

Writing like a Clown: Apuleius' Metafiction and Plautus' Metatheater

by ALEXANDER KIRICHENKO, Trier

Abstract. This essay shows that the identity of the primary narrator of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, as well as identities of some of its internal storytellers, is constructed in such a way as to draw attention to the manipulating presence of the implied author behind the text and thus to draw attention to the novel's fictionality. This metafictional game, which Apuleius begins in the prologue and plays throughout his entire novel, is based on the same principles as metatheatrical jokes in Plautus' prologues.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the prologue to Apuleius' *Golden Ass* has been generally perceived as one of the most enigmatic texts in ancient literature. This peculiar status is clearly documented by the fact that, with the recent publication of *A Companion to the Prologue of Apuleius' Metamorphoses* (Kahane – Laird [eds] 2001), it became, to my knowledge, the first text of a third of a Teubner page in length to have merited an Oxford companion of its own. To judge from modern scholarship on Apuleius, every single word of the prologue is fraught with wide-ranging ambiguities. Even such a basic question as 'Who is the speaker of the prologue?' remains a matter of debate: is it the author (Edwards 1993), the main character (Bürger 1888), a bizarre combination of both (Harrauer – Römer 1985), or, ultimately, the book itself (Harrison 1990)?

It has often been observed that the prologue displays a number of similarities with prologues to Plautus' comedies (Smith 1972; Winkler 1985. 200-203; May 2006. 110-115). In a typically Plautine manner, Apuleius' narrator asks the reader to pay attention,¹ puts emphasis on the reader's benevolent ears,² guarantees pleasure in return for kind attention,³ introduces himself,⁴ promises to

¹ Cf. Apul. *lector intende* vs. Plaut. *Asin.* 14 *date benigne operam mihi*; *Cas.* 22 *benigne ut operam detis ad nostrum gregem*; *Trin.* 7 *si animum advortitis*, 22 *adeste cum silentio*; *Cist.* 154 *nunc operam date*. – Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* and Plautus' *Comedies* are quoted from R. Helm's Teubner edition (3rd ed., 1931, repr. 1992) and W.M. Lindsay's OCT of 1904-05 (various repr.), respectively.

² Cf. Apul. *aves benevolas* vs. Plaut. *Cas.* 29 *aves vocivae si sunt, animum advortite*; *Men.* 4 *quaeso ut benignis accipiatis auribus*; *Mil.* 80 *si ad auscultandum vostra erit benignitas*; *Merc.* 14-15 *si opera est auribus atque advortendum ad animum adest benignitas*; *Trin.* 11 *date vocivas aures dum eloquor*.

³ Cf. Apul. *laetaberis* vs. Plaut. *Amph.* 151-152 *adeste: erit operae pretium spectantibus/ Iovem et Mercurium facere hic histrioniam*.

be brief,⁵ and imagines his addressee to ask him a question.⁶ His unrestrained verbosity, his rambling style, and his failure to provide an adequate expression for the information he purports to convey also find their parallels in Plautus (Smith 1972.516). And, last but not least, Apuleius' emphasis on the Greek origin of his book (*fabulam Graecanicam incipimus*) succinctly sums up the central message of most of the Plautine prologues, namely that the plays that they introduce are Latin versions of Greek originals (Winkler 1985.202; May 2006.111).

However, the discussion of the extent to which the Plautine intertext influences the meaning of Apuleius' prologue does not confine itself to single verbal echoes or similarities of the basic train of thought. One of the most popular models for the identity of Apuleius' narrator, for instance, is also based on some of Plautus' prologues: just as Plautus' *prologi* are distinct from both the playwright Plautus and the characters in the play, it is argued, so is Apuleius' prologue speaker not to be confused with either Apuleius or Lucius; he is supposed to be much rather, like a Plautine *prologus*, a separate person who, while delivering the prologue, is located outside the fictional world but, once the narrative begins, enters it by impersonating one of the characters (Winkler 1985.203; May 2006.110).

What I would like to do in this article is to propose a new interpretation of the connections between Apuleius' and Plautus' prologues. I argue that, even though the text of the *Golden Ass* gives us no compelling reason to distinguish between the primary narrator and the prologue speaker, Apuleius' indebtedness to the characteristically Plautine humor is in fact much deeper than has been previously assumed.

I. Apuleius' Narrators

Throughout his entire novel, Apuleius plays a curious metafictional game, breaking the fictional illusion that the narrative is an autobiographical account related by a Greek man named Lucius.⁷ The primary narrator presents himself

⁴ Cf. the autobiography of Apuleius' narrator prompted by the addressee's question *quis ille?* vs. Plaut. *Amph.* 18 *simulque eloquar nomen meum; Trin.* 6-7 *nunc igitur primum quae sim <... > dicam.*

⁵ Cf. Apul. *paucis accipe* vs. Plaut. *Aul.* 1 *ne quis miretur qui sim, paucis eloquar; Men.* 6 *quam potero in verba conferam paucissima.*

⁶ Cf. Apul. *quis ille?* vs. Plaut. *Cas.* 67-68 *sunt hisce quos nunc credo dicere: "quaeso hercle, quid istuc est?"*

⁷ On the concept of metafiction, see Waugh 1984 and Scheffel 1997.

now as a wealthy Greek from Corinth (2.12) who inhabits the fictional world of the primary narrative, now as a poor Latin speaker from Apuleius' hometown of Madaurus (11.27),⁸ that is, as the Latin author of the novel. Moreover, the supposedly Greek narrator sometimes assumes a detached attitude to things Greek that would much better become the Latin implied author.⁹ The impression that arises from such self-contradictory statements is that the author does not aim at concealing the fact that he impersonates a fictional character but that he constantly calls the reader's attention to the irreducible duality of the image of his primary narrator, who is both a Latin writer and a Greek storyteller.

Images of some of the internal storytellers are also explicitly constructed as composite figures resembling that of the primary narrator. In the inserted tales the author similarly continues to remind the reader of his constant manipulative presence behind the text. For instance, the old drunken (and unquestionably Greek) woman, who within the fictional world of the primary narrative is presented as the narrator of the tale of *Cupid and Psyche*, claims that Apollo, even though he is a Greek god from Ionia, gave an oracle to Psyche in Latin for the sake of the Latin author of the tale.¹⁰ Casual references to various things Roman, which sound comically incongruous in the context of the tale, further emphasize its Latin provenience.¹¹

The Latin author betrays his masked identity not only through such overtly self-referential remarks but also by portraying some of his secondary narrators as the least plausible tellers of their tales or by presenting their manner of narration as ridiculously unsuitable for the subject matter. For instance, the author really seems to go out of his way to emphasize the comic incompatibility between the identity of the drunken delirious old hag entertaining Charite in the robbers' den¹² and the exquisite charm, philosophical depth, and elaborately allusive texture of the tale of *Cupid and Psyche* that she formally reveals. In a similar way, the unbridgeable gap between the narrator's identity and the style of his narrative is stressed in the tale of Charite's death. The il-

⁸ 2.12 *Corinthi apud nos* vs. 11.27 *Madaurenses, sed admodum pauperes*. See Van der Paardt 1981.

⁹ E.g., 3.9 *nec mora, cum ritu Graeciensi ignis et rota, cum omne flagrorum genus inferuntur*; 3.29 *inter ipsas turbas Graecorum genuino sermone nomen augustum Caesaris invocare temptavi*; 11.17 *renuntiat sermone ritum Graeciensi πλοιαφρονα*.

¹⁰ 4.32 *sed Apollo, quamquam Graecus et Ionicus, propter Milesiae conditorem sic Latina sorte respondit*.

¹¹ E.g., the mention of the shrine of the goddess Murcia in the Roman Circus Maximus, which was notoriously frequented by prostitutes, 6.8. See Kenney 1990 *ad loc.*

¹² 6.25 *Sic captivae puellae delira et temulenta illa narrabat anicula*.

literate slave who tells it declares that it is worthy of being written down by learned men *in historiae specimen*.¹³ The clear implication of this statement is that he himself is absolutely incapable of producing such an account. However, contrary to what the text explicitly states, the actual narrative that we read is a perfect specimen of learned historiography composed in accordance with the standard rhetorical principles of the genre and interspersed with numerous allusions to other literary works (see Hijmans *et al.* 1985.4-7).

Finally, the robber-tales present a double contrast: the elevated style of the tales is completely inconsistent not only with the narrator's identity but also with their lowly subject matter. The robber-tales are narrated in a style that presents a mixture of heroic epic and military historiography (see La Penna 1985 and Loporcaro 1992). Both the names of their protagonists (Lamachus, Alcimus, and the grandiloquent, vaguely epic Thrasyleon) and the locales in which they unfold (Thebes, Plataeae) are suggestive of the idealized glorious Greek past. The choice of diction and imagery constantly evokes associations with elevated genres: the robbers go to *Thebas heptapylos* (4.9); Lamachus is compared to the great kings and generals of the past and his suicide is portrayed as a glorious deed of truly epic proportions; the third tale, in which Thrasyleon disguised as a bear infiltrates into Demochares' house, is in effect a burlesque of the Trojan-horse episode of the Greek heroic saga (Frangoulidis 1991), etc. At the same time, the narrator of this lofty panegyric to heroic valor is portrayed as a member of the band of crude bloodthirsty robbers who more resemble wild beasts than humans,¹⁴ whereas the content of the tales is a series of ridiculously inadequate attempts at robbery that miserably fail one after another. Thus the very fact that the tales composed in an ornate and allusive style are repeatedly attributed to humble storytellers not only serves as one of the major sources of humor but also once again explicitly reveals the figure of the cunning Latin implied author hiding behind his different masks.

At the same time, the ridiculously incongruous images of some of the internal storytellers put in perspective the mimetically impossible image of the primary narrator Lucius. In a sense, there is no fundamental difference between the old hag who talks in Platonic allegories or a crude robber who sounds like an outlandish hybrid between Livy and Virgil, on the one hand, and the ascetic Isiac priest practicing law on the Roman forum (11.28-30), who tells sala-

¹³ 8.1 *sed ut cuncta noritis, referam vobis a capite, quae gesta sunt quaeque possint merito doctiores, quibus stilos fortuna subministrat, in historiae specimen chartis involvere.*

¹⁴ 4.8 *estur et potatur incondite, pulmentis acervatim, panibus aggeratim, poculis agminatim ingestis. clamore ludunt, strepitu cantilant, conviciis iocantur, ac iam cetera semiferis Lapithis cenantibus Centaurisque similia.*

cious stories, inadvertently ridicules religion,¹⁵ and claims that his own style is infinitely remote from forensic speech, on the other (1.1 *exotici et forensis sermonis rudis locutor*). Thus the image of Lucius the narrator emerges as just one of the novel's several comic characters who make the reader laugh not only at the content of their tales but also at blatant incompatibility between their mimetic characteristics and their manner of storytelling.

II. Apuleius' Prologue Speaker

We do not have to wait until the beginning of the narrative proper to encounter this comically self-contradictory primary narrator, who playfully parades his irreconcilable dual identity. The text of the *Golden Ass* contains no signs indicating that the primary narrator Lucius can be separated from the prologue speaker: there is no perceptible change of identity of the narrating 'I' between the prologue and the first sentence of the narrative proper:

1.1 *fabulam Graecanicam incipimus. lector intende: laetaberis.* 1.2 *Thessaliam – nam et illic originis maternas nostrae fundamenta a Plutarcho illo inclito ac mox Sexto philosopho nepote eius prodita gloriam nobis faciunt – ex negotio petebam.*

1.1 I begin a Greekish tale. Give it your attention, reader. You will enjoy it. 1.2 To Thessaly – for I pride myself on stemming from that region too: through the connection on the maternal side of my family with that famous Plutarch and later with his nephew philosopher Sextus – so, it was to this Thessaly that I was on my way to transact some business.

This sentence introduces some additional biographical information explicitly connected with the autobiography that the narrator has presented in the prologue. I would like to put particular emphasis on the fact that the *et* linking the speaker's origin to Thessaly and introducing the mention of Plutarch and Sextus undoubtedly connects this sentence to the description of the prologue speaker's *prosapia*:

1.1 *Hymettos Attica et Isthmos Ephyrea et Taenaros Spartiaca, glebae felices libris felicioribus conditae, mea vetus prosapia est.*

¹⁵ For instance, the Diophanes tale (2.13-14); the priests of Dea Syria (8.25-9.10); the miller's wife (9.14 *confictis observationibus vacuis fallens omnes homines*). The fact that in Book 11 there is a pervasive emphasis on the exorbitant payments for religious initiations (11.27-30) acquires extra significance in juxtaposition with the other descriptions of religious activities in the novel and makes the protagonist's conversion look all the more irrational and ludicrous. See Winkler 1985.215-227.

1.1 My ancestors of old come from Attic Hymettus, the Ephyrean Isthmus, and Spartan Taenarus, fertile lands forever enshrined in even more fertile books.

What is more, this information is later on corroborated as true in the fictional world of the novel's protagonist Lucius when we learn that his Thessalian aunt Byrrhena and his mother Salvia are both related to Plutarch.¹⁶

Thus the prologue speaker, the primary narrator, and the protagonist are presented in the text as one and the same person. However, the way the identity of this person is constructed in the prologue directly anticipates the metafictional effect of the comic disjunctions that Apuleius produces throughout his entire narrative. The first thing that strikes one as one begins to read the prologue is the self-conscious playfulness with which the narrator oscillates between establishing the illusion of oral communication and pointing to the material aspect of his narrative as a written text:

1.1 *At ego tibi sermone isto Milesio varias fabulas conseram auresque tuas benivolas lepido susurro permulceam – modo si papyrus Aegyptiam argutia Nilotici calami inscriptam non spreveris inspicere –, figuras fortunasque hominum in alias imagines conversas et in se rursus mutuo nexu refectas ut mireris. exordior. quis ille? paucis accipe.*

1.1 Let me weave together different tales in that Milesian mode of storytelling and let me stroke your kind ears with an elegant whisper – as long as you don't scorn to look at the Egyptian papyrus written over with the sharpness of a reed-pen from the Nile – so that you may wonder at the transformations of men's shapes and fortunes into alien forms and their reversions, one in connection with the other, to their own. Who is this? Let me tell you briefly.

On the one hand, he addresses the reader directly as a reader (*lector intende*) and refers to his own writing as writing (*papyrus, calamus, stilus*) but, on the other, he presents his communication with the reader as an imaginary oral conversation. The stance that the narrator adopts is that of an experienced oral storyteller trying to sell his own product by making it look as attractive as possible: the strong adversative force of *at ego* seems to contrast the prologue-speaker's offer with other texts that the addressee is in the position to choose from, whereas the promise of a diverse (*varias*), elegant (*lepido*), and relaxing (*susurro permulceam*) entertainment seems to be designed to provide a persuasive argument for the reader to lend his kind ears (*aures benivolas*). In all of this, there is a continuous emphasis on aural perception: listening to the narrator's *lepidus susurrus* is explicitly associated with physical pleasure that is

¹⁶ 2.3 *nam et familia Plutarchi ambae prognatae sumus.*

hard to resist; all the recipient has to do is lay back, relax, and let the narrator “soothe his ears”. In other words, the reader is insistently lured to enter the narrator’s fictional world, to start playing the narrative game of make-believe by pretending to be a listener of the narrator’s stories.¹⁷

When the prologue speaker says that he can only soothe his addressee’s ears with an agreeable whisper if the addressee does not scorn to examine the Egyptian papyrus inscribed with a sharp pen from the Nile (*modo si papyrus Aegyptiam argutia Nilotici calami non spreveris inspicere*), it sounds on the surface just as another self-ingratiating appeal to the reader to continue to read the book that he holds in his hands. At the same time, there seems to be more to this parenthetical remark: the explicit opposition between the oral and the written mode introduced by the mention of the Egyptian papyrus produces the impression of a clownish joke, since being reminded of the fact that, despite the injunction to adopt the fictional posture of a benevolent listener, the reader is in reality not listening but reading strikes one as, at best, superfluous and, by any count, quite silly. It is precisely the self-evident incongruousness of this phrase that creates the comic effect: it is as if the narrator were to say, ‘in order for me to stroke your ears, you will have to use your eyes’.

The humor entailed in the juxtaposition of listening and reading in the first sentence of the prologue has clear metafictional implications. By inviting the reader to participate in the narrative game of make-believe and then immediately reminding him of the obvious fact that it will be just a game, the prologue speaker lays bare and effectively reenacts the paradoxical duality of fictional communication. In order to enjoy fiction, the reader must project a fictional self upon the fictional world, access to which, however, can be gained only through the medium of signs printed on paper (or inscribed on an Egyptian papyrus) processed by the reader as an empirical human being (cf. Pavel 1986.89). The fact that the narrator explicitly points to the activity performed by the reader in the extratextual world crosses the boundary between the world of fiction and the real world and thus completely disrupts the fictional illusion that he has just begun to establish. What makes this operation look like a rather silly joke in this specific case is that the redirection of the reader’s attention from the fictional world to the literary artificiality of the text, which the narrator accomplishes here, does not point to any higher-level features of the narrative as a constructed artifact but focuses exclusively on its most obvious material quality as a piece of writing.

¹⁷ On the concept of fiction as a game of make-believe, see Walton 1990.

It has been observed (Winkler 1985.180) that Apuleius' prologue in effect consists of two prologues (1. *at ego ... exordior*; 2. *Hymettos ... laetaberis*) connected by a short dialogic interlude (*quis ille? paucis accipe*). The first part of the prologue provides information about the content and the general tenor of the book. The fact that the narrator announces at the end of the first part that he is ready to begin his narrative (*exordior*) indicates that the information it contains is, in his opinion, perfectly sufficient to fulfill the prefatory function of the prologue. The metafictional humor inherent in the contrast between the soothing of the ears and the sharpness of the reed pen from the Nile is not sufficient *per se* to affect the reader's mental image of the narrator: on the whole, the first part of the prologue may leave one with the impression that the narrator is simply identical with the witty implied author.

The second part of the prologue prompted by the imaginary addressee's question (*quis ille?*) clearly points to a higher complexity of the narrator's image. To begin with, it is obvious that the brief autobiography that serves as the answer to the addressee's question cannot refer to the author: the narrator's self-description as a Greek who learnt Latin as an adult¹⁸ does not square with what we otherwise know about Apuleius, who was born and raised in predominately Latin-speaking North Africa. Besides, the manner in which the narrator introduces himself also calls attention to the fact that he focuses not on himself as a writer but on the fictional role of an oral entertainer that he is playing. In direct contrast to some Greek historians (Herodotus, Thucydides, etc.) and the novelists who imitate them (Chariton, Xenophon of Ephesus), who introduce themselves by name and put strong emphasis on their authorship,¹⁹ Apuleius' narrator does not mention his name and frames his autobiography as part of the fictional world of the oral communication with the addressee (*quis ille? paucis accipe*). Moreover, the fact that, in answering the question about his identity, he concentrates exclusively on his education and language skills shows that he is less concerned with the immortality of his personal fame as an author than with successfully persuading his addressee *here and now* that he possesses sufficient credentials to do the storytelling job announced in the first part of the prologue. This stance is more characteristic of an oral storyteller, eager to attract an audience and to keep them interested in the story than of an actual author worried about the fate of his book.

¹⁸ 1.1 *mox in urbe Latia advena studiorum Quiritium indigenam sermonem aerumnabili labore nullo magistro preaeunte aggressus excolui.*

¹⁹ E.g., Thuc. 1.1 Θουκυδίδης Ἀθηναῖος ξυνέγραψε τὸν πόλεμον τῶν Πελοποννησίων καὶ Ἀθηναίων.

Thus the prologue creates a template of how the primary narrator is to be understood throughout the entire novel: the narrator is introduced in the prologue as the (Latin) implied author who assumes the persona of a Greek oral entertainer. Through his metafictional humor that undermines the fictional illusion of oral communication, the narrator slyly allows the reader a glimpse at both sides of his complex identity. In other words, it is already in the prologue that the Latin author of the novel dons the mask of a Greek storyteller, which he then continues to wear intermittently throughout his entire narrative in such a way as to encourage the reader to be constantly aware of its artificiality.

III. Plautus' Prologues

Prologues of some of Plautus' comedies form an invaluable intertext that anticipates the relationship between Apuleius' narrator as a writer and the mask of an oral entertainer, with which he only half-conceals his true identity. I claim that the relationship between the two sides of Apuleius' narrator (as a writer and as a fictional oral entertainer) can be conceived of in similar terms as that between the *prologus* as an actor and the *prologus* as a character in the play.²⁰

The fictional world of Plautus' comedies is never hermetically closed so as to create the impenetrable sense of dramatic illusion. On the contrary, his spectators are constantly reminded of the fact that they are watching a play. The humor of many of Plautus' prologues is based on a constant play on the permeability of the boundary between the fictional world of the play and the empirical world of the theater where the performance takes place. The metatheatrical comments, with which the Plautine *prologi* intersperse their introductory remarks, stress their awareness of belonging to both worlds and thus serve as a transitional step for the spectators between their own everyday concerns and the action of the play that they are invited to enjoy.

Although the spectators of a Plautine play are insistently lured to enter its fictional world, they are also asked to be kind judges of the play as a performance. In other words, what is required from them is full awareness of their participation not only in the narrative audience, emotionally moved by the mimetic aspect of the play, but also in the authorial audience, capable of appreciating the author's role as the creator of its fictional world.²¹ Constant conflation of the conventions operative in the creation of the fictional world and the conventions of its reception constitute the foundation of the buffoonish

²⁰ On metatheatrical elements in Plautus, see Moore 1998.67-90.

²¹ On authorial and narrative audiences, see Rabinowitz 1987.20-29

humor characteristic of the Plautine prologues. The self-conscious breach of the dramatic illusion that inevitably ensues from this humorous conflation is obviously not a mimetic flaw but one of the primary catalysts of the spectator's laughter that guarantees the success of the play.

Plautus' *prologi* can be either located outside the fictional world of the play (e.g., *Asinaria*, *Captivi*, *Casina*, *Menaechmi*, *Poenulus*, *Truculentus*) or double as fictional figures. Of those prologue speakers who are fictional characters some do not participate in the main action of the play at all (*Aulularia*, *Cistellaria*, *Rudens*, *Trinummus*) while some play a leading part in it (*Amphitruo*, *Mercator*, *Miles Gloriosus*).²² Notwithstanding the principal relationship between the prologue speaker and the play, however, most of them are extremely comfortable with crossing back and forth the boundary between the world of the play and the world of the theater.

In the *Amphitruo*, the prologue speaker Mercury is at the same time one of the main characters of the play. While introducing himself and his father Jupiter, he keeps indiscriminately alternating references to both of them as gods, that is, as characters in the play, and as actors. The prologue speaker starts by speaking as the god Mercury, universally known as the divine herald and the promoter of material gain. He talks at length about his capacity to give wealth and to bring good news (1-14) and then, all of a sudden, breaks the illusion and addresses the spectators of the play directly: they should pay attention to the performance with the same intensity with which they normally desire Mercury's benefactions (13-16). This remark immediately betrays him as an actor primarily concerned with the success of the production. Mercury continues this metatheatrical game throughout the entire prologue. He says, for instance, that although Jupiter is confident that the spectators respect and fear him as becomes the highest god (22-23), he is extremely nervous before the performance since he, as everybody else, is born from mortal parents (26-29 *etenim ille quous huc iussu venio, Iuppiter / non minu' quam vostrum quovis formidat malum: / humana matre natus, humano patre / mirari non est aequom sibi si praetimet*). So, Jupiter as well is not only an omnipotent god but also a lowly actor (88 *ipse hanc acturust Iuppiter comoediam*).

What Plautus does here is to present both Mercury and Jupiter as composite images of actors playing fictional roles. The humor of the *Amphitruo* prologue originates from the fact that they are neither just actors nor just fictional char-

²² On Plautus' prologues in general see Abel 1955.

acters but both at the same time and Plautus wants us to laugh at the incongruities that this duality produces.

We encounter innumerable similar jokes in other Plautine prologues as well. In the *Casina*, the prologue speaker in his summary of the *argumentum* mentions that the prostitute Casina will be found out in the end to be a chaste virgin and a freeborn Athenian citizen; so, if anyone of the spectators dare offer her money for sex after the play is over, they will be punished (*Cas.* 84-86). In the *Menaechmi* and in the *Poenulus*, Plautus uses the same metatheatrical joke twice: while summing up the *argumentum*, the prologue speakers of the two plays pretend to actually go to the city where the next turn of the plot takes them, offer the spectators to get them there anything they want if they give them money to buy it, and make fun of the fools who would accept this offer (*Men.* 49-56 and *Poen.* 79-82). In the *Mercator*, the prologue speaker is the main character of the play, who decides to kill two birds with one stone: to summarize the plot and to tell the audience about his own amorous predicament (*Merc.* 1-2). He rejects the comic convention, according to which the lover complains about his woes to the Night, the Sun, the Moon, etc., and says he prefers to share his human concerns with other humans, that is, with the audience (*Merc.* 3-7). So, he switches back and forth between his own fictional love story and the Greek play translated into Latin by the author Plautus (*Merc.* 8-11). In the *Poenulus*, the prologue speaker is explicitly located outside the fictional world of the play: his only role consists in bringing the audience into the right mood for the play and in summarizing its plot. Moreover, he presents himself as an actor who after the prologue has to dress to play one of the characters (*Poen.* 126 *ibo, alius nunc fieri volo*). However, while delivering the prologue, he guarantees the veracity of the information that he cites by appealing directly to sources inside the world of the play (*Poen.* 61-63).

In some plays, the prologue speaker emphasizes the complete control the author (Plautus or the author of the Greek original) exercises over the fictional world of the play. In the *Casina*, the prologue speaker says that one of the characters will not be able to appear on stage because Plautus prevented it by destroying a bridge (*Cas.* 64-66). In the *Rudens*, the star Arcturus playing the role of the *prologus* points out that the reason why the city in which the action of the play takes place is Cyrene is simply because the Greek playwright Diphilus wanted it that way (*Rud.* 32-33). In the *Trinummus*, the personified allegory Luxuria knows that she is delivering the prologue only because Plautus created her (*Trin.* 8). And in the *Truculentus*, the prologue speaker asks the audience to allow Plautus to use a small portion of their city to construct Athens there (*Truc.* 1-3).

In all these examples Plautus lays bare the most fundamental convention of mimetic theater, which requires that the spectators make-believe that the actor on stage, wearing a mask and a funny costume, actually *is* the fictional character that he pretends to be. Plautus' *prologi* do not completely merge with their mimetic masks but continuously fall out of their fictional roles in various highly amusing ways. I find that the situation in Apuleius' narrative is quite similar. As I have shown, the narrator of the *Golden Ass* is neither just a fictional writer nor just a fictional oral storyteller, but a writer impersonating a storyteller. When he says that he will soothe his addressee's ears by letting him read the text inscribed on an Egyptian papyrus, he does something very similar to Plautus' Mercury, who informs the audience that the omnipotent god Jupiter is nervous before the performance because he was born from mortal parents, or to the prologue speaker of the *Menaechmi*, who makes a joke out of 'walking' to Epidamnus. Like Plautus' prologue speakers, Apuleius' narrator acts like a buffoon – now putting on his mask, now dropping it again – in such a way that his role-playing eschews the illusory mimetic effect but insists on being taken for what it is, namely just role-playing.

The main difference between the two is that they belong to different media. Whereas Plautus' prologue speakers flaunt and ridicule conventions of acting on stage, Apuleius' narrator does the same thing with conventions of fiction writing. What is funny about Plautus' *prologi* is that they explicitly attract attention to the fact that they are ultimately actors impersonating characters in the play. It is as if they were to say to the audience, "you know perfectly well that I'm just pretending to be so and so, and I know too that you know; so, let's just both admit it and have fun." Apuleius retains this buffoonish tone of the Plautine prologues but transposes it into his writing. On the one hand, it is true within the fictional world of his novel that the narrating 'I' is a Greek oral storyteller but, on the other, it is also true in the 'reading' world of the implied reader and the implied author that the text in question is written on an Egyptian papyrus by the writer Apuleius, who, albeit in a different sense, can also be claimed to be its narrator. In a typically Plautine manner, Apuleius' roleplaying narrator admits that he is just an impersonator and turns the incongruity between his actual status and the mask that he wears into an exuberant comic game.

Thus both Plautus and Apuleius derive their humor from the conflation of the world of their fictions and the world of the medium that enables these fictions to come about. For Plautus this medium is theater, for Apuleius a papyrus roll. But even though Apuleius transforms the metatheatrical antics of Plautus' comic stage into a metafiction inscribed on an Egyptian papyrus, the humor remains essentially the same.

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Dr. Alexander Kirichenko
 Universitätsring 15
 D-54296 Trier
 E-Mail: kirichen@uni-trier.de