The Disappointment of the Ass: A Study of Food in Apuleius

Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses* is a tale driven by desire—desire for stories, desire for magic, desire for sex, and most notably desire for food. Many scholars have pointed out the way Apuleius plays with traditional themes and elements of other authors, but twists them to frustrate expectations.¹ From Homer’s *Odyssey* to Plato’s *Phaedrus*,² the novel is built off humorous allusions to other great works. The importance of these allusions lies not in the similarities to other texts, as others have argued,³ but in where the novel diverges from expectations. For it is here when the novel fails to follow tradition that the reader connects with the central theme of desire. In the first book of *The Golden Ass*, Apuleius purposely uses perverted literary tropes, particularly in scenes relating to food, to disappoint the reader’s own desires in the narrative so that, like Lucius, we are left hungry for more.

With a focus on food, the most obvious literary trope to consider is the symposium. Many scholars have noted the way Apuleius draws on this traditional dinner party several times throughout the novel.⁴ Maaike Zimmerman argues the novel itself serves as a symposium, acting as a dialogue between author and reader.⁵ If it is meant to be so, it is a very disappointing one. Instead of a lively conversation, reading the book is more like hearing the long rambling of one man, where the reader has no choice but to listen. There are several points where we might want to interrupt or to call Lucius out for his actions. But these protests would only fall on the deaf

---

¹ Keulen 2007, 36-37 for example discusses the connection between themes of hospitality and these “debiased literary paradigms.”
² Graverini 2007, 134-135 actually notes a two-for-one allusion in 1.6, as Socrates’s embarrassing head covering connects to him to both Odysseus in *The Odyssey* and Socrates in *The Phaedrus*
³ e.g. Winkle 2014, 1-37 argument over the connection between *Cupid and Psyche* and *The Phaedrus*
⁴ Dowden 2006, 49 mentions the dinner at Milo’s house in 2.11, the banquet with Byrrhena in 2.19, and the thieves’ dinner and storytelling in 4.7-8
⁵ Zimmerman 2008, 140.
ears of the text.\footnote{Had this in fact been a dialogue instead of a novel, this would certainly not be the case, as Lucius, once transformed into an ass, frequently mentions how his large ears allow him to hear everything (e.g. 10.14)} We are transformed, as Lucius will later be, into “a silent witness to the narrative.”\footnote{Winkler 1985, 36; Winkler uses this phrase to describe the connection between Lucius’s horse and the audience, but it can just as easily apply to Lucius himself when he becomes a four-legged creature and is led along by others} For just as he, as an ass, tries and fails to speak as though he were a man,\footnote{For example, in 7.3 when he tries to proclaim his innocence, but can only bray} we are unable to voice our own opinions. In presenting the story as a sort of symposium, Apuleius fails to meet our desires. Readers, expecting to engage in a conversation, are then left disappointed with only silent observance.

The novel fails as a symposium not merely in its lack of a conversational element. A symposium is also a competition, a chance for debate between philosophers. Yet the \textit{Golden Ass} remains stubbornly\footnote{To use a hackneyed phrase, “stubborn as an ass”} single-sided. This is the story as told by Lucius, where everything is seen through his eyes. Even when others give their opinions, as Aristomenes’s skeptic companion does 1.3, they are quickly dismissed, and the only interpretation of their thoughts is given by Lucius himself. All ideas are filtered through one man onto the page, cutting out the debate from the novel’s symposium. Again, if the reader wished to challenge Lucius to create this competition, he would be disappointed. Even if he could hear, given his reputation with others who challenge his belief,\footnote{Ibid., 40-41; In book 2, Lucius and Milo debate the story of Diophanes, and Winkler notes the philosophy of skepticism in Milo’s argument. Despite the logic in his point, however, Lucius leaves the argument with the same opinion with which he began it, as if the debate never even happened.} he is unlikely to listen. If we read the novel as a symposium, we would expect some sort of philosophical debate. Instead, we have only the unchanging beliefs of a single man.

There are other more direct connections to the symposium throughout the novel. For example, in 1.4 Lucius describes his near-death experience:
Ego denique vespera, dum polentae caseatae modico secus offulam grandiorem in convivas aemulus contruncare gestio, mollitie cibi glutinosi faucibus inhaerentis et meacula spiritus distintentis minimo minus interii.

As for me—last night, when I was eagerly wolfing down an only slightly larger piece of polenta cheese cake in a competition against my fellow diners, because of the softness of the glutinous food hanging in my throat and hindering my air passages, I very nearly died.\(^{11}\)

Here Apuleius creates a scene of a symposium. Lucius sits the evening (*vespera*) with other dinners (*convivas*) for a meal of “polenta cheese cake” (*polentae caseatae*), a food in literature often found at symposia.\(^{12}\) It is here that the similarities end. Lucius claims to “wolf down” (*contruncare*) the cheese, a word that when used, especially in Apuleius, is “charged with animalistic qualities.”\(^{13}\) We would expect from a symposium an event comprised of educated men, but Lucius turns it into one of wild animals. The act of eating actually prevents any further conversation, as the food causes his jaws to cling together (*faucibus inhaerentis*) and blocks the passageways (*meacula*) of not just his breath, but also his words. Even Apuleius’s way of describing the symposium goes against tradition, as food itself is rarely mentioned in literature about symposia because “the conversation is more important than the food.”\(^{14}\) Here, food is instead the only thing of importance\(^{15}\) and the conversation is nonexistent. Instead of a dialogue that forms a battle of intelligence, Lucius’s *aemulatio* is a competition of the stomach. Lucius does not attempt to debate philosophy with his dining companions, but rather to out-eat them. This becomes a defining characteristic for Lucius throughout the novel. Instead of seeking out

---

\(^{11}\) May 2013, 67 for translation. All translations in this paper will come from May 2013 unless otherwise noted.

\(^{12}\) May 2013, 110-111 notes its use in Horace’s *Satire* and Plutarch’s *Quaestiones Convivales*.

\(^{13}\) Ibid.

\(^{14}\) Zimmerman 2008, 148.

\(^{15}\) After all, what could be more important than the cause of near death?
knowledge and philosophy—the pursuit the reader would expect from a symposium—Lucius is focused on material and physical pleasure above all else.¹⁶

This greedy character is not uncommon for the tradition, as “the gluttonous parasite was a customary figure of ridicule at the symposium.”¹⁷ In this scene, Lucius’s greed for cheese cakes mirrors a similar symposium from Horace, where a character named Porcius “swallows cheesecakes whole.”¹⁸ But again, Apuleius twists this trope. Lucius’s gluttony is meant to be mocked, a source of comedy in the symposium. But here, as well as at other points in the novel, his flaw goes by without anyone raising issue with it. In Roman Satire, a “glutton” is treated by others as a joke to laugh at.¹⁹ Yet Lucius’s dinning mates are barely mentioned, and we get no sense of their reactions to his choking. If the reader himself desires to fill that void—that is, to ridicule Lucius in his greed—his laughter cannot be heard by a fictional character. Lucius fails to provide the entertainment a gluttonous character should, so our symposium now lacks not just in conversation, but also traditional entertainment.

This failure of a symposium is what connects the reader to Lucius. When Lucius attempts to create a scene of a symposium, his eating, conversation, and even his own character all fail to meet with tradition. The reader too is invited into a symposium, but fails to participate. Some of Lucius’s main desires in the novel are food and entertainment, the key parts of a symposium. We too desire these, as they would fulfill our expectations from the symposium that has been set up.

¹⁶ Throughout the novel, Lucius focuses largely on his desires for food, magic, sex, and entertainment, such as his desire to hear others’ stories, as he strives to do in this passage.
¹⁷ Ibid., 141-142.
¹⁸ Keulen 2007, 30.
¹⁹ Ibid., 30-31.
But we are both disappointed. The symposium transforms us into Lucius, hungry for something we cannot have.

Cheese especially is an important food in Apuleius, as it connects the reader’s desires directly with those of Lucius. Cheese is often associated in literature with witches and magic, such as when Circe transforms Odysseus’s men using a potion mixed with cheese and wine. When the characters in the *Golden Ass* consume cheese, the reader anticipates that something magical will happen. But it rarely does. For example, in the scene above, Lucius’s meal of cheese does not lead to anything magical. In fact, it causes quite the opposite, as he has a very mundane experience of choking on a large amount of food. It is in moments such as these, when cheese is mentioned, where we are most similar to Lucius. Just as he spends the better part of the novel searching for magic, we too desperately want it. Magic would fulfill our expectation from the literature of cheese, so we want it to appear in these scenes. But much like Lucius, we are constantly disappointed in this hope for magic.

Take for example the scene of Socrates’s death:

Verum ille, ut satis detruncaverat cibum, sitire inpatienter coeperat; nam et optimi casei bonam partem avide devoraverat, et haud ita longe radices platani lenis fluvius in speciem placidae paludis ignavus ibat argento vel vitro aemulus in colorem. ‘En’ inquam ‘explore latice fontis lacteo.’ Adsurgit et oppertus paululum pleniorem ripae marginem complicitus in genua adpronat se avidus adfectans poculum. Necdum satis extremis labis summum aquae rorem attigerat, et iugulo eius vulnus dehiscit in profundum patorem et illa spongia de eo repente devolvitur eamque parvus admodum comitatur cruor.

But as soon as he had wolfed down enough food, he began to feel unbearably thirsty. For he had greedily devoured a good part of the best cheese, and not very far from the roots of the plane tree a gentle stream was gliding lazily, like a peaceful pool in appearance, rivalling silver or glass in its color. ‘Here’ I said, ‘Fill yourself up with the milky liquid of this spring.’ He got up, and after waiting a little to find a more level edge of the river bank, he got down on his knees, leaned forwards and greedily reached for a draught. He

---

had as yet hardly brushed the water’s moist surface with the tip of his lips, when the
wound in his throat gaped open into a deep hole and that sponge rolled out of him
suddenly, and only a little blood accompanied it.\textsuperscript{21}

The scene is full of allusions, particularly to the \textit{Phaedrus}. A main character named Socrates sits
under a plane tree near a river, a setting that is lifted straight from Plato’s writing.\textsuperscript{22} Additionally,
the Socrates of Apuleius and of Plato “both end their lives with a drink.”\textsuperscript{23} Yet this is not the
famous philosopher Plato writes about. This Socrates is a wasted and hollow man,\textsuperscript{24} a far cry
from Plato’s, who is described with “unchanged complexion and demeanor in the face of
death.”\textsuperscript{25} Nor does he give any philosophical thoughts as he sits under the plane tree, but rather,
in a scene that recalls Lucius’s earlier failed symposium, he is focused only on food. His death
from his drink is not a noble act purposely brought about surrounded by his friends as it is in
\textit{Phaedo}, but caused by his own greed and foolishness, occurring on a rarely traveled road with
only one old companion to witness it. In the \textit{Phaedrus}, Socrates avoids crossing a river because
of some unspoken warning,\textsuperscript{26} yet in \textit{Metamorphoses} Socrates marches right up to it, despite
having been given an actual command from the witches not to cross one. The references to
Socrates all fail when compared against his traditional poise and intelligence, instead
transforming him into a new Lucius whose gluttony leads to his death.

Beyond the parts about Socrates, much of this scene is contradictory to the reader’s
expectations. Food and water generally sustain life, but instead, here they cause a sudden death.
The color of the water, “rivaling silver and glass” invokes the image of a mirror, a tool used in

\textsuperscript{21} May 2013, 83.
\textsuperscript{22} Hunter 2012, 240.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Described earlier as “intentiore macie atque pallore buxeo”
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} May 2013, 183.
literature\textsuperscript{27} for reflection, as a person looks at his self.\textsuperscript{28} But instead of being used to explore the living man, this mirror transforms the human into a corpse. Most notably, however, is the lack of magic. Because Socrates has consumed cheese, we expect some sort of witchy magic to befall him. Instead, we get the exact opposite. The cheese leads to the reversal of the witches’ earlier magic that had brought Socrates back to life. Where we desire the creation of new magic from the cheese, we instead are left with the death of an old one.

We are not the only ones disappointed by a breech in convention in the novel. At several points in the novel, Lucius himself is faced with a change in tradition. For example, when he arrives at Milo’s house:

\begin{quote}
Intuli me eumque accumbentem exigu admodum grabattulo et commodum cenare incipientem invenio. Assidebat pedes uxor et mensa vacua posita, cuius monstratu: ‘En’ inquit ‘hospitium.’
\end{quote}

I took myself inside and found him reclining on a rather short cot, and only just starting his dinner. His wife was sitting at his feet and an empty table was placed before them. He pointed at it and said ‘Behold, hospitality.’\textsuperscript{29}

Lucius comes to Milo’s house with certain expectations about traditional hospitality, but he fails to get it. His host has no food on his table for dinner and practically no furniture to rest on. What furniture he does have is too small to be of use, such as the little cot (grabattulo) that offers Lucius no real space to rest. The empty table is “placed before them” (mensa posita) in a phrase that mimics the image of setting the table.\textsuperscript{30} Yet this table is set not with dishes and food, but with only air. When Milo points (monstratu) to it, even acknowledging it in his speech as he proclaims “behold,” it seems there should be something there. Yet he points at nothing. Milo

\textsuperscript{27} And also real life
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 186.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 87
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 202.
provides his guest with no food or rest, only an empty house and table. He not only fails to fulfill his duties in hospitality, but in a symposium as well, as he provides no food and no entertainment.\(^{31}\) Instead, he expects entertainment from Lucius, asking him about his travels and their friend, without providing any food. This scene connects the reader and Lucius further, for not only do we both have desires to meet traditional expectations, we are both disappointed in them. We are left hungry (in Lucius’s case literally) and unfulfilled in our desires.

Yet the story does not set Lucius up as a sympathetic character. He is gullible\(^ {32}\) and greedy,\(^ {33}\) so focused on his own desires that he eventually physically turns himself into an ass. Nor is his fate one we would wish upon ourselves. His and others’ gluttonous desires often lead to pain and disaster. When he greedily consumes too much cheese, he nearly dies. When Socrates does the same, he actually dies. There seems to be a clear morality—don’t bite off more than you can chew.

But how are we any better? We too have constant expectations throughout the novel. And what are expectations but our desires from the narrative? Based on the traditions Apuleius draws on, we want to see certain things happen to completely fulfill those ideas. Time and time again, we are left wishing for something we cannot have. We ourselves are transformed into Lucius, as we continue to wish for more, despite the consequences and the knowledge that we likely won’t get it. It creates a sort of paradox. Most people would wish to be different from Lucius.\(^ {34}\) Yet it is the very act of desiring that makes us like him. Despite it all, we continue reading, desiring to hear more *fabula*. It is a hunger we cannot fill.

\(^{31}\) Zimmerman 2008, 144-145.

\(^{32}\) He believes whatever stories people tell him, such as Aristomenes’s tale of Socrates, without any proof or logic

\(^{33}\) He almost choked on cheese because he wanted a larger portion of it

\(^{34}\) He is, after all, an ass
The final line of the book completes our transformation:

Evasit aliquando rancidi senis loquax et famelicum convivium, somno, no cibo gravatus, cenatus solis fabulis, et in cubiculum reversus optatae me quieti reddidi.

At last I escape that rancid old man’s chatty and starving dinner party, and weighed down with sleep not food, having dined on stories alone, I returned to my bedroom and surrendered myself to my desired sleep. 35

The use of the word *fabulis* here in the last sentence of the book mirrors its use in the last sentence of the first chapter, completing the ring composition of book one. 36 We circle back to where we began, as if we never went anywhere. Our desires are left as unfulfilled as they were at the start. Lucius’s sentiment is one we can identify with. In the end, it feels as if we too have finally escaped from “a chatty and starving dinner party,” the failed symposium Apuleius creates. “Starving” is an apt word to use, as despite all its references to food, the form of the novel gives us nothing to physically sustain ourselves. If indeed this is a symposium, then again it disappoints us. For what is a symposium without a meal? We, like Lucius, are hungry for something more. And in the end, having read a story that does nothing but disappoint our expectations, we are left in the same situation: “having feasted on stories alone.”

35 May 2013, 91.
36 Ibid., 221.
Bibliography


