

# ***Xenia* Perverted: Guest-host Relationships in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses***

**By Noreen Sit**

The relationships between guests and hosts in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* are interesting because of their parallels and contrasts with similar relationships in epic. Much like Homer's tale of the wandering Odysseus, Apuleius' novel follows the adventures of Lucius who encounters many lands and people during his travels. In some cases, Lucius is the guest; at other times, he is an observer. *Xenia* appears in the *Metamorphoses* in various manifestations, but it is frequently violated. Apuleius takes the familiar theme of *xenia* and, by perverting it, challenges the tradition for his audience's entertainment.

*Xenia* is the term that refers to the relationship between guest and host. Good *xenia* is characterized by a host's willingness to accommodate a guest, no matter the circumstances, and a guest's promise that he will return the favor. Proper *xenia* includes an exchange of gifts and a pact of friendship for generations to come. Bad *xenia* appears early in the *Metamorphoses*, starting with the tale of Socrates at the inn of Meroë. Socrates recalls:

quae me nimis quam humane tractare  
adorta cenae gratae atque gratuitae ac  
mox urigine percita cubili suo adplicat.  
Et statim miser, ut cum illa adquievi, ab  
unico congressu annosam ac pestilentem  
con<suetudinem> contraho  
(Apuleius *Metamorphoses* 1.7)

"And she, having endeavored to treat me much too kindly, brought me a dinner both pleasing and free of charge; and soon after, feeling hot and bothered, [brought me] to her

bedroom. As soon as I had lain with her — miserable me! — from that single encounter I consigned [myself] to a long and destructive bondage".<sup>79</sup>

Meroë deceives Socrates with seemingly good *xenia*, but then ensnares him with magic. Similarly, in the *Odyssey*, the sorceress Circe lures Odysseus' men into her home with apparent kindness, and then bewitches them:

εἶσεν δ' εἰσαγαγοῦσα κατὰ κλισμούς τε θρόνους τε,  
ἐν δέ σφιν τυρόν τε καὶ ἄλφιστα καὶ μέλι χλωρόν  
οἴνω Πραμνεῖω ἐκύκα· ἀνέμισγε δὲ σίτω  
φάρμακα λύγρ', ἵνα πάγχυ λαθοῖατο πατρίδος αἴης.  
(Homer *Odyssey* 10.233-6)

"Leading them in, she sat them down on couches and chairs, and mixed cheese and barley and yellow honey with Pramnian wine for them. But in their food she mixed dreadful drugs, so that they would utterly forget the land of their fathers."

There are strong parallels between the two episodes. In both cases, the role of host is fulfilled by a powerful woman with magical abilities, and the guests are wandering men coming from fresh bouts of hardship — violent robbery for Socrates, and terrorization by the Laestrygonians for Odysseus' crew. In both cases, the hostesses deceive their guests with hospitable actions and, bewitching them, hinder their escape. Circe's later treatment of Odysseus is similar to Meroë's treatment of Socrates in another way: both women initiate, and achieve, sexual relations with their guests although Odysseus refuses Circe's advances until she promises to free his men (10.346-7).

Meroë is later compared to another magical woman from the *Odyssey*. When she expresses her sadness over her loss of Socrates, she likens herself to Calypso: *At ego scilicet Ulixi astu deserta vice Calypsonis aeternam solitudinem flebo* ("But certainly I, [suffering] the plight of Calypso deserted by the wiles of Odysseus, will mourn my loneliness forever."

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<sup>79</sup> All translations are my own.

Apul. *Met.* 1.12). In the *Odyssey*, however, Calypso shows no hint of such loneliness or mourning. When Hermes tells her that she must free Odysseus, she ῥίγησεν ("shudders") and reproaches him (Hom. *Od.* 5.116-29), but her anger quickly dissipates. She tells Odysseus ἤδη...σε μάλα πρόφρασσ' ἀποπέμψω ("At this time I, quite willing, will send you away" 5.161). Furthermore, unlike the vengeful Meroë, Calypso reassures Odysseus μή τί τοι αὐτῷ πῆμα κακὸν βουλευσέμεν ἄλλο ("I do not devise any other evil for you" 5.187).

Apuleius bases the character of Meroë on Circe and Calypso, but only selectively. Meroë displays their negative traits: black magic, vengeance, and the ability to keep guests against their will. But Meroë is no divine sorceress, like Circe and Calypso; rather, she is a mere witch whose lowly arsenal includes such earthly weapons as urine (Apul. *Met.* 1.13). Meroë is a parody of her epic counterparts. By including characters such as her, Apuleius brings his work down from its lofty precedent and makes it accessible and entertaining to his readers.

Other hosts in the *Metamorphoses* similarly fall short of their epic precedent. At the house of Milo, as Lucius prepares to retire for the night, his host summons him. Lucius declines: *excusavi comiter, quod viae vexationem non cibo sed somno censerem diluendam* ("I courteously made the excuse that I thought the exhaustion of my journey ought to be relieved not by food but by sleep.") When Milo hears this response,

*pergit ipse et iniecta dextera clementer  
me trahere adoritur: ac dum cunctor,  
dum modeste renitor, 'Non prius' inquit  
'Discedam quam me sequaris' (1.26)*

"He came in person and, slipping his right arm [around me], tried to pull me gently. And when I hesitated and resisted weakly, he said 'I will not leave until you accompany me.' "

Milo's rude behavior reaches absurd heights. He interrogates Lucius about his travels, not allowing him to

leave until he starts slurring his words and dozing off mid-sentence; Lucius climbs wearily into bed *somno, non cibo, gravatus, cenatus solis fabulis* ("heavy with sleep, but not with food, having dined only on gossip"). Milo's negligence of Lucius' basic needs is an egregious violation of proper *xenia*. In the *Odyssey*, Nestor makes a point of not inquiring after his guests' intentions, or even their identity, until after they have feasted:

αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ πόσιος καὶ ἐδητύος ἐξ ἔρον ἔντο,  
τοῖσ' ἄρα μύθων ἦρχε Γερέηνιος ἱππότης Νέστωρ·  
“νῦν δὴ κάλλιον ἐστὶ μεταλλῆσαι καὶ ἐρέσθαι  
ξείνους, οἳ τινὲς εἰσιν, ἐπεὶ τάρπησαν ἐδώδης.  
(Hom. *Od.* 3.67-70)

"Then, when they had placed aside their desire for food and drink, Nestor the Gerenian horseman was first to speak to them: 'Now, indeed, it is better to ask and inquire of these strangers who they are, after they have enjoyed their meal.' "

Menelaus exhibits the same decorum:

σίτου θ' ἄπτεσθον καὶ χαίρετον· αὐτὰρ  
ἔπειτα  
δείπνου πασσαμένω εἰρησόμεθ' οἳ τινὲς  
ἐστον  
ἀνδρῶν. (4.60-2)

"Enjoy your food and be merry. When you have eaten your meal, we will then ask what men you are."

Milo's conduct as a host is the complete opposite of proper *xenia*. His behavior and extreme stinginess make him a foil to the dignified, generous hosts immortalized in the *Odyssey*. Like Meroë, Milo is the earthly rendition of a lofty epic precedent. He is deficient, but comically so. Apuleius creates characters such as Meroë and Milo with epic tradition in mind, but he gives these characters flaws to flout the tradition for a humorous and entertaining effect.

Other guest-host relationships in the *Metamorphoses* go against the epic standard. The unfortunate Thelyphron, whose nose and ears were stolen by witches, is so cruelly

ridiculed at Byrrhena's dinner-party that he prepares to leave. The hostess, however, neither apologizes nor takes any steps to comfort her distressed guest; rather, she asks him to stay and tell the story of his misfortune *ut et filius meus iste Lucius lepidi sermonis tui perfruatur comitate* ("so that my beloved son, this Lucius, can enjoy the entertainment of your charming story" Apul. *Met.* 2.20). Thelyphron has no choice but to comply begrudgingly. Byrrhena sacrifices the comfort of one guest for the entertainment of another.

Lucius soon finds his own comfort compromised for the entertainment of the entire town of Hypata. The day after Byrrhena's party, Lucius becomes the laughingstock in the Risus Festival, the annual Hypatian celebration of laughter. He recalls his humiliation at being paraded *velut quandam victimam* ("like a beast for sacrifice") and his utter dismay at seeing the whole crowd laughing at him, *illum bonum hospitem parentemque meum Milonem risu maximo dissolutum* ("including that good host and patron of mine, Milo, collapsed with the greatest laughter" 3.2). The behavior of Byrrhena towards Thelyphron, and of Milo towards Lucius, reflects an utter disregard for a guest's feelings. Both hosts allow their guests to become unwilling objects of attention and ignore their anguish. This unseemly host-behavior stands in sharp contrast with Nausicaa's and King Alcinous' treatment of Odysseus. After bathing and clothing Odysseus, Nausicaa asks him to take a separate route to her father's palace to prevent him from becoming an object of negative attention:

τῶν ἀλεείνω φῆμιν ἀδευκέα, μή τις ὀπίσσω  
μομεύῃ: μάλα δ' εἰσὶν ὑπερφίαλοι κατὰ δῆμον  
(Hom. *Od.* 6.273-4)

"I shun their unkind words, lest some man should later make criticism: indeed, there are overweening men in our city."

Nausicaa's father, King Alcinous, shows similar concern for Odysseus during his stay in Phaeicia. During the festivities, when a bard sings the song of Troy, Alcinous

notices Odysseus weeping and tactfully suggests a change of activity (8.93-104).

Hosts in the *Metamorphoses* do a poor job at fulfilling the expectations of proper *xenia*, but Lucius also falls short of being a model guest. Lucius is Apuleius' rendition, albeit flawed, of Homer's wandering hero. Like Odysseus, Lucius is far from home and buffeted by many hardships; he receives both punishment and assistance from deities, and eventually achieves a homecoming of sorts. Furthermore, Lucius alludes to his *sagacitas ac prudentia* ("keenness and foresight" Apul. *Met.* 9.11), which are mental qualities shared by the wily Odysseus. Both Lucius and Odysseus are guilty of surreptitious, snooping behavior. Lucius sneaks up to Pamphile's room with *insono vestigio* ("silent footsteps") and watches her *per rimam ostiorum* ("through a chink in the door" 3.21). Odysseus and his men, finding nobody inside the Cyclops' cave, invite themselves in and scrutinize everything: ἐλθόντες δ' εἰς ἄντρον ἐθηεύμεσθα ἕκαστα ("Entering the cave, we gazed at each thing" Hom. *Od.* 9.218). When his host, the Cyclops, finally appears, Odysseus and his men scamper εἰς μυχὸν ἄντρου ("into a nook in the cave") and spy on their host until they are discovered (9.236).

Despite these similarities, Lucius does not behave properly as a guest. Even though his trip to Hypata is premeditated, he brings nothing to Milo's home except for his own belongings and a letter of introduction (Apul. *Met.* 5.22). In contrast, Odysseus brings wine into the Cyclops' cave, not knowing what sort of host he will encounter, but making provisions for gift-giving anyway (Hom. *Od.* 9.196-7).

Another instance of Lucius' unseemly behavior is his seduction of the maid Photis. His actions violate the boundaries of proper guest-friendship because he shifts Photis' loyalty away from her household, with the result that she is willing to reveal her mistress' secrets to a stranger. Seducing members of a host's household is a crime in the *Odyssey*. Odysseus, before slaughtering the suitors, accuses

them of raping his maids: δμῶῃσιν δὲ γυναιξὶ παρευνάξεσθε βιαίως: ("You lay beside the serving-women by force" 22.38). Lucius is guilty of commandeering one of his host's household resources for his own gain, but it is unclear whether he is directly punished for it. Fortune's unpredictability makes it impossible to tell which of Lucius' actions get punished and which are merely the results of bad luck.

Amidst the many instances of bad *xenia* in the *Metamorphoses*, one incident stands out for the unexpectedly good conduct of those involved. In this singular episode, a land-owning *paterfamilias* stops at the hut of a humble market-gardener, unable to continue home during a dark and rainy night. Guest and host both exhibit laudable behavior:

*receptusque comiter pro tempore, licet  
non delicato, necessario tamen quietis  
subsidio remunerari benignum hospitem  
cupiens promittit ei de praediis suis sese  
daturum et frumenti et olivi aliquid et  
amplius duos vini cados.* (Apul. *Met.*  
9.33)

The *paterfamilias* "was received genially, as the situation required; and although the accommodations were not luxurious, but rather basic, he, wanting to repay the kindness of his host, promised to send from his estate grains, olives, and two casks full of wine."

The market-gardener and the *paterfamilias* act in accordance with the rules of *xenia*. The behavior of the host, in particular, resembles that of Odysseus' swineherd Eumaios who, though humble, nevertheless offers his disguised master whatever food his servile means allow: ἔσθιτε νῦν, ᾧ ξεῖνε, τά τε δμῶεσσι πάρεσσι ("Eat now, stranger, the things that belong to a servant." Hom. *Od.* 14.80). Despite the proper conduct of the market-gardener and the *paterfamilias*, however, both men suffer terrible reversals of fate: the *paterfamilias'* three sons are killed in a violent and senseless

property dispute (Apul. *Met.* 9.35-8); the market-gardener, after fighting a brutal and rapacious soldier, is pursued and presumably executed (9.42). The sharp contrast between these characters' diligent adherence to *xenia* and the extreme nature of their misfortune illustrates the powerful and unpredictable role of Fortune.

Fortune plays a significant role in the quartet of adultery tales in the ninth book of the *Metamorphoses*. Adultery naturally lends itself to bad *xenia*, because there is an unwelcome guest whose sexual misconduct undermines the stability of his host's household. In the *Metamorphoses*, however, adultery by itself is not necessarily punished; rather, Fortune determines whether the adultery, with its accompanying violation of *xenia*, is detected.

Lucius tells four tales of cuckoldry, two of which are punished and two of which are not. It is interesting to note that in all four cases, the adulterer's presence is known or suspected, but the two that result in punishment are the ones where a clear case of *xenia*-violation can be made. Where the adultery goes unpunished, it is because the perpetrators are not caught violating *xenia* despite their obvious sexual crimes.

In the first tale (9.5-7) of unpunished adultery, an adulterous wife fools her husband into thinking that her lover is a prospective buyer of an old corn-jar. The issue of *xenia* does not come into play because the husband and the wife's lover have a business relationship, not a guest-host one. While the husband cleans the jar in preparation for the transaction, the unfaithful wife and her lover manage to copulate openly, within close range of the cuckolded husband who, suspecting nothing, accepts the payment and sends the jar off with his buyer.

The second tale of unpunished adultery contains clear references to the *Odyssey*. The unfaithful wife, Arete, shares a name with Queen Arete of the Phaeicians. The choice of name is ironic. The Phaeician queen is the epitome of ἀρετή



(virtue, or excellence). But the adulteress Arete shows quite different qualities from the ones that her name and epic precedent suggest. She does share a similar background: the gossiping hag describes her as *uxorem generosam et eximia formositate praeditam* ("a wife of noble stock and gifted with exceptional beauty" 9.17). In the *Odyssey*, Athena (disguised as a child) describes Queen Arete's royal lineage (Hom. *Od.* 7.54-66) and high esteem in the eyes of her children, King Alcinous, and the people (7.69-71). Yet despite her high status and beauty, Apuleius' Arete is corruptible. The conniving Philesitharus bribes his way past Myrmex, the slave charged with guarding Arete's chastity, and becomes Arete's lover. One day, surprised by the husband Barbarus' sudden arrival, Philesitharus accidentally leaves his slippers under the bed, causing Barbarus to clap Myrmex in chains and march him through town, but

*opportune Philesitherus occurrens,  
quanquam diverso quodam negotio  
destinatus, repentina tamen facie  
permotus, non enim deterritus, recolens  
festinationis suae delictum et cetera  
consequenter suspicatus sagaciter  
extemplo sumpta familiari constantia.*  
(Apul. *Met.* 9.21)

"Philesitherus showed up at this key moment and, although he was headed toward some other business, was jolted by the sudden look of things; but he was not afraid and, recalling the blunder of his hasty escape and having suspected what followed, he immediately and perspicaciously took up his familiar mental firmness."

Philesitherus then invents a credible cover-up story that exonerates himself and Myrmex. His skills in reasoning and improvisation recall the wit and cunning of Odysseus, who is repeatedly called πολύμητις ("many-witted") in the *Odyssey*. But unlike Odysseus, who uses his wiles for good, Philesitharus uses his mental capacity for evil. Philesitharus

more closely resembles another adulterer mentioned in the *Odyssey*, the δολόμητις ("conniving") Aegisthus (Hom. *Od.* 3.250), lover of Queen Clytemnestra.

Apuleius' story of Arete and Philesitharus shows many similarities with Homer's account of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Prior to King Agamemnon's departure for Troy, Nestor recalls, he had enlisted a minstrel to guard Clytemnestra; but Aegisthus kidnapped the minstrel, marooned him on an island, and became Clytemnestra's lover (3.265-72). The parallels between the two stories are clear: a husband employs a servant to guard his wife from corruption; this servant is somehow removed, and the matron's virtue compromised. But in Apuleius' version, the characters fall short of their epic model. The unfaithful wife is no queen; she is only named after one. The servant who guards her is no divinely-inspired minstrel, but a slave easily wooed by a bribe. To top this all off, the cuckolded husband is no King Agamemnon; rather, his name Barbarus suggests boorish foreignness. Apuleius takes a tale of adultery famous from epic and lowers it from the dignified to the pedestrian. He writes the "soap-opera" version — fodder for gossiping women, but nowhere near the level of its glorious precedent. Apuleius' rendition also has an opposite, quite shocking outcome; Fortune sides with the adulterers and they go unpunished.

Fortune is fickle when it comes to determining the fates of the adulterers in the *Metamorphoses*. In the two cases where the perpetrators are punished, the crimes are equally serious but the characters' fates are heavily influenced by chance. In these cases, the adultery — and, by extension, the violation of *xenia* — is discovered. The laundryman hears his wife's lover coughing in a vat of poisonous fumes, and drags him outside to die (Apul. *Met.* 9.24-5); the baker finds his wife's lover hiding under a tub and punishes him soundly (9.27).

The baker's tale calls for special attention because it is the one adultery story that involves a semblance of a guest-host relationship between the cuckolded husband and the wife's lover. When the baker finds the adulterer in his house, he genially offers to share his wife. His unusual generosity is mere pretense, however; he leads the lover to bed and punishes him with both sexual and physical assault (9.28). The baker later dies when his vengeful wife enlists the aid of a witch (9.29-30). Even though both men violate *xenia* — the adulterer, by intruding on the baker's home and marriage, and the baker, by feigning hospitality and then taking advantage of his unsuspecting guest — one man escapes with his life while the other one dies. Fortune metes out unfair punishments.

Apuleius' tale of the wandering Lucius recalls many episodes from the *Odyssey* but renders them quite differently. Characters in the *Metamorphoses* behave badly as guests and hosts, but all contribute to the color and flavor of Apuleius' work. Characters such as Milo depart so absurdly far from proper *xenia* that the effect is humorous; others such as Meroë are entertaining parodies of their epic precedent. The force that works behind the scenes is not divine justice, as it is in epic, but rather fickle Fortune who has no qualms about punishing good *xenia* and overlooking the bad. The overall effect is a story full of unpredictable, tradition-flouting twists that are as entertaining as they are rebellious.

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