his house also and more pointedly looks to Meroe's revenge on the individual *coetus auctor*, which involves the disappearance of his whole house and presumably his death too (still locked inside).

16 On foreshadowing in connection with Lucius see esp. P. G. Walsh, *The Roman Novel* (Cambridge 1970) 150, 155, 177f., G. N. Sandy, "Foreshadowing and Suspense in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*", *CJ* 68 (1972–73) 232–235, B. L. Hijmans/R. Th. van der Paardt (eds), *Aspects of Apuleius' Golden Ass* (Groningen 1978) 80f., J. Tatum, *Apuleius and the Golden Ass* (Ithaca/London 1979) 38ff. and pp. 145 and 150 in L. Zurli, "Anus sed admodum scitula", *MCSN* 4 (1986) 143–177.

17 For this message cf. Tatum, *op. cit.* (n. 1) 498f. and Walsh, *op. cit.* (n. 16) 177ff.