

Cenatus solis fabulis?
A Symposiastic Reading of Apuleius' Novel

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τῷ σὺ πάτερ Διόνυσε, φιλοστεφάνοισιν ἀρέσκων
ἀνδράσιν, εὐθύμων συμποσίων πρύτασι,
χαῖρε· δίδου δ' αἰῶνα, καλῶν ἐπιήρανε ἔργων
πίνειν καὶ παίζειν καὶ τὰ δίκαια φρονεῖν.

And so, father Dionysus, you who give pleasure to garlanded
Banqueters and preside over cheerful feasts,
My greetings to you! Helper in noble works, grant me a lifetime
Of drinking, sporting and thinking just thoughts.¹

1. Apuleius: His Public Speeches and His Novel

In his novel, Apuleius does not address a mass audience, as he does in the *Florida*, the *De deo Socratis*, or the *Apology*. Novels, though they may sometimes have been read aloud to a small circle,² belonged to the sphere of private reading;³ Schmitz for this reason explicitly excludes the novels from his study of *Bildung und Macht* in the Second Sophistic.⁴ In his novel, Apuleius has the opportunity to enter—and to have his audience enter—into a more intricate intertextual and interdiscursive relationship with the cultural capital which he on the one hand possesses and applies, and which on the other hand he can expect to be within the grasp of his educated audience. In

¹ Ion *Eleg. Fr.* 26,13–16 West, with a translation by Campbell.

² See my suggestion in the final section of this essay.

³ Cf. Cavallo 1996, 42–43, who explicitly points to *lepido susurro* and *inspicere* in Apul. *Met.* 1,1,1 as signals of ‘*una lettura diretta, verisimilmente solitaria, intima e a mezza voce*’.

⁴ Cf. Schmitz 1997, 35 and note 73.

declamations for mass audiences, among whom many connoisseurs and rivals would be listening—and the subjects of which were often quite hackneyed themes—greater care was taken by the speaker about the form in all its aspects than about the content. This does not automatically apply for the novel. Here too, style, word choice, and sound, mattered a great deal, of course.⁵ But besides that, the novelist would be in a position to appeal to the audience's appreciation of the content, and could count on the audience's awareness of surprise effects in the plot, and its perception of pervading themes as well as intratextual connections.

Thus, besides all the glitter and brilliance of Apuleius' prose, and beyond all proud display of learning in this novel, which has been excellently discussed by Harrison,⁶ we are entitled to search for other, subtle, and meaningful strands in this text.

2. *Spoudaiogeloion*

Scholars, when applying the term “seriocomic” to Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, have not always used this term in a clear and uniform way.⁷ For instance, Walsh pointed to an ambivalence between the serious and the comic: a tension between Milesian ribaldry and Platonist mysticism.⁸ Winkler, disagreeing with other scholars who were reasoning from a kind of juxtaposition of ‘*Scherz und Ernst*’ in Apuleius' novel, in the end dismissed such an approach. But he did not actually address the seriocomic, and neither does he use that term: he mentions as only partly satisfactory those interpretations of Apuleius' novel that seek to explain the apparent discrepancies between the first ten books and the eleventh book of *The Golden Ass* by pointing out that ‘Greco-Roman religion ... displays a festive mixture of playful and serious elements that is puzzling to us only because our religious formats have developed on other, more strait-jacketed lines’.⁹ Anderson, in

⁵ The illuminating discussion by Kenney 1990, 28–38 of such elements in Apuleius' *Met.* 4,28–6,24 (the *Cupid and Psyche* tale) could easily be extended to the whole of Apuleius' novel. Cf. also Bernhard 1927 *passim*; Callebat 1994.

⁶ Cf. Harrison 2000, especially ch. 6 (210–259): ‘A Sophist's Novel: the *Metamorphoses*’.

⁷ Tatum 1969, 103 rightly remarks that seriousness and frivolity ‘... impose far too simplistic alternatives’ on the complex work that Apuleius' novel is.

⁸ Walsh 1970, 143. Cf. also Shumate 1996, 8–9.

⁹ Winkler 1985, 230–233; cf. also *ibid.* 228–229 (criticizing the approach to the *Met.* of those who ‘... emphasize ... the taste of the times for works of maximal internal variety’).

an eloquent and illuminating discussion of the ‘whimsical alternation of comic and serious in Apuleius’ novel’,¹⁰ applies the term *spoudogeloion*, and rightly points to the second-century sophists’ approach to the seriocomic through the most urbane and literary works of Plato. But, in a note,¹¹ he observes that ‘the term itself admits of too many ambiguities’, and in the end he concludes that ‘Apuleius ... seems to alternate whimsically between the two moods and attitudes (i.e., serious or comic)’.¹² Schlam in a broader approach sees serious instruction as a part of the entertainment: ‘The *Metamorphoses* is a work of narrative entertainment, and among the pleasures it offers is the reinforcement of moral, philosophic, and religious values shared by the author and his audience’.¹³ However, as Beaujeu argued, this antithetical pair (seriousness and frivolity) conveys much more than the juxtaposition in Apuleius’ work of texts and elements belonging either to seriousness or to frivolity: the union, the blend of the serious and the frivolous is an essential characteristic of Apuleius’ œuvre in its totality.¹⁴

In approaching the peculiar blend of ribaldry, buffoonery, coarse joking, and philosophical-mystical questions which are interwoven with each other in *The Golden Ass*, a closer look at this novel’s use of the vital tradition of *spoudaiogeloion* may help. This concept, as Kindstrand explains, expresses a combination of joking and seriousness, usually where an amusing form is used to hide a serious content.¹⁵ In antiquity, this means of expression was connected for instance with Aristophanic comedy, as Aristophanes himself admitted (Ar. Ra. 389–392):

καὶ πολλὰ μὲν γέλοιά μ’ εἶπειν, πολλὰ δὲ σπουδαῖα
And that I speak part in earnest, part in jest.

It was also considered typical of Socrates (X. Mem. 1,3,8¹⁶):

¹⁰ Anderson 1982, 78–85.

¹¹ Anderson 1982, 159, note 56.

¹² Anderson 1982, 84.

¹³ Schlam 1992, 5.

¹⁴ Beaujeu 1975, 94: ‘... ce binôme antithétique traduit beaucoup plus que la juxtaposition, dans ses écrits, de textes ou d’éléments ressortissants les uns au sérieux, les autres au frivole; l’union, l’alliage du sérieux et du frivole, est une caractéristique essentielle de son œuvre tout entière’.

¹⁵ Kindstrand 1976, 47–48. For a synthesizing discussion of various aspects of *spoudaiogeloion* in Greek and Latin literature, cf. Giangrande 1972, who (*ibid.* 122) concludes that more complete studies are necessary.

¹⁶ Cf. also X. Mem. 4,1,1; Pl. Ap. 20d; Smp. 216e: Εἰρωνεύμενος δὲ καὶ παίζων πάντα τὸν βίον πρὸς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους διατελεῖ. σπουδάσαντος δὲ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀνοιχθέντος, οὐκ οἶδα

ἔπαιζεν ἅμα σπουδάζων

He would talk both joking and at the same time in earnest.

It is important to note that this art form has always been considered as highly typical of Cynic literature, which in this respect may have been influenced by both Aristophanic comedy and the Socratic tradition. It is, however, primarily among the later Cynics that *spoudè* and *geloion* become formally allied so that a serious lesson may be imparted through a comic form.¹⁷ Although the first occurrence of the exact term is not found before Strabo 16,2,29, who applies it to Menippos: Μένιππος ὁ σπουδογέλοιος, the combination of the terms *geloia* and *spoudaia* (or comparable expressions) appeared much earlier (as seen in the quotations above). The principle of *spoudaiogeloion* is clearly to be seen behind Horace's famous verses *quamquam ridentem dicere verum / quid vetat ?* ('yet what forbids one to tell the truth while laughing?'),¹⁸ as Plaza argues in an illuminating discussion of the seriocomic in Horace's satires, and its associations with the Cynic *spoudaiogeloion*.¹⁹

Branham has taken the mode of *spoudaiogeloion*, which he rightly considers a central concept in Lucian and in the whole Menippean tradition, as a heuristic device for analyzing the principles at work in both Lucian's so-called 'philosophical' works and in his mythological dramatic miniatures. Branham shows that the relationship between *Scherz und Ernst* must be treated as a dynamic relation, not as loosely disconnected, juxtaposed elements.²⁰ It is such a dynamic relation in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, that Shumate is referring to when she speaks of the 'interpenetration of the comic and the serious' in Apuleius' novel, and thus points in fact to the large tradition of *spoudaiogeloion*, in Greek and Latin literature, from which Apuleius could draw.²¹

εἴ τις ἑώρακε τὰ ἐντὸς ἀγάλματα: ('He spends his whole life in chaffing and making game of his fellow-men. Whether anyone else has caught him in a serious moment and opened him, and seen the images inside I know not' – trans. Lamb); *Phaed.* 234d; *Gorg.* 481b. For a fine discussion of σπουδογέλοιον in Plato's *Symposium*, cf. Hunter 2004, 9–15. Cf. also Branham 1989, 50–52.

¹⁷ Thus Giangrande 1972, 33–34; cf. also Curtius 1953, 417.

¹⁸ Hor. *S.* 1,1,24–25.

¹⁹ Plaza 2006, 27–31.

²⁰ Cf. Branham 1989, 25–63; on *spoudaiogeloion* as a 'heuristic device', *ibid.* 28; on 'dynamic relation' *ibid.* 235–236, note 81.

²¹ Cf. Shumate 1996, 9–10. For an admirable discussion of the seriocomic character of the *Metamorphoses* in all its aspects, with a wealth of information, I recommend Graverini's recent monograph on Apuleius' novel: cf. Graverini 2007, 105–150, esp. 132–150.

3. A Symposiastic Reading

The dynamics of *spoudaiogeloion* are captured very well in some symposiastic songs, for instance *Adesp. El. 27 West*:

χαίρετε συμπόται ἄνδρες ...
 χρῆ ...
 γελᾶν παίζειν χρησαμένους ἀρετῆ,
 ἦδεσθαί τε συνόντας, ἐς ἀλλήλους τε φ[λ]υραεῖν
 καὶ σκώπτειν τοιαῦθ' οἷα γέλωτα φέρειν.
 ἢ δὲ σπουδῆ ἐπέσθω, ἀκούωμέν [τε λ]εγόντων
 ἐν μέρει. ἦδ' ἀρετῆ συμποσίου πέλεται.

Hail, fellow drinkers ... we ought to laugh and joke, behaving properly, take pleasure in being together, engage in silly talk with one another, and utter jests such as to arouse laughter. But let seriousness follow and let us listen to the speakers in their turn: this is the best form of symposium.²²

This elegy is possibly influenced by the opening words of Xenophon's *Symposium*, which were often quoted or alluded to by ancient authors.²³ However, '... poetry in a symposiastic context predating Xenophon had already established a connection between laughter and seriousness'.²⁴

Through what I have called a 'symposiastic reading' of Apuleius' novel, I want to discuss precisely such a dynamic relationship in the *Metamorphoses*. I will trace several 'symposiastic' episodes in the *Metamorphoses* and offer a brief discussion of each of those moments. I will also point to passages that in themselves do not offer real symposium situations, but that in quite another way evoke elements from symposiastic gatherings. Interwoven with all those playful symposiastic elements and evocations, references to Plato's *Symposion* surface in this text and contribute to a truly dynamic relation between the playful and the serious evocations of the symposium. First, however, some general observations must serve as preliminary remarks.

²² Translation by Hunter 2004, 13.

²³ X. *Smp.* 1,1: 'Ἄλλ' ἐμοὶ δοκεῖ τῶν καλῶν ἀγαθῶν ἀνδρῶν ἔργα οὐ μόνον τὰ μετὰ σπουδῆς πραττόμενα ἀξιομνημόνευτα εἶναι, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰ ἐν ταῖς παιδιαῖς ('To my mind it is worthwhile to relate not only the serious acts of great and good men but also what they do in their lighter moods' – trans. Todd). Cf. Huss 1999, 391.

²⁴ Thus Huss 1999, 397. Huss then quotes Ion *Eleg. Fr.* 26,13–16 West (used as an epigraph to my essay).

As Pellizer points out, one of the defining characteristics of the *symposion* is the direct relationship between author and public.²⁵ The rules developed in the *symposion* manifest an elaborate system of communication, leading to an exceptionally powerful and efficacious participation of the audience. Although less strictly bound by specific rules than was the classical Greek *logos sympotikos*, lively and active communication had become a distinct element of Roman *convivia* as well, as may be seen in some of Pliny the Younger's letters, and, for instance, in the lively conversations represented in Gellius' *Attic Nights* and Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistai*. It has often been observed that, right from the opening words of the *Metamorphoses*, this text, too, invites the active participation of the reader. In this respect we may, in the context of my present investigation, connect this aspect of Apuleius' novel with a 'symposiastic' communication model.

As another preliminary remark it has to be pointed out that in this novel of an author who was equally at home in Greek as in Latin literature and culture, elements of the typical Greek *symposion* with its rituals and clearly delineated regulations figure side by side with elements of the Roman *convivium* or *cena*. The distinctions between those two are often blurred in this text. A comparison of Greek *symposion* and Roman *cena* is offered by Murray,²⁶ similarities and differences as well as overlappings in *cena* literature are discussed by Gowers.²⁷ Therefore, I will use the terms 'symposium', 'convivium', or 'cena' loosely without insisting on cultural differences. Nor will I in this essay distinguish between the meal proper, and the *symposion* which normally came after the meal, and during which all kinds of entertainment took place.

4. *Symposiastic Situations and Elements in the Metamorphoses*

Hints at a symposiastic situation of storytelling are already announced in the prologue of the *Metamorphoses* (Apul. *Met.* 1,1,1):

*At ego tibi sermone isto Milesio varias fabulas conseram auresque tuas
benivolas lepido susurro permulceam.*

²⁵ Pellizer 1990, 179.

²⁶ Murray 1985.

²⁷ Gowers 1993, 29, 62; cf. also Nauta 2002, 97–98.

Come, let me join various tales for you in this Milesian conversation, and let me beguile your ears into approval with a charming whispering.²⁸

The allusion to Aristides' *Milesiaka* may point to a situation of storytelling during a symposium. As Hägg observed: 'Such stories were evidently a cherished form of entertainment at banquets and club meetings in Hellenistic times'.²⁹ In his commentary on the first book of the *Metamorphoses*, Keulen highlights the symposiastic atmosphere of this first, programmatic book.³⁰

In one of the first chapters of the novel, Lucius, the protagonist-narrator, refers to 'yesterday's *convivium*', where he apparently played the part of the gluttonous parasite and thus made a fool of himself (Apul. *Met.* 1,4,1):

Ego denique vespera, dum polentae caseatae modico secus offulam grandiore in convivas aemulus contruncare gestio, mollitiae cibi glutinosi faucibus inhaerentis et meacula spiritus distinentis minimo minus interii.

In my case, last evening when I was competing with my dinner-companions and was eager to devour a disproportionately large bite of cheese pudding, the softness of the sticky food clung to my throat and blocked my breathing-passages, and I very nearly died.

As Lucius should know from his relative Plutarch,³¹ gluttony is against the norms of true conviviality (Plu. *Quaest. Conv.* 2,10,2: 644a):

τῶ πλέονα δ' ἐκ τῶν κοινῶν ἐσθίοντι 'πολέμιον καθίσταται' τὸ καθυστεροῦν καὶ ἀπολειπόμενον, ὥσπερ ἐν ῥοθίῳ ταχυναυτοῦσης τριήρους:

Those who eat too much from the dishes that belong to all antagonize those who are slow and are left behind as it were in the wake of a swift-sailing ship.

One is reminded of the parasite Porcius who in Horace's *cena Nasidieni* swallows cheesecakes whole (Hor. *S.* 2,8,23–24): *Porcius infra, / ridiculus*

²⁸ Usually translations of quotations from Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* are taken from Hanson 1989 (sometimes slightly adapted by myself), but for this passage I have used the translation by Keulen 2007a.

²⁹ Hägg 1983, 188; cf. also Keulen 2004, 236–237 and note 51 with bibliography.

³⁰ Cf. the Index Rerum s.v. 'Symposium-setting' in *GCA* (Keulen 2007a), 514.

³¹ In Apul. *Met.* 1,2,1 and 2,3,2 a family relationship between Lucius and Plutarch is mentioned.

totas semel absorbere placentas, ... ‘below him Porcius, ridiculous for swallowing whole cakes at once’. The gluttonous parasite was a customary figure of ridicule at the symposium.³²

At *Metamorphoses* 1,7, Aristomenes offers his friend Socrates, whom he has found in a deplorable state outside the baths, a meal, with food, drinks, and *fabulae*! Then follows lively conversation and an exchange of witticisms just like at a *symposion* (Apul. *Met.* 1,7,3–4).³³

(*sc. Socraten fatigatum*)... *cibo satio, poculo mitigo, fabulis permulceo. Iam adlubentia proclivis est sermonis et ioci et scitum etiam cavillum, iam dicacitas timida ...*

I filled him (*sc. Socrates* who was exhausted) with food, relaxed him with wine, and soothed him with stories. Then came a willing inclination for conversation and laughter, and even a clever joke, and then hesitant clowning ...

Socrates tells his friend that he has become a powerless victim of the bibulous witch Meroë, who has ensnared him into a sexual relationship. Aristomenes suggests to his friend that they must escape together. Their conversation evolves under the influence of wine, and jokes which are probably at first innocent develop into skoptic utterances. Although we, the readers, would have been delighted to hear the jokes, no details about their contents are reported to us. However, from the following events we may conclude that the two friends are exchanging jokes about the bibulous, aged, over-sexed witch Meroë: for later that night, when Meroë and Panthia come to revenge themselves on the two friends, Meroë explains to her colleague (Apul. *Met.* 1,12,4–5):

‘*Hic est, soror Panthia, carus Endymion, hic Catamitus meus, ... qui meis amoribus subterhabitis non solum me diffamat probris, verum etiam fugam instruit.*’

‘This, sister Panthia, is my darling Endymion, my Ganymede. This is the one who ... disdained my love and not only slandered me with his insults but even plotted to escape’.

³² On parasites as customary γελωτοποιοί at *symposia*, cf. Halliwell 1991, 29 and note 48; Martin 1931, 51–64.

³³ Cf. Halliwell 1991, 291 and note 49 on symposiastic ‘flyting’, attested as early as the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* (55–56).

From these words of Meroë it appears that she must, by some magic trick, have overheard the escape plans, and also probably the jokes the two friends exchanged during their *symposion*. In the eleventh book of the Palatine Anthology, we find a number of skoptic epigrams whose targets are older women made ridiculous for their sexual appetites and their heavy drinking. We can imagine Aristomenes and Socrates having fun by exchanging and improvising such epigrams as for instance *AP* 11,73 by Nicarchus (trans. Nisbet):

Γραῖα καλὴ· τί γάρ; Οἶσθας ὅτ' ἦν νέα· ἀλλὰ τότ' ἤτει,
 νῦν δ' ἐθέλει δοῦναι μισθὸν ἐλαυνομένη.
 Εὐρήσεις τεχνίτιν· ὅταν δὲ πῆ, τότε μᾶλλον
 εἰς δ' θέλεις αὐτὴν εὐεπίτακτον ἔχεις.
 Πίνει γὰρ καὶ τρεῖς καὶ τέσσαρας, ἦν ἐθελήσης,
 ξέστας, κάκ τούτου γίνετ' ἄνω τὰ κάτω·
 κολλᾶται, κνίζει, παθικεύεται· ἦν τι διδῶ τις,
 λαμβάνει· ἦν μὴ δῶ, μισθὸν ἔχει τὸ πάθος.

A fanciable old crone ... really? You know, when she was young; then she asked for money, now she's prepared to give it for a ride. You'll find her accomplished; and when she's drinking, you'll have her all the more amenable to your desires. Yeah, she puts away three, even four jars, if you're willing, and then ... well, she doesn't know which end's up: wraps herself round you, gives you the come-on, offers herself for buggery ... If you give her anything, she takes it; but if not, her pay-off comes with the goods.

As Nisbet argues, the special subgenre of skoptic epigram came into existence from Lucillius onward, who wrote in the mid-to late first century CE; the genre would outlive Lucillius by at least a century. The key venue for skoptic epigrams was the *symposion*.³⁴ The improvising of mocking or jesting epigrams at a *symposion* or *convivium* must have been current practice. Many of the skoptic epigrams collected in the eleventh book of the Palatine Anthology were composed in symposion settings, and may then have been noted down by the poet himself or by one of the guests. Nauta provides evidence that Martial, too, in the wake of Lucillius, composed epigrams *à l'improptu* at dinner parties, whether his own or those of his patrons. Nauta adduces Quintilian, who at his *Institutiones* 10,7,19 refers to the practice of

³⁴ Cf. Nisbet 2003.

improvising poetry; his testimony can be supplemented with evidence specifically referring to the symposium.³⁵

Plutarch, discussing suitable and unsuitable subjects for conversations at the *symposion*, probably has in mind among others the skoptic epigrams when he, in disapproval of a special kind of insulting joke, writes (Plu. *Quaest. Conv.* 2,1: 631e):

Μᾶλλον οὖν τὰ σκώμματα δάκνει, καθάπερ τὰ παρηγκιστρωμένα βέλη πλείονα χρόνον ἐμμένοντα, καὶ λυπεῖ τοὺς σκωφθέντας ἢ τέρψις τῇ κομψότητι καθ' ὅσον ἡδύνει τοὺς παρόντας· ἡδόμενοι γὰρ ἐπὶ τῷ λεγομένῳ. πιστεύειν δοκοῦσι καὶ συνδιασύρειν τῷ λέγοντι.

Thus jokes are more biting, for like barbed arrows they lie longer embedded. The delight in their cleverness distresses the victims in the degree it gives pleasure to the company, for by taking pleasure in what is said the company seem to believe the speaker and join in with his ridicule.

Since the *convivium* must have been an almost daily form of socializing for the elite in the cities of the Roman empire,³⁶ Apuleius, too, was no doubt acquainted with the poetry improvised and recited on those occasions. Being a not untalented poet himself, he may even have practiced this special literary form as well. His admiration of neoteric poets like Catullus and Calvus is well known and, as is clear from Catullus' *Carmen* 50, these poets also practiced improvising at *convivia*.³⁷

In chapter 26 of the first book of the *Metamorphoses*, Lucius has to put up with the empty dinner table of his host Milo and his boring conversation. He finally manages to excuse himself and to go to bed, complaining that he has *cenatus solis fabulis* (dined on words only). Not only do we have here a kind of negative *convivium* without food and without entertainment, but Milo also appears to be a target of skoptic epigram 'turned into flesh': Numerous are the examples of epigrams in which an unsatisfactory host is mocked by the poet. Thus, for instance, in an epigram by Lucillius (*AP* 11,313 trans. Paton):³⁸

³⁵ Nauta 2002, 99–100.

³⁶ Cf. e.g., Schmitz 1997, 127 ('eine für Angehörige der Oberschicht alltägliche Form der Geselligkeit: das Gastmahl').

³⁷ Landolfi 1986 is an enlightening study about improvisation of poetry at the *symposium*.

³⁸ Other examples of skoptic epigrams on the unsatisfactory host are: *AP* 11,314 (Lucillius); 11,96 (Nicarchus); 11,14 (Ammianus); 11,413 (Ammianus). Cf. also *Mart.* 1,18;

Ἀργυρέη λιμῶ τις, ἐς εἰλαπίνην με καλεσσας,
 ἔκτανε, πειναλέους τοὺς πίνακας προφέρων.
 ὀχθήσας δ' ἄρ' ἔειπον ἐν ἀργυροφεγγεῖ λιμῶ·
 'Ποῦ μοι χορτασίη ὀστρακίων πινάκων;'
 One, bidding me to a banquet, killed me with silver hunger, serving famished dishes. And in wrath I spoke amid the silver sheen of hunger: 'Where is the plenty of my earthenware dishes?'

Cf., with Milo's empty table, Martial 3,12 (trans. Fitzgerald):

*Unguentum, fateor, bonum dedisti
 Convivis here; sed nihil scidisti.
 Res salsa est bene olere et esurire.
 Qui non cenat et unguitur, Fabulle,
 Hic vere mihi mortuus videtur.*

The perfume you gave your guests yesterday was, I admit, a good one, but you carved nothing. It's amusing to smell nice and go hungry. He who doesn't dine but is anointed, Fabullus, really seems to me to be a corpse.

Milo is, of course, also a notorious miser, another target of skoptic epigrams.³⁹

Throughout the novel we meet other current targets of skoptic epigram "in the flesh": for instance, fake prophets and astrologers. In the tale of the astrologer Diophanes who failed to predict his own shipwreck and his being robbed by pirates in *Met.* 2,14, we meet a charlatan-astrologer who is very much like the ones mocked in *AP* 159–165. We may read here one of those that comes especially close to the tale of Diophanes, an epigram by Nicarchus (*AP* 11,162 trans. Nisbet):

Εἰς Ῥόδον εἰ πλεύσει τις Ὀλυμπικὸν ἦλθεν ἐρωτῶν
 τὸν μάντιν, καὶ πῶς πλεύσεται ἀσφαλῆως.
 Χῶ μάντις: 'Πρῶτον μὲν' ἔφη 'καινὴν ἔχε τὴν ναῦν,
 καὶ μὴ χειμῶνος, τοῦ δὲ θέρους ἀνάγου.
 Τοῦτο γὰρ ἂν ποιῆς, ἥξεις κάκεισε καὶ ᾧδε,
 ἂν μὴ πειρατῆς ἐν πελάγει σε λάβῃ.'

1,20; 3,13; 3,49; 3,60 etc. Cf. Nauta 2002, 100–101; Watson 2003 (introductory note to Mart. 3,12).

³⁹ For epigrams on misers, cf. for instance *AP* 11,168–172.

Someone came asking Olympicus whether he should embark to Rhodos, and how he could ensure a safe passage. The seer answered: ‘First, get a new ship, and do not set sail in the winter, but in the summer season. If you do that, you will arrive there and return here, unless a pirate attacks you on the high sea’.

In Apul. *Met.* 9,9 we once again meet false prophets who earn money by editing a sham oracle.

Other targets of skoptic epigrams that we meet “in the flesh” in Apuleius’ novel are bad doctors: these figure in both the skoptic epigrams of *AP* 11,112–126; 11,257 (imitated in Mart. 6,53); Mart. 1,30; 1,47; 5,9; 8,74; 11,71; 11,74, and in the tenth book of Apuleius’ novel.

Often, skoptic epigrams ridicule wretchedness, in cases of simple “bad luck”. For instance, there is an epigram (*AP* 11,249) about poor Menophanes who, driven by hunger, hanged himself—from someone else’s tree. He did not have enough soil to cover his corpse, etc. ...⁴⁰ We may compare the poor market gardener in Apuleius’ *Met.* 9,39–42: he has tried to defend his one and only possession, the ass, against an overbearing Roman soldier and is taken to jail for that. His wretched lot is made into a slapstick joke by the officials who arrest him (*Met.* 9,42,4).

More generally, many of the skoptic epigrams have a distinct misogynistic flavour: Nisbet, in his chapter entitled ‘Loukillios: Life’s a bitch, and then you marry one’,⁴¹ gives telling examples from the epigrams. Many episodes and inner tales in the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius, replete with witches, adulterous and murderous women, breathe a misogynistic atmosphere.⁴²

Many of the witticisms in these skoptic epigrams display a great similarity to jokes as they are found in ancient jokebooks, for instance in the *Philogelos*. Andreassi has discussed the affinities between, and the symposiastic setting of both the *Philogelos* and skoptic epigram. He also points out that there is enough evidence that both jokes and skoptic epigrams at an early stage were noted down and collected, not only by professional jokers who as parasites had to earn their meals by presenting witticisms at the tables of the rich, but also by the educated and refined dinner guests themselves. Such collections

⁴⁰ This is ‘a relentless joke based on the grim realities of subsistence farming’, as Nisbet 2003, 70–71 remarks, adding: ‘I am not laughing’.

⁴¹ Nisbet 2003, 76–80.

⁴² In contrast, a group of tales in the ‘Charite complex’ emphasizes the loyalty and devotion of women. Cf. Schlam 1992, 69, 80–81; McNamara 2004.

later enabled for instance Athenaeus and Macrobius to quote long lists of jokes and anecdotes, and to situate them in a convivial context.⁴³ Winkler has discussed a number of passages in the *Metamorphoses* that bear close resemblance to items in the *Philogelos*, for instance the *scholasticus* jokes, jokes that play with questions of identity, and many other types of jokes.⁴⁴

Like the novels, both skoptic epigram and jokebooks belonged to the rich and exciting realm of the subliterary, of which many pages of Apuleius' novel offer such enticing glimpses.

5. More Symposiastic Situations in the *Metamorphoses*

In chapter 19 of Book 2, Lucius is invited to a dinner party at the house of his aunt Byrrhena (Apul. *Met.* 2,19,1–4):

Frequens ibi numerus epulorum et utpote apud primatem feminam flos ipse civitatis. Mensae opipares citro et ebore nitentes, lecti aureis vestibus intecti, ampli calices variae quidem gratiae sed pretiositatis unius. Hic vitrum fabre sigillatum, ibi crustallum inpunctum, argentum alibi clarum et aurum fulgurans et sucinum mire cavatum et lapides ut bibas et quicquid fieri non potest ibi est. Diribitores plusculi splendide amicti fercula copiosa scitule subministrare, pueri calamistrati pulchre indusati gemmas formatas in pocula vini vetusti frequenter offerre. Iam inlatis luminibus epularis sermo percrebuit, iam risus adfluens et ioci liberales et cavillus hinc inde.

There was a large company of dinner-guests, and since she was one of the first ladies of the town, the very flower of society was there. There were luxuriant tables gleaming with citron-wood and ivory, couches draped with golden cloth, generous cups of varied appeal but alike in costliness – here skilfully moulded glass, there flawless crystal, elsewhere shining silver and glistening gold and marvellously hollowed-out amber and precious stones made to drink from – in short, everything impossible was there. Several brilliantly robed waiters elegantly served heaped platters; curly-haired boys in beautiful clothes continually offered vintage wine in gems shaped into cups. Soon lamps were brought in and the table-talk increased, with plentiful laughter and free wit and banter on every side.

⁴³ Andreassi 2004, 2–3.

⁴⁴ Winkler 1985, 160–165.

Cf. with this lavish feast of Thessalian Byrrhena Socrates' criticism in Plato's *Crito* 63, where he has his imaginary interlocutor, the Law (in an argument against fleeing to Thessaly), remark: 'What else can one do in Thessaly besides having lavish dinners? What will remain there of our conversations on righteous action and virtue?'

Here we are presented with an aristocratic *cena*; the luxury of its ambience is described in detail. The food is not mentioned. While a Roman *cena* was inescapably weighed down with food, literary meal descriptions often do their best to erase mentions of food, and emphasize the diversions surrounding the dinner.⁴⁵ Cf. e.g., Gel. 7,13,2: *coniectabamus ad cenulam non cuppedias ciborum, sed argutias quaestionum*, 'we brought as our contribution not delicacies, but topics for discussion'. Equally, in Plato's *Symposium* there is no mention of the food itself. This is in keeping with *symposium* literature, especially since Plato: the conversation is considered more important than the food.⁴⁶

Then, during a conversation, Lucius informs his aunt Byrrhena about the tales he has heard of dangerous practices by witches in Thessaly. Other guests react (Apul. *Met.* 2,20,4–9):

His meis addidit alius: 'Immo vero istic nec viventibus quidem ullis par-citur. Et nescio qui simile passus ore undique omnifariam deformato truncatus est.' Inter haec convivium totum in licentiosos cachinnos effunditur omniumque ora et optutus in unum quempiam angulo secubantem conferuntur. Qui cunctorum obstinatione confusus indigna murmurabundus cum vellet exurgere, 'Immo mi Thelyphron,' Byrrhena inquit 'et subsiste paulisper et more tuae urbanitatis fabulam illam tuam remetire, ut et filius meus iste Lucius lepidi sermonis tui perfruatur comitate.' At ille: 'Tu quidem, domina,' ait 'in officio manes sanctae tuae bonitatis, sed ferenda non est quorundam insolentia.' Sic ille comotus. Sed instantia Byrrhena, quae eum adiuratione suae salutis in-gratis cogebat effari, perfecit ut vellet.

Someone else added: 'Yes, but here they (sc. witches) do not even spare the living. There was a man who had an experience of that kind; his face

⁴⁵ Gowers 1993, 29.

⁴⁶ See below, section 6. Romeri 2002 studies this development since Plato's *Symposium*: Plutarch, in his *Quaestiones Convivales* and his *Banquet of the Seven Sages*, following Plato's lead, Lucian reacting with the "antisymposium" of Lexiphanes, and Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistai* as another reaction, demonstrate that for the sophists at the table the food itself can be as worthy of commemoration as the intellectual pleasure of learned conversation.

was completely mutilated and disfigured'. At these words the whole party dissolved into unrestrained laughter, and all faces turned staring toward one man reclining by himself in the corner. Upset by the general interest in him, he muttered some complaints and tried to get up to leave, but Byrrhena said, 'Don't, my friend Thelyphron. Stay a little while and tell us your story once again with your usual kindness, so that my son Lucius here may share the pleasure of your charming talk too'. 'You, my lady', he answered, 'are always true to your own virtuous kindness. But some people's insolence is intolerable.' He was extremely upset, but Byrrhena persisted. Swearing by her own life, she pressed him to speak out despite his reluctance and finally won his consent.

In Thelyphron's reluctance, and his words 'some people's insolence is intolerable', we recognize the objections which Plato and Plutarch formulate against skoptic entertainment at dinner parties (Apul. *Met.* 2,21,1–2):

Ac sic aggeratis in cumulum stragulis et effultus in cubitum suberec-tusque in torum porrigit dexteram, et ad instar oratorum conformat articulum duobusque infimis conclusis digitis ceteros eminus porrigens et infesto pollice clementer surrigens infit Thelyphron.

And so Thelyphron piled the covers in a heap and propped himself on his elbow, sitting half upright on the couch. He extended his right arm, shaping his fingers to resemble an orator's: having bent his two lowest fingers in, he stretched the others out at long range and poised his thumb to strike, gently rising as he began....

Thelyphron's studied attitude may suggest that he is here at the dinner as a specially invited professional *fabulator*. With this long tale, told in the first person, and in which the narrator himself appears to be the dupe, Thelyphron evokes the loud laughter of the guests (Apul. *Met.* 2,31,1): *Cum primum Thelyphron hanc fabulam posuit, conpotores vino madidi rursum cachinnum integrant*, 'As soon as Thelyphron had finished this story, the banqueters, soused in their wine, renewed their uproarious laughter'.

Informal storytelling by guests at dinners is very well attested; compare e.g., Niceros' werewolf tale in Petronius 61–63 and Pliny's letter 9,33, the tale about the dolphin.

Quite a different symposium is reported at *Met.* 4,7,5–4,22: the robbers, who had captured Lucius, the ass, and brought him to their cave, are being served a splendid meal by their old housekeeper (Apul. *Met.* 4,8,5):

Clamore ludunt, strepitu cantilant, conviciis iocantur, ac iam cetera semiferis Lapithis Centaurisque similia

They ate and drank in utter disorder, swallowing meat by the heap, bread by the stack, and cups by the legion. They played raucously, sang deafeningly, and joked abusively, and in every other respect behaved just like those half-beasts, the Lapiths and Centaurs.

During this banquet that breaks all the rules of a proper symposium, the robbers bolt down their food with voracious gluttony, and when well in their cups they take turns in telling each other tall stories about their (failed) exploits (4,8–22). These same robbers have another lavish meal at 6,30–31; this time their *logos sympotikos* consists in taking turns in proposing a fitting cruel punishment for the ass and Charite, who had tried to escape.

At *Met.* 5,3 Psyche's costly dinner, served by invisible servants, is accompanied by music and song of invisible artists. It is not a real dinner party, since she is the only guest here.

At *Met.* 6,11 Venus returns from a wedding banquet, 'soaked in wine and smelling of balsam'.

At the wedding of Cupid and Psyche, in *Met.* 6,24, celebrated on Mount Olympus, the banquet of the gods is complete with food cooked by Vulcan, nectar—the wine of the gods, as the old woman who narrates this tale explains—, and musical and dancing performances.

A remarkable *convivium* takes place in the tenth book of the novel. First, there is mention of the delicacies on which the ass furtively feasts (10,13–15). They are the leftovers which the cooks of a rich master are allowed to take home. This situation already evokes the daily luxurious dinner parties of the cooks' master Thiasus. When his taste for human food has been discovered, Lucius the ass is brought into the banqueting hall of Thiasus, where a real *convivium* is already going on, with plenty of food and wine, and with a jester (*scurrula*: 10,16,6) to boot. Lucius, entering as a kind of uninvited guest, is in 10,16,8 called a *parasitus*.⁴⁷ The *parasitus* and the flatterer are the most important variants of the *akletos* in later literature.⁴⁸ Lucius is here presented as a kind of *akletos*, the uninvited, late dinner guest of whom the company expected jokes and entertainment in exchange for a free meal. At *Apul. Met.* 10,16,4 Lucius, the narrator, explains that he, although he was already full, wanted to please Thiasus and therefore continued eating:

⁴⁷ On the comic aspects of Lucius as a parasite, cf. May 2006, 143–166.

⁴⁸ Fehr 1994, 186.

At ego quamquam iam bellule suffarcinatus, gratiosum commendationemque me tamen ei facere cupiens esurienter exhibitas escas adpetebam.

Although I was already splendidly stuffed, I wanted to be agreeable and win his favour, and so I hungrily attacked the dainties laid out before me.

Thus by displaying his bad habits, here his gluttony, the ass makes the other dinner guests laugh, providing *them* with a feeling of superiority through *his* ridiculous behaviour. The *akletos*, as it were, ‘performs himself’.⁴⁹

After Lucius the ass has become the regular table-companion of Thiasus, the series of amorous nights with the Corinthian lady also take place in an atmosphere of lavish feasting and wine-drinking.

In Book 11, this symposiastic atmosphere may be said to be still at the background of its explicit negation: After Lucius has eaten roses, and has become a devotee of Isis, the required religious *abstinentia* is repeatedly stressed, and is expressed clearly e.g., in *Met.* 11,23,2:

... decem continuis illis diebus cibariam voluptatem cohercerem neque ullum animal essem et invinius essem

... to restrain my pleasure in food for the next ten days, not to partake of animal food and to go without wine.⁵⁰

6. The ‘Other’ Symposium in Apuleius’ Novel

Throughout the novel we thus find numerous evocations of symposium situations and symposiastic elements, jokes, skoptic humour, story-telling, gluttony, unrestrained laughter, abundance or absence of food. But not one of these symposiastic moments recalls in any of its aspects the *symposium* as Socrates created it around his person in Plato’s *Symposium*. Rather, the recurrent symposiastic moments in the *Metamorphoses* seem to function as a foil for the undeniable presence in the novel of the other, Platonic *Symposium*. It has recently been convincingly argued that Plato with his *Symposium* had created a new genre of symposium literature: the ‘socratic’ *symposium*, in which ‘socratic’ indicates not so much the presence of Socrates, and even less a real dinner party, but instead points to the presence of philosophic and

⁴⁹ Fehr 1994, 186.

⁵⁰ Cf. Schlam 1992, 108–109, also on the word play with the homonyms *essem* in this passage.

educational conversation in the manner of Socrates. Plato's *Symposion* describes the *symposion* as it should be in Plato's eyes, and the call (in the *Symposion*) for sober discussion without entertainment is reminiscent of Socrates' prescriptions for a properly educational *symposion* in the early *Protagoras* (347c–48a).⁵¹ With his *Quaestiones Convivales*, Plutarch followed this lead. It remains unknown to us what has been the purport and content of Apuleius' own *Quaestiones Convivales*. With Harrison, I think that the passages from Sidonius and Macrobius that refer to Apuleius' *Quaestiones Convivales* point to the serious nature of that work: the term *convivales* refers to a symposiastic setting, where various questions were put and answered in the manner of the Aristotelian *Problemata*, as is the case with Plutarch's work of the same title (Συμποσιακὰ Προβλήματα = *Quaestiones Convivales*).⁵²

7. 'A Tale of Two Texts'⁵³

It is not necessary to rehearse here the numerous scholarly studies devoted to the Platonic interpretations of Apuleius' novel.⁵⁴ One may expect to find allusions to symposium literature nowhere more than in the tale of Cupid and Psyche: 'Eros and the pleasures of love figure among the most characteristic subjects of the *logos sympotikos*, both in its poetic expression and in the eloquent philosophical discussion which was to typify the "literary" *symposion* from Plato and Xenophon onwards'.⁵⁵ In the tale of Cupid and Psyche, a tale about Love and the Soul, scholars have indeed detected and discussed allusions to Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Symposion*. In the secondary literature on the tale, many have either based their readings on an exclusively

⁵¹ Relihan 1992, 219. Cf. also Romeri 2002, and see above, note 46.

⁵² Sidon. *Epist.* 9,13,3: *a Platonico Madaurensi saltim formulas mutuare convivalium quaestionum* ('... borrow at least from the Platonist of Madauros the formulas of *quaestiones convivales*'); Macr. *Sat.* 7,3,23–24: *suadeo in conviviiis ... magis quaestiones convivales vel proponas vel ipse dissolvas. Quod genus veteres ita ludicrum non putarant, ut et Aristoteles de ipsis aliqua conscripserit et Plutarchus et vester Apuleius* ('I advise you ... rather to ask, or to answer yourself, such questions as are suitable to dinner parties. The men of old were so far from considering matters of this kind as mere play, that Aristotle and Plutarch and your own Apuleius have discussed them in their writings'). Cf. Harrison 2000, 30–31.

⁵³ The expression is borrowed from the title of Dowden 2006; see below.

⁵⁴ For a helpful overview and discussion of the literature since 1970, cf. Schlam – Finkelpearl 2000, 99–117.

⁵⁵ Pellizer 1994, 180.

serious, allegorical interpretation of the Platonic elements, or have denied any seriousness to the Platonic strands, and exclusively stressed the element of comedy and literary display. In both cases, elements that do not fit into either one of such readings have to be suppressed or distorted. Awareness of the dynamics of the *spoudaiogeloion*, in itself, again, a typical Socratic element,⁵⁶ in this tale—as in the novel as a whole—will enable the reader to enjoy fully both the literary entertainment and the serious undertones that may give him ‘food for thought’ during the enjoyment of the ‘feast of words’ of this *logos sympotikos*. Krabbe, referring to Alcibiades’ famous speech in the *Symposion*, remarks: ‘The *Metamorphoses* is itself a Silenus of sorts, and what it reveals comes as a surprise: *ut mireris*’.⁵⁷

As de Jong has argued, many elements in the opening of the novel suggest a dialogue form, as well as a beginning in mid-conversation (*at ego tibi sermone isto*).⁵⁸ Moreover, with *Quis ille* ... the apparent intrusion of a dialogue partner is suggested. De Jong then considers how Platonic dialogues sometimes begin in mid-conversation and how Plato’s *Symposion* in particular provides a model for the repetition of a story already told, just as Aristomenes will repeat a tale for Lucius. Recently, Dowden has taken de Jong’s observation (that the *Metamorphoses* is initially marked as a dialogue) as a starting point for a discussion of the novel as ‘a tale of two texts’.⁵⁹ After discussing strong structural parallels between Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* and Plato’s *Symposion*, Dowden pays special attention to the role of the feminine in the *Metamorphoses* against the background of Diotima’s authoritative role in the *Symposion*.

Apuleius’ *Golden Ass* is, besides many other things, the tale of a quest, the search of a human being for contact with the divine, and this is a pervasive theme in Diotima’s speech in Plato’s *Symposion* (cf. e.g., Pl. *Smp.* 212a). As Dowden makes clear, in this search for the divine, the tale of Cupid and Psyche seems to be an interim stage. Psyche’s success is qualified because it is still at the stage of ‘God with man does not mix’, and Eros is, when all is said and done, an intermediary *daimon*. In Book 11 Isis somehow

⁵⁶ See above, section 2, and note 16; cf. also Graverini 2007, 141–144 and notes.

⁵⁷ Krabbe 2003, 33. Cf. Schlam 1970, 486 on the relevance of the Silenus image of the *Met.*, with a Socrates parody in Book 1 and a serious Socrates in Book 10. Cf. Hunter 2004, 10–12 on the persistence of the Silenus imagery in later literature; also Branham 1989, 51–52 and 232–233, note 69. Cf. also Graverini 2007, 137–138 on Alcibiades’ characterization of Socrates (Pl. *Smp.* 221e–222a), and its relevance for the seriocomic in Apuleius’ novel.

⁵⁸ De Jong 2001, 202–204.

⁵⁹ Dowden 2006.

offers direct contact with the divine, but the myth that closes the novel is not the satisfactory goal of Lucius' search. Too much satire and too many parodic elements in this final book preclude the readers' belief in Isis and Osiris as the definite breakthrough to divinity. In this book, the preludes continue: the novel finds difficulty in ending, as Finkelp pearl has shown.⁶⁰ We have to accept that the search continues.⁶¹ Or, as Shumate has observed: 'In spite of the critique of the religious experience that is built into the narrative, the same narrative's invocation of such experience remains, in the final analysis, an extremely sympathetic one. Thus Apuleius is perhaps the first in a long line of intellectuals who have understood the pull exerted by the divine but who have not been able themselves to make the leap'.⁶²

8. *A Final, Tentative Step*

Could we take this 'symposiastic reading' one step further, and suggest that the *Metamorphoses* as a whole might have had a *convivium* as its original venue? What if Apuleius himself had conceived this text to be recited (in parts) at a banquet among his intellectual friends? We know that quite extensive recitations (whole tragedies or comedies) were sometimes read aloud by a *lector* or by *lectores*, and prose recitations are also recorded. Recently, Keulen has suggested that we could imagine Apuleius performing parts of his novel in a theatre, but he at the same time admits that the intimate atmosphere evoked by the first words of the novel would seem at odds with such a theatrical performance, and goes on to suggest recital of the *Metamorphoses* during a dinner party.⁶³ Indeed, the first words of the novel would admirably fit the typical agonistic atmosphere of intellectual dinner conversations, where the guests were often in contest, overbidding each other, in displays of *paideia*, or "feasts of the spirit", as illustrated so well in many of Gellius' banquet scenes.⁶⁴ *At ego tibi ... fabulas conseram*, 'But now, I, in my turn, will string together stories' (*Met.* 1,1). The cultural display and the entertainment qualities at work in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* have been eloquently emphasized by Harrison.⁶⁵ This essay has been an attempt to do

⁶⁰ Finkelp pearl 2004.

⁶¹ I have here partly quoted, partly paraphrased Dowden 2006, 55–57.

⁶² Shumate 1996, 328.

⁶³ Keulen 2007b, 109–111.

⁶⁴ Expression taken from Beall 1999, 61 on Gel. 17,8; cf. also Schmitz 1997, 127–129 on the '*spielerische Konkurrenz*' at the sophists' *convivia*, with references.

⁶⁵ Harrison 2000, 210–259.

justice to the dynamics of entertaining and serious elements, by a ‘symposiastic reading’ of Apuleius’ novel. I may conclude with some lines from a fable of Phaedrus that comes close to a definition of the seriocomic in avowedly low-life literature (Phaedrus 4,3,1–4; trans. Perry):

*Ioculare tibi videtur, et sane levi,
Dum nihil habemus maius, calamo ludimus.
Sed diligenter intueri has nenias:
Quantam sub titulis utilitatem reperies!*

...

I seem to you to be fooling, and I do indeed wield the pen lightheartedly, so long as I have no very important theme. But take a careful look into these trifles; what a lot of practical instruction you will find in tiny affairs!

We are reminded of some details in the prologue to Apuleius’ novel: ... *si ... non spreveris inspicere lector, intende ...* ‘if only you do not scorn to look carefully ... reader, pay attention ...’. Indeed, Apuleius’ *Golden Ass* itself has strong elements of the animal fable, and, as is well known, the fables by Aesop and Phaedrus were important bearers of the tradition of σπουδαιογέλοιον.