

Apuleius, ‘Metamorphoses’ 1. 10: A Jeer at Conventional Magic Motifs?

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For citation: Denis V. Keyer. Apuleius ‘Metamorphoses’ 1. 10: A Jeer at Conventional Magic Motifs? *Philologia Classica* 2018, 13(1), 96–102. <https://doi.org/10.21638/11701/spbu20.2018.107>

Some unusual details in Socrates’ account of Meroe’s witchcraft (Met. 1. 9–10) can presumably be explained as hinting at conventional shortcomings of the folktales or magic stories contemporary to Apuleius. (1) The surprising remark on the impossibility of digging through the walls of the enchanted houses might point out that popular magic stories about doors being jammed by witchcraft generally ignore the possibility of alternative exits. (2) The bizarre outcome of the house being transported to a remote city (the witch has to drop it in front of the town gate, since there is not enough room for it in the town) must refer to similar stories in which the transported house ends up amid other houses and the problem of free space is conventionally glossed over. (3) The oddly absurd picture of the lawyer who continues pleading in the shape of a ram (thus shattering the narrative illusion) may have been intended as a pointed criticism of certain magic stories, in which people are transformed into animals without a plausible link between the animal and its former human personality. The literary game played with the reader and zest for the self-exposure of literary convention is typical for the *Metamorphoses*, and playful hints at the narrative conventions of popular magic motifs would well conform with Apuleius’ manner of writing.

Keywords: Apuleius, Metamorphoses, folklore, magic stories, narrative illusion.

The narrative technique of the *Metamorphoses* as well as the relation of the inserted tales to modern folktales and literary fairy-tales have been popular topics of Apuleian scholarship. However, Socrates’ account of Meroe’s witchcraft at the beginning of the novel appears to display some comic traits that go unnoticed by scholars, but might enrich both ‘narratological’ and ‘folkloristic’ branch of Apuleian studies. When seen from a certain point of view, these traits will, firstly, shed light upon the author’s manner of writing and, secondly, help us draw certain conclusions about the magic stories contemporary to Apuleius — however scant our knowledge of folktales and magic story writing in antiquity might be.

First Meroe cast spells upon individual enemies: she turned her unfaithful lover into a beaver (regarded as prone to self-castration), her rival inn-keeper into a frog and a lawyer who had spoken against her into a ram. Her lover’s pregnant wife was cursed with everlasting pregnancy due to an insult. Here is Socrates’ account of what happened next, according to Aristomenes (Met. 1. 10; for the reader’s convenience, the sentences I focus on are printed letter-spaced):

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‘Quae cum subinde ac multi nocerentur,¹ publicitus indignatio percrebruit statutumque ut in eam die altera seuerissime saxorum iaculationibus uindicaretur. Quod consilium uirtutibus cantionum anteuortit et ut illa Medea unius dieculae a Creone impetratis indutiis totam eius domum filiamque cum ipso sene flammis coronalibus deusserat, sic haec deuotionibus sepulchralibus in scrobem procuratis, ut mihi temulenta narrauit proxime, cunctos in suis sibi domibus tacita numinum uiolentia clausit, ut toto biduo non claustra perfringi, non fores euelli, non denique parietes ipsi quiuerint perforari, quoad mutua hortatione consone clamitarent quam sanctissime deierantes sese neque ei manus admolituos, et si quis aliud cogitarit salutare laturos subsidium. Et sic illa propitiata totam ciuitatem absoluit. At uero coetus illius auctorem nocte intempesta cum tota domo, id est parietibus et ipso solo et omni fundamento, ut erat, clausa ad centesimum lapidem in aliam ciuitatem summo uertice montis exasperati sitam et ob id ad aquas sterilem transtulit. Et quoniam densa inhabitantium aedificia locum nouo hospiti non dabant, ante portam proiecta domo discessit.’

‘And because these things happened repeatedly and many people were injured, indignation grew throughout the populace, and it was resolved that on the morrow she should be punished most severely by the hurling of stones. But she foiled this plot through the powers of her incantations, and, just as the famous Medea by obtaining from Creon the indulgence of a brief single day had burned down his whole house and his daughter and the old man himself with the garland’s flames, in a similar way this woman, when with necromantic imprecations she had procured a trench (as she herself recently told me when she was drunk), locked everyone in their very own houses by the concealed force of supernatural powers, so that for two full days no bolts could be broken, no doors be torn out, and not even walls could be penetrated — until with joint instigation they cried out with one accord and swore the most solemn oath that they would not lay a finger on her themselves, and if anyone intended otherwise, they would come to her aid and bring salvation. Thus propitiated she released the whole town. However, in the dead of night she conveyed the instigator of that assembly with his entire house — that is with walls and even the ground and the whole foundation — locked as it was, a hundred miles away to another city, which was situated on the extreme peak of a barren mountain and therefore bereft of spring-water. And because the densely packed houses of the inhabitants did not allow space for a newcomer, she cast down the house before the gate and departed’ (tr. Keulen 2007, 222–234, with minor corrections).

The witch’s compatriots (who had intended to stone her) were locked up in their own houses, and could neither break the locks, nor unhinge the doors, nor even — here follows a somewhat unexpected technical detail — dig through the walls from inside. The third possibility mentioned here cannot be considered illogical (after all, this was the way that burglars used to break into a house²), yet it somehow comes as a surprise for the reader, at least the modern one, who is familiar with the motif of enchanted doors rather than walls and houses.³ The very idea that apart from the bars and doors of a house its whole perimeter must be enchanted, since one can get out not only through the door, is far from trivial. Normally it occurs neither to narrators of magic tales, nor to their audience. The possibility of alternative exits is conventionally ignored.

¹ If we keep to the manuscript reading, a strong ellipsis is to be supposed: *quae cum subinde* (scil. *fi-erent*) *ac...*

² Hence Gk. τοιχωρύχος (cf. Pl. *Pseud.* 980 *perfossor parietum*). Maybe, additional humour is supplied by the fact that the citizens had to become burglars of their own houses and their actions are described in terms of burglary.

³ Cf. Thompson 1956, D1654.15: ‘Door stuck by witchcraft so that it cannot be opened’, with reference to the literature cited in Baughman 1966, 112.

Of course, it is conceivable that in antiquity the readers' perception was different, and the added remark about the impossibility of getting out through the walls, which strikes us as odd, seemed ordinary to them. Everything hinges on how this motif appeared in the folktales and magic tales of ancient Greece and Rome, which, alas, are lost for us. Was it the whole house that was enchanted (as it is illustrated in Apuleius) or only the door, which is typical of modern folktales? In my opinion, the second option is more plausible: the impossibility to escape through the walls was specifically referred to by Apuleius, while similar folktales or magic stories contemporary to him mentioned only doors and locks.⁴ Admittedly, I can advance only indirect arguments in favour of this conjecture.

(1) It is easier to conceive the magical spells as cast upon concrete objects, like doors and bars, than some abstract 'limits' of the house.

(2) The motif of the magical opening of the doors locked, recorded in antiquity,⁵ seems to suggest that the reverse operation of blocking the exit was also applied to doors rather than the borders of the house.

It is tempting to interpret the phrase in question as a sophisticated man of letters' jibe at the narrative convention of a widespread magic motif. If we suggest that it was normally taken for granted that it was impossible to get out of the house with the door jammed by witchcraft and that alternative means of exit were never considered, Apuleius' atypical remark has a plausible explanation. Figuratively speaking, Apuleius, while recounting a trite witchcraft story, thus winks at the reader and grins between the lines: 'In fact, the tellers of primitive magic stories like this do not take into account the obvious possibility to exit the house other than through the door.'

In the next episode the hint at the magic motif as a narrative convention seems to be more obvious. The instigator of the reprisal over Meroe was transported by her, as is the custom in folktales, 'a hundred miles away' (*ad centesimum lapidem*), to a town with adverse climatic conditions — together with his locked house *and even the ground underneath it*. The latter is a remarkable addition that rarely occurs in folktales, and might best be taken as a subtle hint at the uncertainty of this standard magic spell. In an indirect way it invites the audience to think about technical details that are normally not specified in a conventional narrative. But inside the densely populated town — another unexpected turn — there appears to be not enough space to place the house, so the witch abandons the attempt and drops it in front of the town gate.

The transportation of an entire house and its inhabitants through the air is substantiated in the folktales of various nations.⁶ In Apuleius the house is transported to another

⁴ Otherwise Keulen 2007, 229: 'From her magical feats it appears that the witch Meroe has a fixation for doors, bars and borders in general.' Yet, the last words and the examples cited further leave me unconvinced: *obsepto utero* in *Met.* 1. 9 implies the popular folk motif of an evil curse that does not let deliver of a child (the resemblance with bars, if any, is purely metaphorical), and another two passages (see n. 5 below) refer to the doors and not to the limits or borders in general. Apart from the mention of the walls in *Met.* 1. 10 there are no indications of the fact that Meroe or other witches in antiquity 'had a fixation ... for borders in general.'

⁵ Meroe's witchcraft breaks open the locked doors of the inn in *Met.* 1. 11 and gets them locked again in 1. 14. Cf. also Prop. 3. 3. 49 *clausas ... excantare puellas*, Ov. *Am.* 2. 1. 27–28 *carminibus cessere fores ... carmine uicta sera est* and McKeown 1989, Vol. II, 136 (ad *Am.* 1. 6. 24).

⁶ See, e. g., Khasanov, Yusupov [М. Хасанов, И. Юсупов, Дунганские народные сказки и предания] 1986, 66; 424 ('Dungan folktales and legends'; in the folktale *The Huach'or Bird* a magic stick transports a house to the desert and back); Chikovani [М. Чиковани, Грузинские народные сказки] 1986, 128–129 (in the Georgian folktale *The Magic Hat* a house is transported to a remote mountain and back). The index of

town — obviously, the same thing occurred in many folktales or magical stories familiar to him (possibly, even in the Greek prototype, the *Metamorphoses* of Lucius of Patrae). However, the unusual ending to this story serves no narrative function, and must have been added by Apuleius — it is impossible to conceive anything of the kind either in folktales or in magic stories of literature.⁷

The oddity and comic overtones of the transported house story in Apuleius also suggest a disguised criticism of a popular magic motif. In magic stories familiar to Apuleius the house and its inhabitant must have been magically transported to another town, winding up amid other houses. Neither narrator nor audience wondered what was previously in place of the new house, where it went, and why a cramped town with narrow streets had room enough for a new building. It is this narrative convention that Apuleius is targeting. The sudden twist at the end of the magical transportation episode drops an obvious hint at the incongruity of the situation suggested by magical story-tellers, including his fellow writers.

Socrates' account of Meroe's previous acts of revenge poses another problem which I am inclined to analyze in a similar way. The lawyer who was transformed into a ram is said to continue pleading in the shape of a ram (1. 9 *et nunc aries ille causas agit*).⁸ Funny as it is, it does appear to be too unreal even for a magic tale. It may be easy for the reader to accept the standard magical transformation into an animal, but the idea of the ram going to court and conducting cases as if he were human is daringly absurd: who can seriously imagine a bleating ram advocating in court?⁹ This episode clearly stands out from the others and certainly violates the narrative illusion.¹⁰

Aarne, Thompson, 1961, 202–203, № 560 mentions the tale type 'Magic ring' (Russian readers know the Russian folktale of the same name from the collection of A. Afanasyev); in one of its episodes the castle is transported to a desert island with the help of a magic object. Cf. also Thompson 1955–1958, vol. 2 (1956), D2136.2 'Castle magically transported' and D2120 ff. 'Magic transportation'.

⁷ Cf. May 2013, 144: '*she threw down the house in front of the city gate*: There is no parallel in ancient witchcraft for this particular feat.'

⁸ It looks like there were popular associations between rhetoricians and rams: cf. Petr. 39. 5 *plurimi hoc signo* (scil. *ariete*) *scholastici nascuntur* and Keyer 2012, 275–276 with n. 47. On the other hand, other passages are less reliable indications of such associations. Artemid. 2. 12 (cited by May 2013, 139) simply says that *πολλά πρόβατα* is a good sign, *μάλιστα τοῖς ὄχλου προϊστασθαι βουλομένοις καὶ σοφισταῖς καὶ διδασκάλους* (an obvious play on *προβαίνειν*; it does not prove that the pupils of sophists were generally likened to sheep). Neither does the abusive assault on lawyers in *Met.* 10. 33 (*forensia pecora*) suggest a common association. Keulen 2007, 217–218 puts emphasis on the possible onomatopoeic *blaterare* in the sense of 'talk nonsense' and similar metaphorical connotations of the rams' bleating. He suggests that the lawyer is thereby condemned to 'bleating' nonsense. However, *causas agit* does not directly point at nonsensical speech, and if there were any popular associations between lawyers and rams (I tend to explain them as based on the idea of 'butting' in rhetoric duels), they are more likely to motivate the metamorphosis. The inn-keeper's transformation into the frog in the same passage might suggest a hint at the popular motif of watering the wine (cf. Petr. 39. 11 *in aquario copones* and Keyer 2012, 286 with n. 108).

⁹ The image of the inn-keeper transformed into a frog who, while 'swimming in a vat of his own wine, sunk in the dregs, calls out hoarsely to his old customers with courteous croaks' (transl. Hanson 1989, 21), is far less absurd. One can easily imagine a frog croaking in a vat of wine, even though one might wonder whether this particular frog can be safely identified as the inn-keeper.

¹⁰ May 2013, 139 ad loc.: 'Again the metamorphosis is apt and preserves the lawyer's human characteristics of litigiousness and stupidity in his animal form, using a verb (*causas agere* — 'to conduct one's cases') specifically associated with his human activities.' I cannot tell with certainty if she takes '*causas agere*' here metaphorically and refers it to the regular activities of the animal, as though it implied '...and now he litigates as a ram, i.e. bleats among the rams, or fights with other rams'. This would deserve attention, because in this case the absurd would be removed. However, it seems far-fetched to refer the technical term *causas agere* to rams in general.

I would like to emphasize that this blatant nonsense is somewhat unique for the novel. In other magic episodes, the irrational is confined to the very acts of witchcraft; once the spells are cast, the rest does not exceed possibility. Therefore, this problem requires more than just pointing out the humour of the situation. It is insufficient to state: 'Apuleius made it up this way, because it is funny'. We still need to understand why the narrative illusion was allowed to be suspended here. Was it merely for the sake of fun? Did the author expect the readers to believe it, or even to believe that his characters, Aristomenes and Lucius, could believe it? Could he not care about it at all?

However, this stunning improbability has not been discussed properly by scholars. In my opinion, the absurdity here should best be regarded as pointed and intentional. Apuleius might want to indicate another narrative convention of magic tales, namely that they pay little regard to the fate of the humans transformed into animals. How do they manage to cope with the situation and retain their personal identity? What happens after the transformation and how do people understand that this particular animal represents the missing person? The pointedly absurd picture of the advocating ram would thus also raise questions that magic story-tellers and their audience conventionally avoid asking, and thereby expose the shortcomings of a popular motif (not without humour, of course).

I'll admit that my interpretation of certain unusual details of the magical episodes of Apuleius relies merely upon hypothetical speculations about the features of similar episodes in folktales or writings contemporary to Apuleius which have not been preserved for us. We can only guess how they might have appeared based on their shape in Apuleius' novel, and later subsequent folklore. As is often the case, the proper understanding of the author's literary intent depends upon knowledge of his literary background.

If, however, my conjecture is correct and the passages discussed above do suggest a jeer at the narrative conventions of popular magic motifs, it exposes a distinctive feature of Apuleius' style of writing. In many ways the employment of similar literary devices makes the *Metamorphoses* a forerunner of modern European novels. Firstly, one would notice the striking interposition of the author's personality in 11. 27 (*audisse mitti sibi Madaurenssem, sed admodum pauperem*).¹¹ Another literary device — remarkably bold, even for the future European novel, is the direct — and in my opinion, also intentional — violation of narrative illusion in 4. 11, where Boeotian Thebes happen to be situated near the sea (possibly, following the similar incongruity in Plautus' *Amphitryon*).¹² A joke from the tale of Cupid and Psyche (4. 32) can be combined alongside these: out of respect for the author of the 'Milesian' tale, Apollo (previously called the 'Milesian' god, a hint at Apollo's sanctuary at Didyma), being a Greek and, moreover, an Ionian, prophesies in *Latin* verses.¹³

The literary game played with the reader and zest for the self-exposure of literary convention, for which the postmodern critics applaud Stern and Cervantes, is therefore typical for the *Metamorphoses*, and playful hints at the narrative conventions of popular

¹¹ Other, less transparent allusions to the author's personality, must be 11. 28 and 30 (Lucius mentions his earnings made in the Roman forum through pleading in Latin).

¹² See Hijmans a. o. 1977, 91 *ad loc.*, with references.

¹³ As scholars have long established, the joke originates in Cic. *Div. 2. 116: quis enim est qui credit Apollinis ex oraculo Pyrrho esse responsum 'aio te, Aeacida, Romanos uincere posse'? Primum Latine Apollo numquam locutus est; deinde ista sors inaudita Graecis est.*

magic motifs (Jacques Derrida might identify them as ‘deconstruction’) would well conform with Apuleius’ manner of writing.

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Received: 11.02.2018

Final version received: 21.04.2018

Апулей, «Метаморфозы» I, 10: насмешки над условностью сказочных мотивов?

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Ряд необычных деталей в рассказе Сократа о чародействах Мерои (*Met.* I, 9–10) соблазнительно трактовать как намеки на условность сказочных мотивов в современных Апулею фольклоре и литературе. (1) Неожиданное упоминание о невозможности пробуровать стены заколдованных домов, вероятно, заостряет внимание на том, что мотив заколдованных дверей, популярный в народных и литературных сказках, не учитывает очевидной возможности выбраться из дома минуя дверь. (2) Эксцентричная концовка эпизода с перемещением дома по воздуху в удаленный город (там оказывается недостаточно места для нового здания, и ведьме приходится опустить его перед городскими воротами) отсылает к подобным историям, в которых перенесенный дом оказывается в чужом городе среди других домов, а проблема свободного места не обсуждается в силу литературной условности. (3) Причудливая, разрушающая иллюзию правдоподобия история с адвокатом,

который, будучи превращен в барана, продолжает выступать в суде, могла быть задумана как нарочито нелепая пародия на истории, в которых рассказывается о магическом превращении людей в животных, но не объясняется, каким образом в животном узнавали превращенного человека. В «Метаморфозах» встречаются и другие примеры литературной игры автора с читателем и многогранное саморазоблачение литературного вымысла, характерное для европейской литературы Нового времени (в том числе и сознательное разрушение иллюзии действительности). Таким образом, иронические намеки на условность расхожих сказочных мотивов хорошо согласуются с литературной манерой Апулея.

Ключевые слова: Апулей, *Метаморфозы*, фольклор, волшебные сказки, иллюзия правдоподобия.