

AN APULEIAN PARROT (ON APUL. *FL.* 12)

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## ABSTRACT

Among Apuleius' *Florida* there is a relatively short piece on a parrot. At first sight it merely shows the author's search for the exotic and his pleasure of description. But in the *Florida*, many animals occur in relation to human speech, notably that of the philosopher. In *Fl.* 12 too the bird serves as an example illustrating greater issues. It has been suggested that it stands for Apuleius' opponents, but the picture of the bird seems too positive for this. It rather extolls human-like qualities in animals, that are surpassed by proper human speech. The ideal representant of human speech is, inevitably, none but Apuleius himself.

Of the brilliant showpieces delivered by Apuleius before his second century African audience, fragments were collected in his *Florida*.<sup>1</sup> These texts well illustrate his skills as an orator and entertainer, and, as he himself would have it, as a *philosophus Platonicus*<sup>2</sup> or, in modern words, as a Second Sophist.<sup>3</sup>

A fine example of this may be found in the short, but fascinating, twelfth fragment, the subject of which may be analyzed in one word: it is about parrots. Although the text at first glance seems to be dealing merely with an exotic theme, it also touches on matters of wider significance.

## 1. Shape and speech

The first paragraph of the text is devoted to the parrot's general shape and colour. Apuleius first mentions five colours which it does not have, and then settles for green, except for the neck, which has a band of red. Then the

<sup>1</sup> For recent work on the *Florida*, see B.L. Hijmans jr., 'Apuleius orator: "Pro se de Magia" and "Florida"', *ANRW* 2.34.2 (1994) 1708-84. Both a new translation and a complete commentary on the *Florida* are in course of preparation. For the former, see Stephen Harrison, John Hilton, Vincent Hunink, *Apuleius of Madauros, Rhetorical Works (Apol., Fl., Soc.)* (Oxford 2000) (forthcoming); for the latter, Vincent Hunink, *Apuleius of Madauros, Florida, edited with a commentary* (Amsterdam 2001) (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> For the expression see *Apol.* 10.6: *negat id genus uersus Platonico philosopho competere*; see further note by Hunink on *Apol.* 1.3.

<sup>3</sup> See Gerald Sandy, *The Greek World of Apuleius. Apuleius and the Second Sophistic* (Leiden 1997) *passim*; Stephen Harrison, *Apuleius. A Latin Sophist* (Oxford 2000).



parrot's beak and head are focused upon, both of which are hard. The head is hit with an iron rod in the process of learning human speech.

This human element, learning speech, in turn becomes the dominant motif of the rest of the description. The parrot is not the only speaking bird in Apuleius' works; one may think of the talkative *gauia* in the well-known tale of 'Cupid and Psyche', the central part of the *Met.* (5.28).<sup>4</sup> But whereas such a case evidently concerns fiction, the parrot's faculty of speech is much more real. In *Fl.* 12 itself, the parrot seems to be favourably compared to the raven, which is capable of learning but produces ugly sounds.<sup>5</sup> The parrot can actually learn human words, Apuleius tells us, in its first two years, when its body is still flexible. He then specifies a very talented subspecies, one that has five toes, a detail which is surely felt to be significant. Whatever the bird has learned really sounds 'human' and unlike the sounds produced by other animals.

Although much of the piece seems to be in praise of the parrot, it ends with an important restriction: the bird can only 'parrot' what others have taught it. If you teach it how to curse, cursing is all it will do. And if you want to get rid of it, you have to cut out its tongue, or let the bird fly to its native woods. This thought can easily be completed: the parrot cannot invent words, cannot say anything new on its own accord, unlike man.

The fragment clearly attests Apuleius' interest in zoology, which is also apparent in his other works, notably *Apol.* and *Met.* (see, for example, *Apol.* 29-41 on fish).<sup>6</sup> Apuleius' description may be compared with Plin. *Nat.* 10.117, of which it seems to have copied some details, and itself finds a close parallel in the 3rd century author Solinus (52.43-45), who probably relied on Pliny's account as well.<sup>7</sup> On a literary level, parrots are not uncommon in Roman

<sup>4</sup> On that passage see W.H. Keulen, 'A bird's chatter: form and meaning in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* 5.28', in M. Zimmerman *et al.*, *Aspects of Apuleius' Golden Ass*, Vol. 2: *Cupid and Psyche* (Groningen 1998) 165-88; in addition, the detailed notes in the *Groningen Commentaries on Apuleius on Amor and Psyche*, Part 1 (4.28-5.31) (Groningen 2000) (forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> There is a bad textual problem at 12.7. The *coruus* is mentioned in 12.8, and the word must obviously be inserted in 12.7 (as Helm proposed) to make sense of the text. The rest of the sentence seems to be corrupt beyond repair: 'idem conate non loqui'. No satisfying solution seems possible, in spite of the numerous attempts by scholars. A lesser textual problem occurs at the beginning of 12.7 where the mss reading *quod dicit* is often changed to *quod didicit*, a change that is not necessary.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. further, for example, Yann Le Bohec, 'Apulée et les sciences dites exactes', in M. Khanoussi, P. Ruggeri & C. Vismara (edd.), *L'Africa Romana; Atti dell XI Convegno di Studio, Cartagine, 15-18 dicembre 1994* (Ozieri 1996) 59-69, esp. 65-66.

<sup>7</sup> For ornithological details on the parrot, see Jacques André, *Les noms d'oiseaux en Latin*

poetry;<sup>8</sup> compare notably Ov. *Am.* 2.6 and Stat. *Silv.* 2.4, two highly literary poems on dead parrots that had been pets,<sup>9</sup> and Petr. Fr. 41 (B) (= AL 691), an epigram delivered by a speaking parrot, that 'has exchanged barbarian words for the sound of Latin'.<sup>10</sup> In the Second Sophistic too, the parrot attracted attention; Harrison refers to a lost 'encomium' of the parrot by Dio Chrysostom (Phil. VS 487) and to Ael. NA 13.18.<sup>11</sup> As an animal known from India, it had, of course, the commendable quality of the 'exotic' associated with that country.<sup>12</sup>

## 2. The joy of description

How are we to interpret this splendid, amusing fragment? First of all, it is obviously intended to be a good description. It is not difficult to notice the speaker's pleasure in giving a vivid and literally colourful picture of the bird. The precise or perhaps 'over-precise' description of colour, form, and sound, also marks Apuleius as a child of his time. Those were the days of the Second Sophists, with their distinct attention to meticulous style and *ecphrasis*. Readers of the *Met.* will recall the many *ecphraseis* in the novel, for example, of the palace of Cupid (5.1), or the Atrium of Byrrhaena (2.4).<sup>13</sup> Sandy even

(Paris 1967) 134, and Filippo Capponi, *Ornithologia Latina* (Genova 1979) 458-61 (s.v. *siptace*); also, D'Arcy W. Thompson, *A Glossary of Greek Birds* (Hildesheim 1966, London/Oxford 1936) 335-38; and J. Pollard, *Birds in Greek Life and Myth* (London 1977) 138. Apuleius' description involves one or two factual errors. For example, the restrictions in 12.4-5 apply to *picae* ('jays' or 'magpies') rather than parrots. The error may stem from Apuleius' hasty reading of Plin. *Nat.* 10.118-19.

<sup>8</sup> For ancient references to parrots, cf. J.M.C. Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art* (Ithaca 1973, repr. 1996) 247-49. Many of the details Apuleius gives here are entirely traditional, like the colour green. Curiously, Toynbee notes that a grey variant from West Africa is mentioned nowhere in the ancient sources. One would imagine that Apuleius, an African himself and a scholar most interested in zoology and biology, had seen this grey bird. Still, he clearly conforms to Greek and Roman literary tradition. One may almost wonder whether literary tradition exerted stronger influence upon our orator than facts from real life.

<sup>9</sup> On the Ovid passage, see Barbara Weiden Boyd, 'The death of Corinna's parrot reconsidered: poetry and Ovid's *Amores*', *CJ* 82 (1986-1987) 199-207; and Niklas Holzberg, *Ovid, Dichter und Werk* (München 1997) 66-67. For Statius, see Harm-Jan van Dam, *P. Papinius Statius, Silvae Book II, A Commentary* (Leiden 1984) 336-67, who also compares both poems.

<sup>10</sup> On the Petronian poem, see notably Catherine Connors, *Petronius the Poet. Verse and Literary Tradition in the Satyricon* (Cambridge 1998) 47-49. The fragment may originally have been linked to the ability of a person to perform in two languages.

<sup>11</sup> Harrison (note 3) 112.

<sup>12</sup> For a specific passage on India in the *Florida* itself, see *Fl.* 6.

<sup>13</sup> See D.K. van Mal-Maeder, *Apulée, les Métamorphoses Livre II, 1-20. Introduction, Texte, Traduction et Commentaire* (Groningen 1998) 99-121 (with further literature).



discusses whether *Fl.* 12 should be considered a mock-encomium, like Fronto's *Encomium of Smoke and Dust*.<sup>14</sup>

But merely putting a label of 'ecphrasis' or 'mock-encomium' on the fragment does not do justice to the text. Apuleius' joy of description is not purely a matter of entertainment. The details on the parrot serve to attract, retain, and focus the attention of the audience. That is: they have an introductory function, much like the opening lines of a classic speech.

In fact, many or all of the *Florida* probably belong to the category of *prolaliae*, 'introductory speeches' paving the way for 'real, serious speeches'.<sup>15</sup> This appears to have been a specific subgenre of oratory in the 2nd century AD. (for instance, there are Greek specimens among the works of Lucian). In the *Florida*, there are several clear examples of the genre, notably the longer pieces 9, 16, 17 and 18. There one can observe how the speaker after some casual beginning gradually works up towards his ultimate theme, loosely connecting motifs, repeatedly addressing (and so capturing) the audience, inserting vivid detail, conspicuous idiom, anecdotes, and personal elements. The relation between *prolalia* and the following 'main speech' could well be only marginal or associative. This may be seen in, for example, *Fl.* 18, which loosely develops thoughts about Attica and Greek sophists, praises Carthage, and only then announces a speech on Aesculapius.

The fragment on the parrot may have been part of such a *prolalia* too. Although there is no firm evidence in the short text itself,<sup>16</sup> the context of the whole collection of the *Florida* does suggest this is the case. Typical for the 'manipulative' or 'seductive' aspect of the *prolalia* is the use of gentle humour. For example, the end of the fragment clearly raises a smile, with the image of a parrot cursing and swearing in such a terrible way that only tough measures can put an end to it.<sup>17</sup> At other moments the speaker likes to provide seemingly

<sup>14</sup> Sandy (note 3) 169.

<sup>15</sup> For the concept, see notably K. Mras, 'Apuleius' *Florida* im Rahmen ähnlicher Literatur', *AAWW* 86 (1949) 205-23.

<sup>16</sup> The description starts and ends in a fairly abrupt way, suggesting that the lines have been isolated from their context. We have no indication as to the length and theme of the original speech, nor of the relative position of our fragment in it. Theoretically, the description may have come from any sort of speech by Apuleius. For example, in the *Apol.*, a full judicial speech, many descriptive passages could be isolated in a similar way.

<sup>17</sup> In antiquity, as in modern times, this may have been a popular thing to teach parrots, although parallel texts commonly refer to more decent tricks. It is usually told they are taught how to greet people, either by name or in general, with words like *chaere* or *ave*! Notably, in several sources the parrot is said to be taught to say the emperor's name; cf. Plin. *Nat.* 10.117: *imperatores salutat*; Mart. 14.73.2: *Caesar, ave*! (with Leary's note *ad loc.*); further Stat. *Silv.* 2.4.29-30 (with Van Dam's note *ad loc.*). Other polite utterances can be found in Ov. *Am.*

insignificant detail, such as the iron rod with which the parrot is knocked on the head,<sup>18</sup> or the various groups of parrots.

By raising a laugh or adding a special point of interest, Apuleius holds the public's attention. In addition, he may even subtly convey a message on the meta-linguistic level, a message with a social dimension. He surely inspires the listeners with the notion that he, the producer of the fine description, is a professional who has a supreme mastery of the Latin language, and is a person worthy of admiration and attention. And the audience may feel proud of itself too, since it shares in the speaker's glory and culture.<sup>19</sup>

### 3. A world of animals

Until now we have had an expert speaker, a delighted audience, and a brilliant bird, all joining in the pleasure of fine language. If we take a broader look at the whole collection of *Florida*, the parrot is by no means the only animal, or indeed the only bird in it.

Let us briefly review the animal world of the collection. In *Fl.* 2 there is an ample description of an eagle, pictured in Homeric fashion. We have elephants fighting snakes in *Fl.* 6 and birds and reptiles figuring in the brief description of life on earth as created by Providence in *Fl.* 10. There is even quite a range of birds in *Fl.* 13, the next fragment in the collection: the *hirundo*, the *noctua*, the *ulula*, the *bubo*, and the *gallus*, which all have their own, individual sound, each at a specific time of the day. Things turn into a full-blown, noisy zoo in *Fl.* 17, where we meet lowing bulls, howling wolves, trumpeting elephants, neighing horses, singing birds and roaring lions. At the end, we hear specific birds again: thrushes, nightingales and swans. Finally, we catch a glimpse of a fast horse in *Fl.* 21 (with a quote from Lucilius). All these fauna are found within these few pages of the *Florida*.

If we also consider Apuleius' other works for a moment, the number of

2.6.48: *Corinna uale*! and Pers. *Prol.* 8: *Chaere*!

<sup>18</sup> The information seems to be based on Pliny, Apuleius' words being an almost verbatim copy of the scholar's words. See Plin. *Nat.* 10.117: *capiti eius duritia eadem quae rostro. Hoc cum loqui discit, ferreo uerberatur radio; non sentit aliter ictus*. Apuleius' version of the idea is marked by rare words such as *clauicula* ('rod'), *ferula* ('stick'), and the archaic and comic *persentiscat* and by powerful sound effects, notably of *c-*; cf. also *persentiscat* and *discenti, ferrea* and *ferula*.

<sup>19</sup> On the constant interaction between the famous Second Sophist and his audience, see Konrad Vössing, *Schule und Bildung im Nordafrika der Römischen Kaiserzeit* (Bruxelles 1997) 447-50; further Sandy (note 3) *passim*. Clear examples of this interaction may be found in Apuleius' *Apol.*, with its constant addresses of the judge and the audience, suggesting their mutual consent and shared culture, against the ignorant accusers.



animals rises to considerable heights. In the *Apology* we meet snakes and monsters, loads of fish, a crocodile and his bird friend (8.7), a *stelio* (lizard) (51.6) and other 'jealous animals', and many others, often of special zoological interest.<sup>20</sup> The speaker also uses much 'animal imagery' to pour scorn upon his opponents.<sup>21</sup> As for the *Metamorphoses*, it is well-known that it centres around a man turned into an ass, and animals play a major role in the novel. There is an interesting chapter on 'animal and human' in the excellent book of Carl Schlam,<sup>22</sup> who distinguishes between animals as 'realistic elements of the world' (notably ass, horse, dog, wolf and bear), and the thematically dominant oppositions animal/human and animal/divine. In the philosophical works too, animals occur. To take one or two instances: in *De Deo Socratis* (7), birds are assigned to the land rather than the air, because that is where they rest and find their food.<sup>23</sup> In the preface to the same speech, one may read among other things the fable of the fox and the crow (*Soc.* pr. 4).<sup>24</sup> Finally, in *De Platone* 1.14 we find a reflection of the topos of the human versus the animal mouth (also in *Apol.* 7.7).<sup>25</sup>

#### 4. Special speech

The number of animals in Apuleius' writings, and the sheer variety of species referred to are quite impressive. In many of these instances, the topic of human speech appears to be important, and in our passage *Fl.* 12, it is clearly a crucial theme.<sup>26</sup> So perhaps it is the key to a further understanding of the passage.

In the *Florida*, with all those animals, there are thematic links between many fragments, whether the editor of the collection was Apuleius himself or

<sup>20</sup> Examples from the animal kingdom easily come into Apuleius' thoughts; cf. *Apol.* 21.1-2.

<sup>21</sup> Cf., for example, Th. D. McCreight, 'Invective techniques in Apuleius' *Apology*', *GCN* 3 (Groningen 1990) 35-62.

<sup>22</sup> See C.G. Schlam, *The Metamorphoses of Apuleius. On Making an Ass of Oneself* (Chapel Hill/London 1992) 99-112.

<sup>23</sup> In that context Apuleius needs a section of the world that is free to be assigned to demons. The argument, therefore, is dependant upon the speaker's momentary needs.

<sup>24</sup> The preface of *Soc.* is often thought to belong to the *Florida*; thus, for example, Harrison (note 3) 130 (and 91-92). There is, however, no positive evidence for this, and the passage may well be at its place before *Soc.* For the whole issue, see extensive discussion in Vincent Hunink, 'The prologue of Apuleius' "De deo Socratis"', *Mnemosyne* 48 (1995) 292-312 (with many references); further Hijmans (note 1) 1771 and Sandy (note 3) 192-96.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. further, for example, Cic. *Inv.* 1.5; *N.D.* 2.122; and cf. further Sall. *Cat.* 1.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. recently Marco Tullio Messina, 'Alcune osservazioni sui *Florida* di Apuleio', *RCCM* 41 (1999) 285-305, esp. 301.

some anonymous scholar or Medieval scribe. For instance, various pieces are connected to each other by this very 'animal' motif mentioned above, or by the motif of 'sound' and 'music', which dominates several fragments (for example *Fl.* 3, 4 and 15). Both these thematic strings combine in the 'animal sounds' of *Fl.* 12, 13 and 17.

Interestingly, there are two other strings of passages which we may bring up here. These centre around 'the ideal use of human language', an ideal which is, of course, more or less embodied in Apuleius himself. First, I may point to passages explicitly celebrating the speaker's own linguistic and literary achievements.<sup>27</sup> Especially in *Fl.* 9 and 20, Apuleius amply celebrates his talents to speak immaculate Latin and to produce work in all major and minor literary genres.<sup>28</sup>

More important still is Apuleius' self-professed quality of *philosophus*. In that quality he claims in *Fl.* 13 to 'sing every sort of tune' (*Sed enim philosophi ratio et oratio tempore iugis est et auditu uenerabilis et intellectu utilis et modo omnica*), thus surpassing all the various birds that have only one speciality to offer. The message in *Fl.* 17 is much the same: birds each sing their particular tune at a different spot, but Apuleius will sing a song that will please and instruct all alike (17.18-19).

I would suggest these two strings are relevant here as well: the parrot has qualities similar to those of the other *Florida* animals: the parrot is also interesting, beautiful and amusing, but it also surpasses them. Unlike the other animals, the parrot *does* seem able to learn anything at all, for it remembers the curses it has been taught. This distinguishes it in a positive sense from the nightingale and the eagle, and this partly explains the special treatment the parrot is given here.

But it is precisely at this point that the parrot itself is easily surpassed by man, by civilized man, that is. A *philosophus* can learn, but also add to the learning of others, come up with new ideas. And for that matter: he does not curse but uses decent language. A *philosophus*, then, is not merely receptive but creative and the parrot cannot stand the comparison with such a man. The portrait of the parrot's talents, interesting and positive in their own right, may have been intended to extoll human speech.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> I do not mention the *implicit* messages, which can be said to be conveyed by the dazzling oratory of the collection from the first fragment on.

<sup>28</sup> One may also think of passages in the *Apol.* where Apuleius extolls his literary talents in both Greek and Latin, for example 4.1.

<sup>29</sup> This is also cautiously suggested by Hijmans (note 1) 1735.



## 5. Bird and Sophist

Some would argue that the juxtaposition of *Fl.* 12 and 13 with its remarks on the philosopher who sings every sort of tune is wholly coincidental, or, as Stephen Harrison says in his new book,<sup>30</sup> that the pieces have been juxtaposed because of a common concern with birds. Harrison himself suggests that the point of *Fl.* 12 is merely that *pupils* like parrots only absorb what they are taught, and should therefore be carefully instructed. Such a message is not openly at odds with Apuleius' general ideas and no-one would argue with the conclusion that good education is needed. Still, the idea seems rather weak, being hardly more than a cliché. Moreover, for a Sophist clearly obsessed with 'learning',<sup>31</sup> it might even be dangerous to suggest that a pupil can be only a passive receptacle, since this would leave little room for originality and personal brilliance, qualities which Apuleius himself claimed.

Alternatively, Harrison argues (following Mras),<sup>32</sup> the frequent topic of the inadequacy of Apuleius' rivals may be the issue here. Then we would have: 'plagiarists against real talent', the same theme as in *Fl.* 11. The location of our piece after the polemical *Fl.* 11 and the negative remarks there at the end would indeed suggest that Apuleius is engaged yet again in a controversy with rivals, 'who can merely echo what they have heard from others.'<sup>33</sup> An argument for this may be found in the literary tradition, since in two clearly poetical allusions by Persius and Martial to parrots (*Pers. Prol.* 8 and *Mart.* 10.3.7), the parrot stands for 'the bad poet', obviously opposed to the author himself.

But in *Fl.* 12 the parrot is, on the whole, described in a fairly pleasant and positive way, and it is not easy to see how it could represent Apuleius' opponents, for whom elsewhere he chooses very negative words and images. For instance, in *Fl.* 3, the savage, arrogant Marsyas who dares to challenge Apollo (with devastating results), may well represent Apuleius' rivals.<sup>34</sup>

In the picture of the parrot, there are some gentle touches of humour (see above), but nothing altogether detestable, and so a more positive interpretation is necessary. The parrot is not merely a vehicle to display the

speaker's encyclopedic knowledge and talent of description, but it also serves to extoll human-like qualities in animals. By implication, this in turn is surpassed by proper human speech, which in its ideal form is represented by the philosopher. It is only a small step to equate this philosopher, who can sing 'every sort of song' (*Fl.* 13.3) with a man who is, according to Apuleius, a consummate scholar, a brilliant, bilingual man of letters and philosophy, in one word, with Apuleius himself.

In the end, certainty will remain out of reach, given the shortness of the text itself. But the thematic strings and parallels within the *Florida* in my view legitimize the supposition that the parrot ultimately serves to mirror Apuleius' own manifold talents of human speech.

<sup>30</sup> Harrison (note 3) 112.

<sup>31</sup> See Sandy (note 3) 42-91.

<sup>32</sup> Mras (note 15) 216.

<sup>33</sup> The thought is expressed in an agricultural variant: he who has nothing himself goes out to steal flowers of others: *sed (...) suis frugibus indigent, aliena furatum eunt et uicinorum flores decerpunt, scilicet ut eos flores carduis suis misceant. Ad eundem modum qui suae uirtutis sterilis est <...>* (*Fl.* 11.2).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. also the fierce attack at the end of *Fl.* 7 or the personal polemics in 17.