

PLUTARCH AND APULEIUS

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What has the venerable Greek moralist Plutarch got to do with a Roman “Second Sophist” such as Apuleius, who seems to be so much unlike him?

First, let me give some elementary data concerning Apuleius.¹ This Roman author was born in Madauros (North Africa) and lived from about 125 until, as is commonly assumed, about 180.² In his own days, Apuleius was probably best known for his rhetorical achievements as a public speaker. His extant *Apology*, the only Roman judicial speech after Cicero to survive, and his *Florida*, a collection of epideictic fragments bear witness to his activities in this field.³ There is a third rhetorical work, *De Deo Socratis* (*DDS*), to which I will return shortly. Apuleius himself would probably have liked to be remembered first of all as a *philosophus Platonicus*,⁴ a philosopher of the school, the *secta*, of Plato. In this respect, he belongs to what is now generally called “middle-Platonism.” His philosophical works include the aforesaid speech *De Deo Socratis*, and a Latin translation of the pseudo-aristotelian *Peri kosmou*, aptly called *De mundo*.⁵ Nowadays, Apuleius is best known, and even loved, for his most voluminous work, the *Metamorphoses* or “*Asinus Aureus*”, the famous novel on Lucius of Corinth, the man who was changed into an ass, and after various adventures turned man again and became a priest of Isis in Rome.⁶

¹ From the vast amount of modern scholarship on Apuleius, some recent introductory books may be mentioned here. Cf. Schlam (1992), Sandy (1997); Harrison (2000).

² Many details concerning Apuleius’ biography remain vague. Only his date of birth is relatively certain, since it can be deduced from indications in his work. The date of his death depends on the date one assumes for Apuleius’ novel *Metamorphoses*, which is a hotly debated issue; see Hunink (2002).

³ The latest editions are Hunink (1997) and (2001). For a new English translation with introduction and notes, see Harrison a.o. (2001).

⁴ For the term, applied to himself, see *Apol.* 10.6: *Platonico philosopho*; cf. also e.g. *Apol.* 41.7: *Platone meo*; *Flor.* 15.26: *noster Plato*.

⁵ For a broader survey of Apuleius’ extant works and fragments, see Harrison (2000) 10–38.

⁶ The standard Latin text is by R. Helm in the *Bibliotheca Teubneriana*. For most of the eleven books, annotated editions are available in the well-known series *Groningen Commentaries on Apuleius*. Several integral translations in English are available; the most

Influences from Plutarch on Apuleius?

In this survey there are one or two elements that may associate Apuleius with Plutarch, but this may not seem very many. Nonetheless, on closer scrutiny, scholars have found a number of points which seem common to both authors. The most important contribution here is that of P.G. Walsh in an important, short article published in 1981 (Walsh 1981). Walsh's thesis is that Apuleius and Plutarch share "a set of religious, philosophical and moral preconceptions which are articulated in the *Metamorphoses*" (Walsh [1981] 30). He distinguishes six points: (1) the reconciliation of Platonist philosophy and Isiac religion; (2) the *curiositas* motif "a proper understanding of the allegorical message of the tale of Cupid and Psyche's *De curiositate*" (Walsh [1981] 30); (3) the insights offered by Plutarch's views on demons; (4) attitudes towards fidelity and harmony in family-life; (5) the condemnation of religious indifference and superstition (*De superstitione*); (6) the importance of the *Erootikos* for "a proper understanding of the allegorical message of the tale of Cupid and Psyche".

Walsh's points seem an attractive set of corresponding interests, but it may be seriously doubted whether we can assume specific Plutarchan influences on Apuleius. For instance, the *curiositas* (*periergia*) motif⁷ is widespread in narrative since the earliest days. Even if it is true that it played a role in middle-Platonic discourse, this does not imply that Apuleius was "inspired" by a specific treatise of Plutarch. Likewise, Apuleius' pictures of unfaithful or, by contrast, loyal wives really do not need to have been derived from Plutarchan works. Rather, they may have been derived from common notions in satire, Greek novel, comedy, and extra-literary "real life".

Similar points may be raised against Walsh' arguments concerning Isis. Although there are some interesting links with Plutarch, who defends the notion that Isiac religion is compatible with a Platonist vision of the world, it is surely exaggerated to state, as Walsh does, that "it seems beyond doubt that Plutarch's *De Iside* inspired Apuleius' conversion of the comic-ass story into an apologia for the Isiac mystery-cult." Why do we need to refer to Plutarch, rather than to Roman

recent one is Kenney (1998).

⁷ Cf. the sensible survey of the motif in the *Met.* by Schlam (1992) 48–57; further Hijmans (1995). The motif of curiosity may even have played a role in Apuleius' Greek model, a lost novel called *Metamorphoseis*.

everyday life, in which the cult of Isis had become very popular? Surely, Apuleius can easily have come into contact with Isis during his stay in Rome and Ostia.⁸

As to the allegorical interpretation of Cupid and Psyche, it suffices to say that this is still a hotly debated issue among Apuleian scholars. Walsh readily takes sides with the proponents of such a reading (notably Merkelbach), but much more is to be said on this topic. The allegorical reading of Cupid and Psyche is by no means the only possible interpretation of the tale.⁹

Next, I will concentrate on a point that does not concern Apuleius' novel: the demonology of Plutarch and Apuleius. This element seems to allow for a much less general comparison between both authors, because they have both written explicitly on the same subject: "What was the *daimonion* of Socrates like?"¹⁰, in works that even bear the same title: *Peri tou Sokratous daimoniou* (De genio Socratis)¹⁰ and *De deo Socratis*¹¹ respectively.

Demons

Plutarch's dialogue *Peri tou Sokratous daimoniou* (De genio Socratis) is a fairly complex work, probably written at about 95 A.D.¹² As Aristoula Georgiadou has stated in a recent article, it is "the meeting point of his various skills as historian, philosopher, storyteller and dramatist."¹³ Or in the words of Philip Hardie: "a mixture of philosophical and political thriller that continues to intrigue and puzzle Plutarchans."¹⁴ The

⁸ Cf. also Apuleius' famous, self-professed wide interest in religion in *Apol.* 55.8–9.

⁹ The team of scholars, who are now editing the two volumes of the *Groningen Commentaries on Apuleius* dealing with the tale, will argue that a strictly allegorical reading is not the best way to approach the text. The tale invites the reader on many points to take a Platonic and "spiritual" look on the narrative, but it does so as part of a wider literary play at many other levels.

¹⁰ For Plutarch's treatise, the most convenient edition is that by Philip de Lacy and Benedict Einarson in the Loeb series (volume 7, p.361–509). See also Plutarque, *Ouvres morales* tome VIII, texte établi et traduit par Jean Hani (Paris 1980) 37–129.

¹¹ The standard editions are: Moerschini (1991) and Beaujeu (1973). For a recent English translation with notes, see S.J. Harrison, in: Harrison a.o. (2001) 185–216. An important German translation with notes is Bingenheimer (1993).

¹² For literature and further discussion concerning the date of composition, see: Georgiadou (1996) esp. 116 n. 13.

¹³ Georgiadou (1996) 117.

¹⁴ Hardie (1996) 123.

dialogue is mainly concerned with historical events in Plutarch's native Boeotia, the liberation in 379 B.C. of Thebes from Spartan domination by Epameinondas (a historical character much admired by Plutarch).

Between the parts of the dialogue dealing with *praxeis*, are some passages dealing with *logoi*, philosophical discussions on Socrates' daimonion, that take place in the house of Simmias. The exact relationship between these parts of Plutarch's dialogue is, to put it mildly, not very clear and has accordingly given rise to numerous, widely diverging interpretations. For example, Plutarch's aim has been seen as a "synthesis" of these two elements, with Socrates functioning more or less as a model for Epameinondas,¹⁵ or by contrast as an "antithesis" suggesting a systematic contrast between distinguished thinkers and the common people.¹⁶ Others have highlighted special themes in the dialogue, such as the role of time.¹⁷

It is not my concern here to add to the discussion on the structure of Plutarch's treatise, but only to compare the sections dealing with Socrates' *daimonion* (579F f.; 588B f.) with Apuleius' account of the subject in *De deo Socratis*. A reading of both texts does not produce very much that meets the eye as a clear parallel between the Greek and the Latin author.

For one thing, both texts are clearly very different in nature. On the one hand we have the "political-historical-philosophical-novelistic" dialogue by Plutarch, on the other there is the popular-philosophical epideictic speech by Apuleius. Plutarch's message, whatever it precisely is, seems to be accessible to a very small group of intellectual readers, whereas Apuleius addresses a fairly large audience,¹⁸ and accordingly conveys a fairly easily understandable morale: everyone should cultivate his or her demon and try to lead a good life. I briefly add that Apuleius' speech is distinctively Roman in colour, especially through its use of Roman names and examples. Inevitably, one can hardly expect any influence of Plutarch here.¹⁹

¹⁵ Thus e.g. Georgiadou (1996).

¹⁶ Babut (1984) 60.

¹⁷ Brenk (1996). Further literature on the dialogue and its purpose may be found here at p.30 n. 6.

¹⁸ There are good reasons to believe that Apuleius delivered the speech, as several of his *Florida*, in a Roman theatre, possibly in Carthage; cf. notably *Flor.* 5; 9 and 18.

¹⁹ Meanwhile, it is worth noting that Apuleius really tries to be as much non-Greek here as he can: if we detect any Greek influences at all, it is decidedly not what the author wishes us to pay attention to.

But even if we leave aside those generic differences and only concentrate on the demonological content, it is the differences rather than the general parallels that meet the eye. In Plutarch's account, the first part of the Boeotians' discussion on the *daimonion* is dominated by the theory that Socrates merely observed common signs, such as occasional sneezes (the "*ptarmós*"-element). The theory is immediately refuted, but it is at least taken seriously. In *De deo Socratis* it does not earn more than one or two casual, scornful remarks, in which the typical *ptarmós* element is not even mentioned.²⁰

As to the more central theme of the various types of demons, Apuleius distinguishes three basic categories (every human soul; demons that have become free of bodies; demons that never came into contact with bodies), much as Plutarch's protagonists seem to do, but the subdivision is different: the lowest Apuleian class does not correspond to the one in Plutarch's dialogue, and there seems to be nothing negative about it, as for instance in the myth of Timarchus which is told in Plutarch's text. The highest category in Apuleius includes *Somnus* and *Amor*, but here we do not find a reference to a specific connection with the divine philosophers such as Socrates, as was suggested by Plutarch. In fact, Apuleius even suggests that the demon that appeared visually to Socrates can be compared to Minerva appearing to Achilles,²¹ and one may ask whether this Minerva belongs to the highest category of demons at all (Apuleius is not clear on this point).

To mention one final, but significant point: according to Plato²² Socrates' sign always held him back from doing something, but never urged him forward. The point is duly made by Apuleius, as we have seen, but in *De genio Socratis* we also see the suggestion (made by Polymnis) that Socrates was both deterred *and* prompted (*koolúon è keleúon*).²³ It has been observed that in another work, Plutarch himself too refers

²⁰ "... just in case anyone should think that he was in the habit of taking omens from ordinary conversation". "Add further, if he was in the habit of merely observing omens, he would surely have sometimes also experienced some encouragement to positive action from them. We see this happen in practice to many, who feel excessive reverence for omens and are directed not by their own heart but by another's words, and creep through alleyways gathering their wisdom from the chance utterances of others" (*De deo Socr.* 19) Translation S.J. Harrison in Harrison a.o. (2001) 211.

²¹ "This sign may have been a visual form of the *demon* itself, which only Socrates could see, just as with Homer's Achilles and Minerva." *De deo Socr.* 20, translation S.J. Harrison, in Harrison a.o. (2001) 212.

²² *Apol.* 31D.

²³ *Gen.Soc.* 581B.

to a “divine and spiritual cause which guided or instructed Socrates to examine others”,²⁴ in other words: something that prompted him to do something. According to Hershbell, this would be consistent not so much with Plato as with Xenophon’s reports, in which Socrates’ inner voice always tells him what he should or should not do.²⁵ So Plutarch’s account may very well have been influenced by Xenophon,²⁶ unlike that of Apuleius.

Demonology and Socrates’ *daemonion* were simply “in the air”, as is proved by [e.g.] two Greek discourses on Socrates’ *daemonion* by Maximus of Tyre, more or less a contemporary of Apuleius.²⁷

Apart from general correspondences, due to the general state of philosophy (i.c. middle Platonic demonology as such),²⁸ or the fact that Socrates plays a surprisingly marginal role in both Plutarch’s and Apuleius’ works that bear his name, there is, in the end, little reason to assume a special influence of Plutarch on Apuleius here, however likely it might seem.²⁹ And if Apuleius did not follow Plutarch on this subject, where else would he? In my view, the positive survey of Plutarchan influences on Apuleius by Walsh does not stand the test of the texts. It remains tempting to assume such an influence, but we just do not have any solid proof.³⁰

²⁴ *Quaest. Plat.* 999E.

²⁵ *Xen. Mem.* 4.3.12; 1.1.4.; *Apol.* 12–13; see further Hershbell (1989) 379.

²⁶ There would be a certain irony here, for Xenophon was known for his pro-Spartan attitude. He would then, in a way, represent the side of the Spartan oppressors in the account of the liberation of Thebes in 379 B.C., of which Plutarch was evidently proud. After Epameinondas defeated the Spartans at Leuktra in 371 B.C., Xenophon was forced to abandon his Spartan estate near Olympia.

²⁷ See Trapp (1997) esp. p.67–83. In his oration nr. 8, Maximus argues at some length that Socrates was actually worthy of such a demon, and that demons really exist, and have different functions. Oration 9 concentrates on the crucial point of their intermediate nature: they partake of the divine through their immortality, and of human nature through their passions.

²⁸ For a convenient list of correspondences between the demonological accounts in Apuleius and Plutarch (*De def. orac.*, *De Is. Et Os.* and *De gen. Soc.*), see Moreschini (1978) 25–26.

²⁹ Regen (1971) 19–20 denies influence of Plutarch on Apuleius, if only for lack of a coherent system of demonology in Plutarch. Cf. also Bingenheimer (1993) 55: “Er [sc. Plutarch] war der Polyhistor der zeitgenössischen Dämonologie—Apuleius war ihr Dogmatiker”.

³⁰ Cf. Brenk (1986) notably 2135: “In general it is fair to say that there is a world of difference between this treatise and Plutarch’s *De genio Socratis*”. See further: Moreschini (1989) esp. 280 “È da escludere, naturalmente, una dipendenza di Apuleio da Plutarco (tale rapporto viene spesso posto, ma rimane quasi sempre un fantasma)”.

Plutarch's relative

There is one point, however, for which we do have such proof: the name of Plutarch was known to Apuleius and it occurs in his works. But for this we must turn from his philosophical works to his famous novel *Metamorphoses*.

Here we encounter the name of Plutarch almost right from the start. After the opening paragraph, the much discussed “prologue”,³¹ the first paragraph of the actual narrative opens as follows:

“I was travelling to Thessaly, where the ancestry of my mother’s family brings us fame in the persons of the renowned Plutarch and later his nephew, the philosopher Sextus (*a Plutarcho illo incluto ac mox Sexto philosopho nepote eius*). Thessaly, I say, is where I was heading on business.” (*Met.* 1.2)³²

One may still have doubts about who exactly had been speaking in the prologue,³³ but here we unmistakably see the protagonist of the story, Lucius of Corinth, who presents himself as a relative by his mother’s side of Plutarch and Sextus.

At the beginning of book 2, Plutarch is named once more, in an address to Lucius by his aunt Byrrhena:

“■Lucius, I raised you with these very hands of mine; naturally, since not only am I a close relative of your mother, but I was even reared with her. We were both descendants of Plutarch’s family, we were suckled together by the same wetnurse, and we grew up together in the close bond of sisterhood. (*Met.* 2.3)³⁴

This reference to Plutarch almost certainly did not occur in Apuleius’ Greek model,³⁵ and so requires some comment and explanation.

In her commentary on the latter passage, Danielle van Mal-Maeder³⁶ first describes what seems now to be the commonly accepted view, namely that Apuleius inserted the reference to Lucius as a tribute to Plutarch in order to point to his own spiritual ascendance and the philosophical orientation of his novel.

³¹ Cf. recently: Kahane/Laird (2001).

³² Translation: Hanson (1989) I, 5.

³³ In the twenty-four discussions in the volume mentioned in the previous note, a majority of contributors supports the view that it is Lucius who is speaking there.

³⁴ Translation: Hanson (1989) I, 63.

³⁵ It is absent from the Greek *omos* tale, and we may safely assume that it was also absent in the more extensive text that served as Apuleius’ model.

³⁶ Van Mal-Maeder (1998) esp. 91–92.

There are two main objections to this theory: first, it confuses, as so often, the biographical person Apuleius and his protagonist Lucius. More seriously, it does not do justice to the humour of the novel, notably the sharp contrast between the low pitched and humiliating adventures of Lucius, who is a silly and quite un-philosophical creature for most of the novel, and the lofty reputation of the respected philosopher Plutarch. One may wonder: what would Plutarch have thought about these scandalous adventures?

Van Mal-Maeder also mentions some interesting minor theories: (1) The name Plutarch in the opening book alludes to Isis in the final book 11. (2) The reference only serves to sharpen the suggestion of realism in the novel, since a figure such as Lucius might in reality well have been related to a famous Greek family. This theory (by Mason) is accepted by Van Mal-Maeder herself and others.

The first of these theories may be a bit too far-fetched to be convincing, but the latter finds some support in the fact that the text of the novel does not mention names of authors and philosophers, except for some names from recent history.

This consideration brings me to a final suggestion which I have not yet come across in the various comments on the passages.

In the text of this richly intertextual novel, we meet surprisingly few names of ancient authors: Vergil, Plato, Cicero, Sophocles, Plautus, to mention some of Apuleius' favourites, are all left entirely unmentioned. The text of the *Met.* quite consistently *alludes* to such names, rather than that it explicitly names them. The exceptions here are Homer (once in 10.30) and Pythagoras (once in 11.1).

The many names we do see, are either "realistic" (Sulla, Caesar), or, in the great majority of cases, fictitious. A special characteristic of names in the novel, which has already been observed by many scholars, is that they are often "speaking names",³⁷ names that show off their etymological roots. We meet *Lucius* and *Photis* ("light" in Latin or Greek), women like *Pamphile*, *Byrrhena*,³⁸ men like *Barbarus*, *Myrmex*, *Philesitherus*, *Thelyphron*, *Tlepolemus*, and *Philebus*, to say nothing of the robber *Haemus* ("Bloody"). The speaking names sometimes obtain an ironic colour, but this is not the rule.

So what if we go one step further and assume that *Plutarchus*, mentioned twice as Lucius' ancestor, can be taken as a speaking name too?

³⁷ Cf. Hijmans (1978).

³⁸ Possibly to be connected with Gr. *búrsa* "Frau Leder"; cf. Hijmans (1978) 110.

Lucius and his aunt Byrrhena³⁹ would then be able to boast about the ancestry of a famous philosopher who “Ruled by riches” or was simply “Rich and mighty”. Surely, this is the impression that Lucius himself wishes to give: he presents himself as a man from a good family and a relatively high social class.⁴⁰ Apparently, he is known as such by others as well: one may observe the highly polite way in which he is addressed by a magistrate later in the novel.⁴¹

The name Plutarch was, of course, a famous name too, and Apuleius surely relished this element as well. The “real Plutarch” brought in at least the associations of a Greek background, which seems more or less suitable for a tale set in Thessaly,⁴² and the name also carried the associations of philosophy⁴³ and sound learning, which another nice point for this novel. But here again, one cannot help contrasting the world of the novel with the wisdom of Plutarch: Thessaly is the land of witchcraft, and philosophy is neglected or scorned by most characters, including Lucius. There is at least some irony here.

The irony may even go somewhat further still. In the novel, Lucius is characterized by various bad habits, notably his curiosity (*curiositas*), a dominant motif in the structure of the tale. He himself calls this

³⁹ Hijmans (1978) 110 observes that Plutarch disapproved of whipping, but advised that *unbridled* indulgence in one’s pleasures was inadvisable. He acutely adds that Lucius first has to admit that he does not know his aunt. All this would add to the significance of her name *Byrrhena*.—Curiously, Hijmans himself nowhere considers the possibility that Plutarch, too, might be used as a name with an added significance.

⁴⁰ Inevitably, this also raises questions as to his journey “for business matters” (*Met.* 1.2). Had he gradually descended to a lower rung on the social ladder, so that he was forced to earn his money abroad?

⁴¹ “We are not unaware, master Lucius, of either your high position or your family’s origins. Indeed the high repute of your famous family embraces the entire province.” (3.11) Translation: Hanson (1989) I, 147.

⁴² It may be noted, meanwhile, that Plutarch did not come from Thessaly but from Boeotia. To Apuleius and his protagonist Lucius, it may have been “Greek” enough to make the point. However, it could also be taken as a teasing pun at the expense of Plutarch, who was so proud of his Boeotian origin.

⁴³ It is curious that in *Met.* 1.2 Plutarchus is called “that famous Plutarch”, whereas his nephew Sextus (a teacher of the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius) is given the epithet “the philosopher”. It might even be taken as a further teasing element that the title “philosopher”, of which Apuleius himself was so proud, seems to be denied to the venerable Plutarch. I owe this point to a discussion with André Lardinois.

Curiously, some translators of Apuleius seem to deliberately restore the honour of Plutarch, by moving the epithet “philosopher” to his name. Thus e.g. “...the prominence lent to it by the famous philosopher Plutarch, and later by his nephew Sextus.”; Walsh (1984) 1. Similarly, Kenney renders “the distinguished philosopher Plutarch and his nephew Sextus”; Kenney (1998) 7.

curiosity *familiaris*, *ingenita* and even *genuina*.⁴⁴ But if this characteristic of Lucius is innate, and the reader starts thinking about possible relatives from whom Lucius may have inherited the characteristic, who else but *Plutarchus ille inclutus* would come to mind? So the Greek writer, who was so much opposed to curiosity himself, would ironically come to be associated with this very vice.

One may wonder whether Apuleius would not feel any scruples to use the name of a distinguished philosopher in such a jocular, ironic way. I guess he would not. For, two pages after we have seen the name Plutarch appear in the novel, we meet a poor beggar, who turns out to be one of the protagonists of the horror stories in book 1. Surprisingly, his name is *Socrates* (*Met.* 1.6 and further).

To be sure, such jocular use of famous names does not necessarily imply any lack of respect. For how could the Platonist Apuleius not respect Socrates, the very model of virtue in his treatise *De deo Socratis*? Analogously, there is no reason to assume that the ironical references to “Plutarch” imply serious criticism or enmity towards Plutarch. The references are rather intended as teasing puns to be appreciated by the learned reader.

To sum up: the mention of Plutarch in the *Met.*, the only real proof of familiarity of Apuleius with Plutarch, may be much less serious than is often assumed. It is, for one thing, yet another “speaking name” which functions in the text in this new, fictional sense. Secondly, it is a famous philosopher’s name jokingly drawn into a world of magic, deceit, gluttony, sex, and crime. Nothing of this is intended as serious criticism against Plutarch, anymore than Socrates is attacked by the use of his name in *Met.* 1. Apuleius is just playing one of his numerous literary and intertextual games. In the context of the Roman novel, much as in Roman satire or Greek comedy, rather more seems to be permitted than some readers might think appropriate.

⁴⁴ Cf. *Met.* 3.14.1; 9.12.2; 9.13.3; 9.15.3. I owe the references to Wytse Keulen.