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Autor: Hunink, Vincent

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A Sea-Monster in Court (Apul. Apol. 32)

By Vincent Hunink, Nijmegen

In 158/9 AD the philosopher and orator Apuleius of Madaurus was accused of having practised magic to seduce the rich widow Pudentilla into marrying him. In the speech he delivered at the occasion, the extant *Pro se de magia*, he employs a wide range of rhetorical techniques to defend his case.

For example, the accusers had asserted that Apuleius had bought fishes for magical purposes. He firmly rejects the charge, and even makes fun of it by means of a *reductio ad absurdum*:

*Ceterum eodem piscium argumento etiam Menelai socios putabis magos fuisse, quos ait poeta praecipuus flexis hamulis apud Pharum insulam famem propulsasse; etiam mergos et delfinos et scillam tu eodem referes, etiam gulones omnes, qui impendio a piscatoribus merguntur, etiam ipsos piscatores, qui omnium generum piscis arte adquirunt (c. 32)*¹.

The first sentence draws some literary figures into the argument, suggesting that Menelaos' comrades must equally be considered magicians, since Homer pictures them as catching fish (*Od.* 4,368–369)². The preceding chapter of the speech, c. 31, had already contained two Homeric quotations, and allusions to six episodes, five of them from the *Odyssey*.

Before the similar references to 'gourmands' and fishermen, comes a clause with three non-human examples: 'large diving sea birds'³, dolphins and one problematic word, spelled *scillam* in the most important MSS, Fφ.

* This note is a preliminary study for a new edition with commentary of Apuleius' *Pro se de magia (Apologia)* (Amsterdam 1997). Research was supported by the Foundation for Literary Studies, Musicology, and Drama Research, which is subsidized by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO).

1 'But on the lines of your argument you must believe that even the comrades of Menelaus were magicians; for they, according to the great poet, averted starvation at the isle of Pharos by their use of curved fish-hooks. Nay, you will class in the same category of sorcerers seamews, dolphins, and the lobster; gourmands also, who sink whole fortunes in the sums they pay to fishermen; and fishermen themselves, who by their art capture all manner of fish.' (translation H. E. Butler, *The Apologia and Florida of Apuleius of Madaura*, translated by H. E. Butler, Oxford 1909). I give the Latin text as printed in: H. E. Butler, A. S. Owen, *Apulei apologia sive Pro se de magia liber* with introduction and commentary (Oxford 1914).

2 It may be noticed that *flexis hamulis*, *insulam* and *famem* literally render words from the Greek text.

3 The *mergus* is not the name of any single, identifiable bird, but a blanket term covering a number of species of large diving sea birds; cf. W. G. Arnott, "Notes on 'gavia' and 'mergus' in Latin authors", *CQ* 14 (1964) 249–262.

Scilla is recorded as a general term for crustaceans; cf. *OLD* s.v. *squilla*⁴. But this poses a curious problem, since the present sentence is manifestly about ‘devourers of fish’. Some editors propose a correction to *squalos*, which is rather distant from the MSS and offers no serious solution, since the *squalus* appears to be some kind of fish itself. Lexica a.l. give the sort of explanations which send readers off empty-handed, such as the dreaded ‘unidentified sea-fish’ (*OLD*).

Instead, we may keep the text of Fϕ much as it is, but interpret it as a name and print it with a capital (*Scillam*); this ingenious suggestion was made in 1954 by Cataudella⁵. In his view, the allusion is to the seabird *ciris*, into which Scylla, daughter of Nisus, was changed (cf. Ov. *Met.* 8,81–151). The metonymia of a human name for an animal would be paralleled by examples like Procne and Philomela. Alternatively, the famous sea-monster Scylla may be meant, a suggestion merely touched upon by Cataudella⁶.

Against both mythological Scyllas, objections were raised by the Italian ornithologist Capponi, in a short study from 1991⁷. He argues that a mythological monster here would not correspond to the culture and experience of Apuleius. Secondly, the judicial setting of the speech would seem a bad context for such a reference. Finally, Capponi argues, Apuleius is always precise in his terminology for birds and fish, and the name of a third species would therefore seem most natural.

However, these arguments remain unconvincing. The first allegation is actually incomprehensible to any reader of the speech: Apuleius constantly displays his knowledge and erudition, in which mythology and literature occupy as important a place as biology and other sciences. This becomes manifest even in the immediate context, where a mythological example from Homer has just been given⁸. In a modern courtroom, mythological *exempla* perhaps seem misplaced, but Apuleius clearly thought otherwise⁹: he expected the judge and the crowd attending the trial to appreciate such allusions. Finally, Apuleius’ zoological interests and accuracy in no way imply that another real animal must be

4 *OLD* has both an entry *squilla* for the animal, and *scilla* for a seaside-plant, adding, however, that it is probably the same word. Obviously, the plant cannot be meant by Apuleius.

5 Cf. Quintino Cataudella, “Congetture al testo dell’ Apologia di Apuleio”, in: *In memoriam Achillis Beltrami miscellanea philologica* (Genova 1954) 51–57, esp. 56–57.

6 Among modern editors, only the Spanish translator S. Segura Munguía (*Apuleyo. Apología, Flórida. Introducción, traducciones y notas*, Madrid 1980) is convinced of this suggestion (p. 113 n. 135). G. Augello (*L’Apologia o La Magia, Florida di Lucio Apuleio*, Torino 1984), seems to agree, but in a note he nonetheless adds remarks by Marchesi rejecting the suggestion.

7 Cf. Filippo Capponi, “Noterelle filologiche”, in: *Studi di filologia classica in onore di Giusto Monaco*, 1 (Palermo 1991) 313–325, esp. 313–316.

8 I already pointed to the six Homeric episodes in c. 31; to these may be added the eight names of Gods at the end of that chapter.

9 Earlier, e.g. Hector, Thyestes, Hercules and Charon have been mentioned (cc. 4, 16, 22 and 23). More mythological examples are to follow later in the speech (e.g. c. 39, 56, 81, 89).

mentioned here. The singular form, following the plural *mergi* and *delfini*, is rather suggestive of a shift to something else.

The first mythological *Scylla* proposed by Cataudella does not indeed seem a very likely option. Metonymical use of the name *Scylla* analogous to Procne and Filomela seems unparalleled. And sadly, as Cataudella admits, the *ciris* is no particularly great consumer of fish. More importantly, such an uncommon, learned allusion to a bird would probably go over the heads of the audience and hence be detrimental to the speaker's case.

There are, on the other hand, strong arguments in favour of the Homeric monster, which seem to have remained unnoticed up to now. First, we need not look for a specific bird at all, whether legendary or real. The change from birds (*mergos*) to marine animals (*delfinos*) already proves this. Apuleius mentions the sea-monster *Scylla* in *Soc.* 24 (178) along with some other highlights from the *Odyssey*, including *Circae poculum*¹⁰.

In the present passage, the ravenous monster seems well at its place in a short list of fish-devourers: the story was widely known and must have been familiar to Apuleius' audience. *Scylla*'s incredible voraciousness makes her the perfect rhetorical climax here. In the Homeric passage on *Scylla*, she is even described as 'fishing for dolphins'; cf. *Od.* 12,95–96. The parallel seems significant, and may even explain Apuleius' order here¹¹. That he may have thought of the Homeric passage at all, rather than of any other text, seems more than likely if we consider the strongly Odyssean 'colour' of c. 31–32 as a whole.

So, we must read *scillam* as *Scyllam*¹² and interpret it as the sea-monster known from the *Odyssey*. This adds a further Homeric touch to the passage, and is rhetorically effective: *Scylla* as a magician seems quite absurd. Hence, terrifying as she is, she is bound to raise a laugh with all who attend the trial¹³.

10 The passage in *Soc.* may be compared to the foregoing c. 31 of *Pro se de magia*, where Homeric episodes are summarized equally briefly (lines 23–26 in the edition of Butler and Owen). Typically, the expression *Circae poculum* occurs in both.

11 Perhaps his mention of dolphins guided his mind to the monster which devours these animals in turn.

12 Paleographically, the confusion between *y* and *i* is quite frequent, especially in names. Examples abound even in F, e.g. *Pithagoram* (4,7); *Dyogenis* (9,11); *Siracusano* (10,10); *pyrata* (32,1); *Mitilena* (39,3). In such cases, the spelling is invariably normalized in our texts. In other, less evident cases, variants or inconsistencies in spelling in F should best be retained; cf. the principles adopted in the *Groningen Commentaries on Apuleius*, as recently set out again by B. L. Hijmans jr., in *Gnomon* 67 (1995) 119–120; cf. further my "Notes on Apuleius' Apology", in *Mnemosyne* 49 (1996) 159–167.

13 The general image is continued in the following *merguntur* (Fφ), a word unduly changed in the later MSS to the weak *mercantur*. The primary sense of *mergi* is 'to be plunged into ruin', but the word again suggests 'being swallowed up and drowned,' with a pun on the activity of *piscatores* (who paradoxically bring their customers into the water by catching fish out of it), and a verbal echo of *mergos*.