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A BODY WITHOUT BORDERS: THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL BODY IN APULEIUS' *METAMORPHOSES* 1.5–1.19*

The body is our general medium for having a world.[1]

You are about to be amazed by a collection of tales on 'the transformation of people's fortunes and *figurae* into different shapes, and their restoration again into themselves in a mutual nexus (*mutuo nexu*)' (*Met.* 1.1) – this is Apuleius' opening statement and promise to his listeners in the very first lines of the *Metamorphoses*.[2] In this article I read the first inserted tale (*Met.* 1.5–19) from a corporeal point of view. Modern researchers consider this tale programmatic for the whole novel, which in itself has a strong corporeal orientation as it tells the story of a human *figura* that becomes bestial; of changing bodies, tortured limbs, and beaten organs; and of lascivious and uncontrollable desires.[3] My focus is particularly on the nocturnal scene at the inn (*Met.* 1.11–17), where I analyse the nature of the body and its representations' literary and philosophical implications. I investigate the tension between rationality and sensuality; explore spatial and temporal dimensions; and discuss sexuality and birth. My main argument is that in the first tale the body has a crucial function in the perception of the characters' world and self alike. Furtheremore, I suggest that the body and the 'corporeal subjects' (a term explored later in the article) are this

* I wish to thank Wytse Keulen for reading a draft of this article and for his valuable suggestions, corrections and advice, which improved it immensely. All translations are my own.

[1] M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London and New York, 2009 [first published 1945]), 169.

[2] *Figuras fortunasque hominum in alias imagines conversas et in se rursus mutuo nexu refectas ut mireris*.

[3] On the programmatic nature of the first tale, see for example J. Winkler, *Auctor & Actor. A Narratological Reading of Apuleius' Golden Ass* (Berkeley, CA, 1985), 27, 30; J. Tatum, 'The Tales in Apuleius' Metamorphoses', in S. J. Harrison (ed.), *Oxford Readings in the Roman Novel* (Oxford and New York, 1999), 164–8; W. Keulen, 'Comic Invention and Superstitious Frenzy in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*: The Figure of Socrates as an Icon of Satirical Self-Exposure', *AJPh* (2003), 107, 116.

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tale's protagonists: the body produces its own narrative, whose plot advances in a chaotic and perplexed way through intensities, uncontrollable lust, flowing secretions, and sensual experience. I shall therefore suggest reading the scene *through* the body, and by asking what the the body *does* rather than merely what it *means*. I thus propose reading the *mututo nexu* which appears in the prologue in the context of the nexus of body and mind, of physical shapes and mental consciousness.[4]

My reading and definition of the body draws on the phenomenological approach of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who investigated the structure of consciousnesses from the perspective of the experiencing corporeal subject. This approach is relevant to this article in two significant ways. The first is the fundamental place reserved for the body in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. Focusing on the live corporeal body, he developed the concept of 'body-subject', which he presented as an alternative to the Cartesian incorporeal *cogito*. By means of this concept he wished to stress the importance of the live body in the process of perception – which, he claimed, is our way of being-in-the-world and conceiving it. He maintained that this perception is always corporeal, primary, direct, and pre-reflective; it has spatial and motorial dimensions; it is dynamic not static; and it introduces presences rather than objective truths.[5] For Merleau-Ponty, the human being is neither a regular object in the world (*en-soi*) nor pure subjectivity (*pour-soi*); rather, he or she takes part in the world as both *en-soi* and *pour-soi*, and does so through his or her corporeality.[6] This approach will be shown to be compatible with Apuleius' corporeal way in his text. Secondly, in his philosophy Merleau-Ponty allocates to literature an important role as a philosophical tool for investigation. He argues that literature and philosophy share the same mission and their tasks cannot be separated: both use language to give voice to the experience of the world, and both employ ambiguous expressions to describe the world which cannot be expressed directly. Only through stories can the world be conveyed, and in this respect literature

[4] For other readings of this phrase, see Winkler (n. 3), 188–94, who suggests that the term *mutuo nexu* mentioned in the prologue has a financial meaning; see also S. J. Harrison and M. Winterbottom, 'The Prologue to Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*: Text, Translation and Textual Commentary', in A. Kahane and A. Laird (eds.), *A Companion to the Prologue of Apuleius' Metamorphoses* (Oxford and New York, 2001), 9–15, who suggest that this phrase reflects the two-way traffic of the metamorphosis's movement.

[5] M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics* (Evanston, IL, 1964), 3–6, 21–6.

[6] Merleau-Ponty (n. 1), 77 ff. See also 159–60, n. 6, and 192 ff.

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becomes metaphysical.[7] In the very first lines of the *Metamorphoses* Apuleius himself refers to his use of the Milesian-style tales as a mean to arouse amazement among his listeners. As I shall argue below, this amazement is a crucial part of the phenomenological inquiry into corporeal philosophy.

The programmatic frame of 'truth' and *mirari*

The first inserted tale starts with the story of Lucius, who takes a break on his journey to Thesssaly after a strenuous ride on his horse. The first lines of the prologue – which give the storytelling a bodily focus by specifically referring to the transformations of the *figurae* – are followed by a description of Lucius' relationship with his horse through his body language: he leaps off his horse's back, wipes away his sweat, strikes his ears (*aures remulceo* [*Met.* 1.2], a term that refers to the *aures permulcere* that Apuleius has promised his listeners [*Met.* 1.1]), undoes his rein, and walks the horse slowly by his side. During this break Lucius happens to overhear two people conversing. One of them, so it seems, does not believe his companion's words; he laughs at him, calling his story absurd, a fiction, and a lie which is no truer than magic stories.[8] Lucius interrupts the conversation and turns to the sceptical listener with an odd demand: he entreats him not to disbelieve unfamiliar phenomena or something that may seem irrational, and not to reject the story he has just heard as false only because it is unfamiliar to his eyes or ears:

> Yet you, with your thick ears and your obstinate heart, are rejecting what might be true. By Hercules, you do not comprehend that because of distorted opinions things are considered lies just because they are new to the ears or crude to the eyes, or, for sure, seem out of reach of the intellectual grasp. But if you explore a bit more meticulously, you will perceive (*senties*) that they are not only easy to know but also simple to do.
>
> (*Met.* 1.3).[9]

What Lucius wants from the doubting companion is that he suspend his rational judgement so as to be able to perceive and feel (*sentire*[10])

[7] M. Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense* (Evanston, IL, 1992), 28.

[8] *Met.* 1.3. For a further discussion of 'truth' in the *Metamorphoses*, see Winkler (n. 3), 27–37.

[9] *Tu vero crassis auribus et obstinato corde respuis quae forsitan vere perhibeantur. Minus hercule calles pravissimis opinionibus ea putari mendacia quae vel auditu nova vel visu rudia vel certe supra captum cogitationis ardua videantur; quae si paulo accuratius exploraris, non modo compertu evidentia verum etiam factu facilia senties.*

[10] See additional discussion on this verb later in the article.

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the *compertu evidentia* and *factu facilia*. This perception, he continues, should be implemented through *accuratius explorare*, whose nature is not explicitly detailed. Nevertheless, we might learn about his intention from his words *audita nova...supra captum cogitationis ardua*, which, as Keulen observes, recall Empedocles' statement (fr. 2D–K) about the limitations of perception. There Empedocles stresses the importance of the senses in the process of perception and of acquiring true knowledge; he also refers to the contradiction between contingent beliefs and the promise of true understanding – just as Lucius does.[11]

Lucius' intention becomes even clearer from the example he gives: he recalls that he himself once choked on a small piece of cheese, but after a while he saw a man in the street shoving a whole sword down his throat; had he trusted his pre-assumptions and earlier knowledge, the sword swallower's performance could not have been real. But the event had been perfectly concrete: it had actually happened, and the narrator knows it because he had *seen* it with his own two eyes (*gemino obtutu...aspexi*; *Met.* 1.4).[12] This little story demonstrates and ratifies the narrator's earlier demand: when searching for the truth one must suspend one's rational pre-assumptions in order to perceive reality through direct and pre-reflective contact with it (just as the narrator's own perception of reality was corporeal rather than rational, and relied on his sensual and physical involvement in the world). In other words, the narrator's suggestion is to conduct what might be called today a 'phenomenological inquiry': to look at the phenomena, to be open to the appearances of things before rationalizing them, and to perceive the world through the sensual body and the corporeal experience of sight, sound, and other senses. Lucius' 'phenomenological' exploration is also reflected in the metaphor of the caressed or stroked ears of the ass, which, as Gowers observes, represents 'pupils who are resistant to philosophical awakening, and the physical image of ears, especially of an ass's ears, signifies the channels of reception that need to be assailed'.[13] It is similar to a metaphor presented in Persius' first Satire (*Sat.* 1.121), in which the need to scratch the ears symbolizes the need to let the truth rub against the ears so that the cure of philosophy can enter one's head.[14]

[11] W. Keulen, *Apuleius Madaurensis Metamorphoses. Book I* (Groningen, 2007), 125.

[12] See also Winkler (n. 3), 30.

[13] E. Gowers, 'Apuleius and Persius', in Ahuvia Kahane and Andrew Laird (eds.), *A Companion to the Prologue of Apuleius' Metamorphoses* (Oxford, 2001), 77.

[14] *Ibid.*, 81–2.

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What the narrator suggests his listeners do is what the Greek sceptic philosophers called *epochē*: avoid or postpone judgement in matters of 'being' and 'truth'.[15] *Epochē* is crucial in discussions of truth and existence, because it enables focusing on the sole certain and indisputable thing: the direct experience at the very moment of its happening. That is why for Lucius the only unarguable truth is that which he perceives through his sensual body: 'For me nothing is impossible', he says to the still sceptical listener after hearing the story, 'I and you and all the people experience strange things (*mira*), almost impossible, which, however, if told to a person who is ignorant of them will lose their credibility' (*Met.* 1.20).[16] And indeed these unbelievable and irrational things cannot be perceived by the logos, but only through the corporeal experience.

Epochē is an important practice in modern phenomenology as well. It enables suspension of rational judgement of the ontological question (the existence of the world) so that we may open up to perceiving the world through our body and corporeal consciousness. In *epochē*, according to Merleau-Ponty, we suspend or bracket rational analysis; it *happens* to us because of our deep involvement in the world (as opposed to Husserl's view of *epochē* as something that we *do*).[17] This suspension of judgement allows us to occupy a position of wonder in the face of the world: amazement at realizing that the world is not necessarily what we *knew*. It also enables us to carry non-judgemental inquiries through our corporeal *experience*: Merleau-Ponty argues that

> it is because we are through and through compounded of relationships with the world that for us the only way to become aware of the fact is to suspend the resultant activity, to refuse it our complicity…or yet again, to put it 'out of play'. Not because we reject the certainties of common sense and a natural attitude to things…but because, being the presupposed basis of any thought, they are taken for granted, and go unnoticed, and because in order to arouse them and bring them to view, we have to suspend for a moment our recognition of them. The best formulation of the reduction is probably…'wonder' in the face of the world.[18]

[15] E.g., Sext. Emp. *Pyr.* 1.10; Chrysippus, *Stoic.* 2.39.

[16] *Ego vero, inquam, nihil impossibile arbitror… Nam et mihi et tibi et cunctis hominibus multa usu venire mira et paene infecta, quae tamen ignaro relata fidem perdant.* See also: *Met.* 1.1: *ut mireris*; *Met.* 1.11: *mira…memoras*.

[17] E. Husserl, *Ideas. General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (London, 1931), Idea 1, ch. 32. See also E. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations. An Introduction to Phenomenology* (Lexington, KY, 1997 [first published 1950]).

[18] Merleau-Ponty (n. 1), xiv–xv.

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This wonder, or *mirari*, in the face of the world is accompanied by endless curiosity; it is suggested in the very first lines of the prologue, when Apuleius invites his listeners to be amazed (*ut mireris*) by his upcoming story. It is also a distinct quality of Lucius' character throughout the story of the *Metamorphoses*: for example, when he arrives at Hypata, we are told that he is anxious and passionate to explore the place and its wonders (*mira*; *Met.* 2.1). He performs a close examination of each and every object around him with curiosity (*curiose*), which is followed by the surprising discovery that nothing seems to be what it is. Later, wonder and curiosity will be the cause of his transformation into an ass, and it is these qualities that will keep driving him in his asinine figure.[19]

The first tale and the body

Here I offer a brief summary of the first inserted tale, which is pursued further by a discussion of the body. Young Aristomenes meets his old friend Socrates, sitting half-naked on the street corner, pale and exhausted. When he asks him why he looks so miserable, Socrates blames a brief sexual encounter he has had with an old witch named Meroë: when their relationship failed he was bewitched by her, and this led him to his current wretchedness. Aristomenes takes care of his friend: he dresses him, takes him to the baths, and invites him to sleep at a local inn. In their room Socrates tells Aristomenes about Meroë's spells against her enemies, all of which targeted their bodies. After a while they both fall asleep. In the middle of the night the doors of the room are violently ripped off, and Meroë appears at the doorway, accompanied by her sister. Their violent entrance overturns the terrified Aristomenes' cot, and lying under it he watches the following scene: Meroë slits the sleeping Socrates' throat with a dagger; she then tears his heart out, drains his blood into a leather bottle, and staunches the wound with a cursed sponge. The two old women then turn on Aristomenes, lift the cot off him, urinate all over him, and leave the room. Aristomenes, afraid of being charged with the murder of his friend, first tries to leave the inn; when the doorkeeper prevents him from escaping he tries to hang himself, but the rope breaks and he falls onto his friend's corpse. Amazingly, the dead Socrates is restored

[19] See also Winkler's discussion on *curiositas*: Winkler (n. 3), 27 ff.

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to life: he opens his eyes and grumbles about the tumult and the stench of urine. The following morning the two men leave their room and have breakfast on a river bank. The thirsty Socrates then goes down to the river to drink, but as soon as his lips touch the water the sponge shoots out of his throat, the wound opens, and he collapses and dies.

A close reading of the tale reveals a focus on the body, which serves Apuleius to design his characters and their actions: Aristomenes sees Socrates sitting on the ground with his head covered in a bodily gesture of shame and grief common in Greek tragedy.[20] His body is disfigured (*deformatus*; a term later used to describe the body of his mourning wife), pale, and lean, and when he tries to cover his face, flushed with shame, he raises his cloak and uncovers his naked lower body parts.[21] Aristomenes takes immediate action targeted at his friend's body: he covers him, takes him to the baths, applies oils, and cleans and scrapes the filth off his back; he then supports Socrates' weak body and takes him to an inn, where he feeds him (*Met.* 1.7). A body-focused approach also appears in Socrates' story about his encounter with the old but 'sexy' (*scitula*) Meroë. This narrative is powerfully sexual in relating the circumstances of their own meeting and in the description of Meroë's magical misdeeds, all of which are aimed at her opponents' bodies.[22] For example, she turns someone into a beaver, who gets free by biting off his genitals (*praecisione genitalium*); she seals the womb of a woman until she is bloated (*distendere*) like an elephant; and she makes the bodies of other enemies bestial (*Met.* 1.9; this last act of transformation presages Lucius' own corporeal metamorphoses). Even Aristomenes' horror at hearing Socrates' story is described with a metaphorical pun of corporeal injury: 'I am struck not by a tiny pebble but by a lance [of fear of Meroë]' (*Met.* 1.11).[23] But it is not only the corporeal references that highlight the phenomenological dimension of the text: this is also brought to the fore by the way in which the body is woven into the plot, challenging rationality, threatening hierarchy, and blurring reality.

[20] Keulen (n. 3), 112.

[21] *Faciem suam. . .prae pudore obtexit ita ut ab umbilico pube tenus cetera corporis renudaret* ('He covered his face, already flushed with shame, such that he exposed all his body from his navel to his pubis; *Met.* 1.6). For self-exposure as a comic theatrical gesture, see Keulen (n. 3), 114–15.

[22] On the relations between phenomenology and sexuality, see later in the article. For corporeal motives in magic, see V. Flint and B. Ankarloo, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe. Volume II, Ancient Greece and Rome* (London, 1999), 168 ff., 183, 201 ff.

[23] *Iniecto non scrupulo sed lancea*. Keulen (n. 11), 238, points out that *lanceam inicere* has a metaphorical note that refers to the imagery of 'words as weapons'.

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Between rationality and sensuality

According to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, our body, in dwelling in space, bestows meaning on our spatial experience. The body is the anchor of our being-in-the-world, it is the absolute 'here' that gives meaning to our spatial settings. Our corporeal experience teaches us that space is embedded in our body, which lives, controls, and actually creates it. In other words, space is a subjective element that contracts and expands in accordance with the subject, and no real border exists between the body and the space around it.[24] As soon as Aristomenes' and Socrates' space is penetrated by Meroë and her sister, we learn of the transformation that occurs in their bodies and in Aristomenes' perception of himself and of the space around him. His 'lame cot' (*uno pede mutilus*; *Met.* 1.11) is overturned and falls on top of him as he is knocked down to the ground. Immediately he feels a sense of transformation and proclaims, 'I changed from Aristomenes into a tortoise' (*de Aristomenes testudo factus*; *Met.* 1.12). But these words – which predict the future metamorphoses in the story, both in the inserted tales (for example, the story of Thrasyleon, who becomes a beast, *Met.* 4.15) and in the frame narrative of Lucius' becoming an ass – are more than mere metaphor. They resemble a typical phenomenological description of a body which is open to the world and constantly annexes other objects that are assimilated into the mass of that body. This incorporation of objects into the bulk of the body – even temporarily, as in this case – expresses the power of extending the being-in-the-world and the changing of existence through appropriating instruments.[25] This process is not unique to Aristomenes: it happens to Socrates when the sponge becomes a temporary part of his body (as we shall see later); in the story of Thelyphron, whose ears and nose are replaced by members made of wax (*Met.* 2.30); or, by contrast, when Lamachus' hand is amputated after being nailed (*offigere*) to a door as he escapes from the place (*Met.* 4.10). All these examples demonstrate how the body is interwoven into the *chair* of the world, merges with other objects, and challenges its closed and fixed boundaries.

The penetration into people's space also emphasizes the phenomenological nexus between the body and mind. After a logical and causal explanation for Aristomenes' situation (a hard blow that overturns his

[24] Merleau-Ponty (n. 1), 112–70: 'The Spatiality of One's Own Body and Motility'.
[25] See *ibid.*, 165 ff.

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lame cot), we learn of his surprising corporeal reaction: 'Then I perceived (*sensi*) how according to nature some states (*affectus*) are expressed through their contraries. Just as tears often emerge out of joy, so also in that excessive fear I could not withhold my laughter' (*Met.* 1.12).[26] This experience is neither rational nor coherent, and it contradicts Aristomenes' own pre-assumptions: his body does not react as he (rationally) had expected it to; he expresses his excessive fear through a contrary manifestation – laughter. Aristomenes' perception of the world is not based only on rational reflection, nor is it exclusively 'empiricist' and sensual; rather, he experiences the world through a unique *mutuus nexu* of the corporeal with the mental. The almost inseparable mixture of feelings and physical reactions is emphasized by the use of the Latin words *sentire* and *affectus*, which can be applied to both physical and mental states and meanings, not always with a clear distinction between the two.[27]

As the story continues Meroë points at Aristomenes, who is still lying prostrate on the ground, and threatens him (*Met.* 1.12). Understanding (*accipere*) that the witch wants to punish him, his body reacts with a flood of cold sweat and great shivering of the internal organs (*sudore frigido miser perfluo*, *tremore viscera quatior*; *Met.* 1.13). His understanding is not necessarily mental: the verb *accipere* is not devoid of corporeal context, and his reaction is wholly corporeal.[28] This leads to additional change in his state: he is no longer 'a tortoise', and the cot, once more a separate object, 'dances' over his back to the beat of his trembling body (*palpitando saltaret*; *Met.* 1.13).[29] The penetration into Aristomenes' body-space thus alters his body and mind. He is left a passive viewer

[26] *Tunc ego sensi naturalitus quosdam affectus in contrarium provenire. nam ut lacrimae saepicule de gaudio prodeunt, ita et in illo nimio pavore risum nequivi continere.*

[27] For various uses of *sentire*, see, for example, Lucr. 1.298: *varios rerum odores* ('various smells of things'); Lucr. 1.496: *calorem et frigus* ('warm and cold'); but also Plaut. *Men.* 3.2.16: *sentio errare* ('I realize that she is wrong'); Cic. *Fin.* 2.3.6: *voluptatem hanc esse sentiunt omnes* ('everyone realizes that pleasure is…'). For *affectus*, see Celsus, *Med.* 3.18: *supersunt alii corporis adfectus* ('there are other corporeal affections'); but also Ov. *Tr.* 4.3.32: *affectum quem te mentis habere velim* ('[I cannot say] what feeling I wish that you have'); Ov. *Tr.* 5.2.8: *affectusque animi, qui fuit ante, manet* ('my state of mind remains as before').

[28] For various uses of *accipere*, see, for example, Enn. *Ap. Non.* 85.1: *cette manus vestras measque accipite* ('take your hands and mine'); Plaut. *Amph.* 2.2.132: *ex tua accepi manu pateram* ('I received the bowl from your hand'); Verg. *Aen.* 4.530–1: *oculisve aut pectore noctem accipit* ('[she did not] receive the night with her heart or eyes' – i.e. she did not sleep). It is also interesting that this verb can be both active (taking things, perceiving) and passive (being the recipient of something, e.g. Verg. *Aen.* 3.243: *nec vulnera accipiunt tergo* ['they were not wounded in their back']).

[29] Keulen (n. 11), 265, notes that, before Apuleius, *palpitare* was used almost exclusively for throbbing or pounding of body parts.

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of the scene, his passivity accentuated by his horizontal position – as opposed to the verticality of the women who dominate the event.

This horizontal positioning – which brings to mind the contrasted corporeal relations between the standing Aristomenes and the sitting Socrates at their first meeting in the street – can also be read through its 'rhizomatic' qualities as disrupting the hierarchies. The term 'rhizome' comes from the Greek noun *rīdzoma*, 'a root', and describes vegetal reproduction through roots and shoots from nodes (for example, grass) in contrast to the vertical structure of the tree. Deleuze and Guattari, like Merleau-Ponty, stress the importance of the body in its ability to experience the world. They argue that thought must penetrate and connect with the body in order to reach the experience itself, which is not thinkable. They use the rhizome concept as a philosophical metaphor. Through the rhizome these thinkers challenge the vertical tree-like principles of thought, based on fixed identities, steady boundaries, and similarity.[30] The rhizome is a horizontal axis that can penetrate boundaries and borders, subvert unifying concepts, and undermine vertical constructions and perceptions of knowledge in favour of principles of multiplicity, heterogeneity, and connection. In the present episode the bodies' horizontality challenges their homogeneity, their boundaries, and their fixed identities and gender attributions (as discussed later).

Aristomenes' passivity, however, is deceptive: lying on the ground and watching (*conspicere*; *Met.* 1.12) the events, he is not gazing passively in a process of receiving representation of an external and separated world into his nous, but is engaged in active involvement in the world. His living body, his certain corporeal gestures and position in space, determine the ways in which objects and subjects are opened up to him; his body determines his field of perception and his sensual involvement in the world: 'Thrown into the dung and fortified by the ingenuity of my cot I waited to see what was going on through my oblique gaze; I saw two women…' (*Met.* 1.12).[31] Aristomenes is thus a contexture of sight and touch. He sees the event and experiences

[30] G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London, 2011 [first published 1980]), 3–28.

[31] *Ac dum in fimum deiectus obliquo aspectu, quid rei sit, grabatuli sollertia munitus opperior, video mulieres duas. <in>infimum* (v); *in sinum* (*Lips*); *in limum* (*Leo*). *In fimum*, the option chosen by Rudolf Helm, *Apulei Platonici Madaurensis Metamorphoseon libri XI*, third edition (Leipzig, 1931), only stresses the corporeal aspect. In a typical phenomenological way, in which everything is part of the flesh of the world, the words *grabatuli sollertia* give a certain life to the object.

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the world through his body. This is acknowledged by him, but also by the witches, who reiterate and emphasize his corporeal and spatial posture in relation to his gaze: '[Aristomenes is] lying prostrate on the ground, thrown under his cot and watching all this' (*Met.* 1.12).[32] This nexus of gazes also has an erotic context, as we shall soon see.

Spatial and temporal dimensions

The first penetration leads to an additional one, into the body-space and body-time of Socrates. Meroë approaches him, tilts his head sideways, plunges a dagger into his neck, and drains his blood into a leather flask (*Met.* 1.13). After another reminder that all this is narrated as seen through Aristomenes' own eyes, the story continues from his (corporeal) point of view (*meis oculis vidi*; *Met.* 1.13), a statement which recalls the scene of the sword swallower, where 'seeing with the eyes' testifies to the actuality of the event. Meroë rips out Socrates' heart, and now it is the turn of the body itself (as opposed to the character) to speak: 'The slashed throat made a sound, or rather a vague whistle through the wound' (*Met.* 1.13).[33] The body then bubbles with the draining spirit, and the wound is staunched with a sponge. Curiously, none of these acts kills Socrates. Rather, they extend and divide his body: now a part of his body (the *cor*) is in Meroë's hand; another part, his blood, is inside an external object, a leather bottle (*utriculus*);[34] and his remaining organs are heaped (*contumulare*) on the floor of the room. For a while, until the following morning, an extrinsic object (a sponge) is assimilated into Socrates' body; this assimilation is so complete that Aristomenes later exclaims, 'Look! Here is Socrates whole, safe and sound. Where is his wound? The sponge? Where, lastly, is his scar?' (*Met.* 1.18).[35] But this is only temporary, and the sponge will later

[32] *Humi prostratus grabatulo succubans iacet [Aristomenes, A.K.] et haec omnia conspicit.* On vision and corporeality, see M. Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind', in T. Baldwin (ed.), *Maurice Merlau-Ponty. Basic Writings* (London and New York, 2004), 294.

[33] *Praesecata gula vocem, immo vero stridorem incertum per vulnus effunderet.*

[34] Being made of animal skin, the *utriculus* has obvious corporeal reference. See Pliny's words: 'Women have all the same [organs], and besides that they have a little leather sac joined to their bladder, hence it is called "uterus"' (*feminis eadem omnia praeterque vesicae iunctus utriculus, unde dictus uterus*; Plin. *NH*. 11.209). Keulen (n. 11), 270–1, notes that Apuleius uses *utriculus* to impart a technical medical flavour.

[35] *Ecce Socrates integer, sanus, incolumis. Ubi vulnus, <ubi> spongia? ubi postremum cicatrix tam alta, tam recens?*

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become a separate object again, fall into the river, and merge with the flowing water.

Socrates is thus no longer an organized organism but an assemblage of dispersed organs manipulated by intensities and desires, and his body is represented as divergent, inconstant, and open (in Deleuze's terminology we might call it a rhizome). In contrast to the closed and strictly rational consciousness,[36] phenomenology indicates that the body is capable of perception precisely owing to its openness and overflowing nature: corporeal subjects are always merged with other objects and subjects, intertwined with the flesh of the world, penetrating and being penetrated by it. Indeed, only through these corporeal actions can the subject perceive reality – which itself is blurred and borderless. Unlike the mind, the body does not categorize or divide reality; it moves, changes, touches other subjects and objects, senses the world; there is no gap between the world and the body (consequently representation is impossible, as will be explored later); thus (logical) representation is replaced by (corporeal) sensation.[37]

Socrates is depicted as a corporeal subject, and it would certainly be difficult to explain the outcome of his penetration rationally, as its physical consequences occur only on the following day, when at last he dies.[38] This 'delay' reveals the unique phenomenological time in the tale: the penetration into the body of Socrates leads to the expansion of his body, which becomes an extension of time; the causal chains of events twist and turn back as *post* precedes *ante*, and Socrates is situated in both real and dream-like time. The bodies of Socrates and Meroë *create* time (and space) rather than being enslaved to it. This time differs from the Roman perception of cyclical time, which is based on a 'sense of immanence of the distant past' and 'on a feeling of the circularity or of the repetitious nature of past history and of

[36] For rational thinking and the logic model of *modus ponens* as 'closed', see U. Eco *et al.*, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge, 1992), 29. Eco claims that, besides the ancient rationalism, the Romans (and the Greeks) developed contradictory principles of multiplicity, negations of identity, and continuous metamorphoses (*ibid.*).

[37] See M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston, IL, 1968), 130 ff.

[38] S. Frangoulidis, '*Cui videbor veri similia dicere proferens vera?* Aristomenes and the Witches in Apuleius' Tale of Aristomenes', *CJ* (1999), 376, discusses some of the attempts to find a logical explanation for this episode: 'Scholarly discussions of the tale have mostly concentrated on the way this incident does not make sense, either as an indication of Apuleius' careless workmanship, or as a mark of the breakdown of the pattern of causality.' In my view this represents a phenomenological literary depiction of a corporeal pre-reflective experience.

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time itself'.[39] It also differs from the passive experience of passing time, which is presented, for example, in Petronius' *Satyricon*, where 'time controls, it humiliates, humans attempt to escape its net', and from time as a 'linear, serial, and cumulative process'.[40] Socrates' time and space do not exist *a priori* or independently; they are the consequences of his corporeal involvement in the world and the encounter of his body with other bodies, subjects, and objects (Meroë, *gladium*, *utriculus*, *spongia*). This is close to the phenomenological perception of time as phrased by Merleau-Ponty:

> We must therefore avoid saying that our body is in space or in time. It *inhabits* space and time... I am not in space and time nor do I conceive space and time; I belong to them, my body conceives with them and includes them.[41]

Another aspect of time is manifested in the locations of the scene, which represents a contexture of temporality and spatiality. The inn (*hospitium*) is both a spatial and a temporal pause between other spaces and time-frames; its nature as a place of in-between is even more emphasized in the scene following Socrates' murder, when Aristomenes' request to exit is refused by the half-asleep doorkeeper (*Met.* 1.14–15; Meroë's occupation as *caupona* should also be noted). Inside the inn, the beds also represent a temporal boundary: they constitutes a space between wakefulness and sleep, reality and dream, mind and soul.[42] The last scene of the tale, in which Socrates dies, also takes place at a unique site from the temporal point of view: a river, which is a site that combines spatiality and temporality, the concrete presence and the eternal flow.

The sexual body

The incursion of the women into the room of the men can also be read from a sexual standpoint, as a feminine penetration into the masculine space. Sexuality is important for the phenomenological inquiry as it is

[39] P. Toohey, *Melancholy, Love, and Time. Boundaries of the Self in Ancient Literature* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2004), 201.

[40] *Ibid.*, 206. See also N. W. Slater, 'Spectator and Spectacle in Apuleius', in W. Keulen, S. Panayotakis, and M. Zimmerman (eds.), *The Ancient Novel and Beyond* (Leiden and Boston, MA, 1990), 54–5.

[41] Merleau-Ponty (n. 1), 161–2, emphasis in original.

[42] See Lucr. 4.916–17: 'The beginning of sleep occurs when the power of the soul is divided between the organs of the body, and part of it bursts out' (*Principio somnus fit ubi est distracta per artus / vis animae partimque foras eiecta recessit*).

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related both to the body's contact with the world and to the body–mind nexus. Merleau-Ponty argues:

> Saying that I have a body is thus a way of saying that I can be seen as an object and that I try to be seen as a subject, that another can be my master or slave, so that shame and shamelessness express the dialectic of the plurality of consciousness, and have metaphysical significance. The same might be said of sexual desire...[43]

Sexuality enables one's own body to come to full existence for oneself through a physical dialogue with the body of another: it makes things and subjects come into existence for us through stimuli of pleasure and pain, and it gives the body its subjectivity and prevents its becoming a mere object. Sexuality is neither pure physicality nor pure consciousness, and it expresses the blur of the connection between the subject and the world while still keeping a degree of separation from it.[44]

The sexual connotations and allusions in the first inserted tale start with the very breaking of the doors, which can be taken as a symbol of the external female pudenda.[45] They are reflected in the general atmosphere of the episode: night-time, two male and female couples, and close physical contact; they also appear in metaphors, verbs, and corporeal attributes. For example the metaphor of the 'shaking bed' (*grabatulus...saltaret*; *Met.* 1.13) has a clear sexual reference (a similar metaphor later describes the encounter between Lucius and the sexy Photis: 'I know how to shake a jar and a bed in a gratifying manner'; *Met.* 2.7[46]). The violent acts of plunging (*demergere*) the sword into Socrates or slashing the throat (*praesecata gula*; *Met.* 1.13) carry sexual allusions;[47] and the twisting of Socrates' head (*Capite...demoto*; *Met.* 1.13) has a sexual connotation of *fellatio*.[48] Other corporeal attributes such as *gula*,[49] *viscera*,[50] *vulnus*,[51] and *sanguinis* (*Met.* 1.13) all have sexual connotations as well.

[43] Merleau-Ponty (n. 1), 193.

[44] *Ibid.*, 178–201: 'The Body in Its Sexual Being'.

[45] J. N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (London, 1990), 89.

[46] *Et ollam et lectulum suave quatere novi*. Cf. Ov. *Am.* 3.14.26: *Spondaque lasciva mobilitate tremat* ('the bedstead should rock under the lusty thrusts').

[47] Cf. the sexual allusion of *dirumpere* in *Met.* 7.21. On the sexual allusion of violence, see Adams (n. 45), 149–51.

[48] Cf. Catull. 88.7-8: 'for there is no crime beyond which he could proceed, not even if lowering his head he swallowed himself' (*nam nihil est quicquam sceleris, quo prodeat ultra*, *non si demisso se ipse voret capite*).

[49] Cf. Plaut. *Aul.* 304.

[50] Cf. Ov. *Am.* 2.14.27; Sen. *Controv.* 2.5.4; *Priap.* 64.

[51] For wounds as a sexual metaphor, see Adams (n. 45), 152. For the association of *sanguinis* (like *urina* in the following urination scene) with sperm, see Keulen (n. 11), 270.

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The invasion into the males' space is followed by a penetration into the body of Socrates, which involves pain and pleasure and blurs gender identities. In a peculiar inversion, his masculine, closed, and dry body is effeminized through perforation and penetration of a masculine object (*gladium*) held in the hand of a female; it is then merged with a feminine subject and object (Meroë; *utriculus*[52]); and is sealed (hence re-masculinized) by a *spongia* – an object of feminine qualities in terms of its liquidity and perforation – only to re-open upon encounter with the water, which is a feminine element in itself.[53] His heart and blood, two elements closely associated with manly courage,[54] are taken by a female subject whose body is masculine in its gestures and vertical position, yet feminine in its leaking (as we learn in the urination scene that follows). Gender roles, just like the body and its boundaries, are thus blurred and unstable: the female corporeality possesses both masculine and feminine attributes; the masculine body is effeminized, reverts to being masculine, and is then re-effeminized.

As mentioned above, according to Merleau-Ponty sexuality is related to the body through the erotic gaze as well. Socrates, Aristomenes, and Meroë are all part of a mutual nexus of dialectical erotic gazes, in which Socrates, as a subject, sees Meroë as a desired corporeal object and is, at the same time, a corporeal object of her own sexual gaze. For him, she is 'old but quite sexy' (*Met.* 1.7); for her, he is Endymion and 'my Ganymede' (*Catamitus meus*; *Met.* 1.12).[55] In the following urination episode it is Aristomenes who is reduced to an object, 'a body', under the witches' gaze, while Meroë, as a subject, desires to merge with that object and to contain it within herself, and she does so through her bodily fluids in the 'procreation' scene discussed below.

[52] For the metaphor of women as receptacles, see P. DuBois, *Sowing the Body. Psychoanalysis and Ancient Representations of Women* (Chicago, IL, 1988), 71, 110 ff.

[53] For the contrast between the closed, dry, and active male body and the fluid, soft, and open female, see, for example, C. Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge and New York, 1993).

[54] Cf. Pl. *Ti.* 69e–70c. Note Plato's depiction of the lungs as sponge (*spōngos*; 70c), as well as the description of the throat as a dividing line between the head and the chest, the divine and the mortal parts of the soul.

[55] Two references are worth mentioning here: the first is Socrates' explanation of Zeus's desire for Ganymede in physical terms as a flow of beauty that passes through the eyes (Pl. *Phdr.* 255c); the second is the use of *Catamitus* in a derogatory way in Cicero's *Philipicae*, a use that is also connected to sight: 'Oh villain!. . .Did you disturb the city with nocturnal terror, and Italia with fear so many days for that reason, so that you might show yourself unexpectedly, you Ganymede, and that the woman might see you before she hoped to?' (*O hominem nequam!. . . Ergo, ut te Catamitum, nec opinato cum te ostendisses, praeter spem mulier adspiceret, idcirco urbem terrore nocturno, Italiam multorum dierum metu perturbasti?*; Cic. *Phil.* 2.31.77).

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The objectifying of the male subjects is also manifested in the corporeal gesture of pointing at them with the hands and talking about (rather than *to*) them while they are present; and it is expressed in the language through the use of indefinite pronouns:

> And after stretching her right hand and pointing at me to her sister Panthia: 'and this' (*hic*), she said, 'is the good consultant Aristomenes. . .let this one (*hic*) at least survive, so that he may bury the corpse of that wretched man with a little earth'. (*Met.* 1.12-13)[56]

The sexuality of the bodies does not, however, end with the gaze: the erotic desire of the protagonists constitutes a corporeal intentionality of the bodies towards each other. The source of Socrates' wretchedness lies in his (and Meroë's) sexual encounter, as we learn when he describes his miserable state to Aristomenes when they meet in the street:

> [Meroë] began to treat me kindly on a more than a human level, offering me a satisfying and free meal, and soon after, aroused by desire (*urigine*), she enticed me to her bed; and at once I became miserable for when I slept with her, from that single union (*congressu*) I contracted a long and pestilential disaster. . . (*Met.* 1.7).[57]

Sexuality and the sexual body are precisely what keep the subject from being reduced to 'pure mind'; it cannot be explained through logic, nor is it a reflective process. Aristomenes blames Socrates' erotic desire (*voluptatem Veneriam*; *Met.* 1.8) for his preference for Meroë, the *scortum scorteum*, over his wife, his children, and his *Lares* (household gods). This desire is neither rational nor logical, but from a corporeal viewpoint it is absolutely present and 'true'. The sexuality of the bodies in the scene results in a kind of procreation: the birth of a corporeal subject through flux of constant change and metamorphoses.

The birth of the subject

Finishing their business with Socrates, the two witches turn to Aristomenes and perform an additional penetration into his corporeal space. Having removed his cot, they spread their legs and empty their bladders over his face until he is flooded with urine (*Met.* 1.13). As

[56] *Et porrecta dextera meque Panthiae suae demonstrato, 'at hic bonus' inquit 'consiliator Aristomene. . . 'immo' ait 'supersit hic saltem qui miselli huius corpus parvo contumulet humo'.*

[57] *Quae me nimis quam humane tractare adorta cenae gratae atque gratuitae ac mox urigine percita cubili suo applicat. Et statim miser, ut cum illa adquievi, ab unico congressu annosam ac pestilentem contraho.*

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noted earlier, space has no absolute dimensions, and it varies with the subject that creates its boundaries. The penetration into the corporeal space of Aristomenes – together with the act of urination – changes his corporeal consciousness once more. He is now lying on the ground, naked and cold, and inundated by urine excreted from the witches' bodies. The borders of his body fade again, and he now assumes the women's corporeality. Aristomenes describes his situation: 'Thrown down on the ground, lifeless, naked, cold, and awash with urine' (*Met.* 1.14).[58] This is the description of a fluid subject in the process of birth and becoming; indeed, he proclaims that now he feels as if he has just left his mother's womb (*quasi recens utero matris editus*; *Met.* 1.14).[59] But it also implies a dual subjectivity, as the dyad of mother and foetus represents both identity and difference: the two bodies are intertwined and share the same bloodstream, yet they still constitute two separate, individual subjects. Nevertheless, the description 'new-born' apparently does not satisfy Aristomenes, and he struggles to find a better one, able to convey in words his corporeal experience.

Words are part of the representative lingual system; Aristomenes' experience, however, is more corporeal, physical, and sensual: he *experiences* the world rather than *thinking* of it. His body is transforming, his corporeal boundaries are blurred again, and he is merged into subjects and objects. It is therefore hard for him to represent this corporeal experience (since representation demands a gap between the subject and the object of representation), and this may explain his difficulty in putting his corporeal consciousness and perception into words. This difficulty is expressed in the proliferation of words of hesitation, reservation, and doubt: *quasi… immo vero… verum etiam… et… vel certe…* (*Met.* 1.14). Merleau Ponty argues:

> Speech and understanding are moments in the unified system of self-other. The substratum of this system is not a pure 'I'…but rather an 'I' endowed with a body which reveals its thoughts sometimes to attribute them to itself and at other times to impute them to someone else.[60]

[58] *Humi proiectus, inanimis, nudus et frigidus et lotio perlutus.*

[59] For a reading of this urination as a rape scene, see Keulen (n. 11), 276. For urine as ejaculation in a sexual context, see Adams (n. 45), 245. For a semiotic interpretation of urination as the 'abject' in relation to Roman satire, see D. Larmour, 'Holes in the Body: Sites of Abjection in Juvenal's Rome', in D. Larmour and D. Spencer (eds.), *The Sites of Rome. Time, Space, Memory* (Oxford, 2007), 175–7.

[60] M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World* (Evanston, IL, 1973), 18. See also the inability of the language to describe Psyche's corporeal beauty: *at vero puellae iunioris tam praecipua tam*

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The process of penetration leaves Aristomenes in an intermediate state, reinforced by his self-description as 'half-dead' (*semimortuus*): he is suspended between life and death, between his own body and the women's bodies, between being a child and being an adult, between being male and being female, and between being a subject and being an object.

Conclusion: corporeal subjects and corporeal narrative

The focus on the body in the nocturnal scene reveals its deep involvement in the characters' subjectivity and perception of the world. The body is the source and origin of what I have termed throughout this article 'body-subjects': subjects who perceive and experience the world through their *acts* and their direct and pre-reflective involvement in the world – as opposed to a rational perception of the world that has appeared in the mind. The body-subjects' experience of being-in-the-world is formed through a set of corporeal practices such as penetration, annexation, gazing, prolongation, and inundation. Thus corporeality becomes the anchor of their being-in-the-world, the medium through which they experience reality, consolidate their perspectives on events, and then narrate the reality further. In other words, the body-subjects produce their own separate narrative alongside the openly declared one of the Milesian tale. Its protagonist is the body; its plot advances through irrational time zones and intermediate, changeable spaces; in addition, its events are strange (from a rational point of view) but nevertheless true (in the corporeal perception). These subjects differ from the characters of the 'open' narrative: they are not closed and steady figures and they lack clear characterization; they have blurred identities and gender, changing bodies, and a separate phenomenological time. For example, Aristomenes in the 'open' narrative is identified and characterized as a curious male, a travelling merchant, a person with his own history and biography; Aristomenes the 'body-subject', in contrast, is a constantly changing subject with blurred gender and inconstant identity as human or animal, grown-up or new-born, half-alive or half-dead; he is a subject with no steady and distinct features, for whom only the present exists.

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praeclara pulchritudo nec exprimi ac ne sufficienter quidem laudari sermonis humani penuria poterat ('but the beauty of the young girl was so extraordinary and distinguished that she could not be praised enough by the poor human language'; *Met.* 4.28).

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The first tale, according to the corporeal view, is not just programmatic to the rest of the novel but can also be read as an individual link in a chain of corporeal events depicted throughout the text. The body constitutes a major axis of the novel: Lucius' transformation is corporeal and his metamorphosis from a young intellectual, a descendent of Plutarch, who studied in Athens, to a beast magnifies his corporeal experience and sensitivity. In his bestial body Lucius enters a fundamental sensual and physical world of bodily functions, uncontrollable secretions, hurt, hunger, and thirst; he is beaten and physically abused, and becomes a beast of burden. His bestial body and corporeal experience thus become the anchor of his own perception of the world. The novel's literary structure complies with this corporeal perception: the body of the narrative is constantly being penetrated, inundated, and prolonged by external tales and narratives, creating a fragmented tissue of a flexible and inconsistent plot that advances not through a rational continuum but through rhizomatic intensities. The corporeal chain of events starts at the very beginning of the novel, *in medias res*, and in the middle of a sentence (with the word '*at*'),[61] as the body is always already in-the-world, an immanent and integral part of reality, which has no starting point or ending. It proceeds through the central event in the text – the corporeal transformation of a human body into bestial one – and ends in the corporeal re-transformation of the animal body into a human body again in the last book.

The corporeal approach might also shed light on the last book's unsolved mystery:[62] from a rational point of view this religious book might seem different and incoherent compared to the rest of the novel; in terms of the bodily narrative, however, it forms an additional link in the chain of the ongoing corporeal narrative. Religion, in general, has strong corporeal elements (in the embodiment of gods, in the physical gestures of the believers, in the physicality of initiation ceremonies, and in the practices of sacrifice). Indeed, many of Lucius' religious experiences in Book 11 are described through his corporeal experience: his initiation includes bathing and cleansing; he

[61] *Met.* 1.1. For discussion on this beginning, see Harrison and Winterbottom (n. 4), 10–11; Keulen (n. 11), 64–5.

[62] In this article I cannot develop a full discussion on the problem of Book 11. For this, see e.g. S. Frangoulidis, *Witches, Isis and Narrative. Approaches to Magic in Apuleius' Metamorphoses* (Berlin, 2008), 175–6; D. Van Mal-Maeder, '*Lector, intende: laetaberis*: The Enigma of the Last Book of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*', in H. Hofmann (ed.), *Groningen Colloquia on the Novel* 8 (Groningen, 1997), 87–118.

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restrains his passion (*voluptas*) for food or feasts (11.23); his body is adorned and dressed; he makes corporeal gestures in honour of the goddess and the priests around him. In his encounter with the divinity, Lucius describes her physical appearance in detail;[63] and even the goddess's consent to the initiation is granted through a physical gesture of nodding.

Rather than reading the work under its title as *The Golden Ass* (namely the story of a character), we could read it under its other title as *The Metamorphoses* (namely the story of the body, its nature, and experiences).[64] If we do decide to read the story that way, we should correspondingly add a new set of questions about the text: instead of straining to identify the literary genre, we should inquire into the nature of the body; instead of looking into the relation between characters and tales, we should investigate the intertwining of body with world; instead of searching for logic in the sequence of tales and within the tales, we should give in to the 'rhizomatic' nature of corporeality; and instead of trying to rationalize the narrative in order to *understand* it, we should read the corporeal plot in order to *experience* it. In other words, instead of asking what the body *means* we should ask what it *does*.

Reading an irrational and chaotic corporeal continuum, however, demands effort. It requires the readers' openness, suspension of rational criticism and logical thinking, and willingness to discard prior assumptions regarding the literary narrative; it entails our not judging as false things that are *vel auditu nova vel visu rudia vel certe supra captum cogitationis ardua videanturi* ('new to the ears or crude to the eyes, or, for sure, seem out of reach of the intellectual grasp'; *Met.* 1.3). In this sense we might perceive the nocturnal scene at the inn (and the entire first tale and, eventually, the whole *Metamorphoses*) as a philosophical–literary invitation to *epochē*, enabling its readers to reassess their own rational positions and assumptions. This kind of suspension and re-evaluation could have carried significant political implications (and power) in a society based on rigid hierarchies, strict dichotomies, and clear and firm identities. It could also have been a liberating act for Apuleius himself, who had dual identity (as African and Roman), believed in religious syncretism, led a

[63] *Met.* 11.3.

[64] See Harrison's note on the name of the novel: S. Harrison, *Apuleius. A Latin Sophist* (Oxford, 2000), 210, n. 1.

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nomadic life of constant mobility, and was bilingual as a 'Latin speaker competent in Greek'.[65] In this respect, the *Metamorphoses* extends its literary boundary, opening new paths of perceptions and experiences for its readers, its listeners, and maybe even its author himself.

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[65] *Ibid.*, 6. On Apuleius' background, see *ibid.*, 1–10.

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