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Circe ‘Pseudo’-Homeric Metamorphoses into Donkeys and Ass-Narratives

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Abstract: Dieser Artikel untersucht eine seit dem 6. Jahrhundert v. Chr. bezeugte, bisher wenig beachtete alternative Version des homerischen Mythos von Kirke, in dem die Zauberin Odysseus’ Gefährten nicht in Schweine, sondern in Esel verwandelt. Es wird gezeigt, dass dieser bisher wenig beachtete alternative Mythos anhaltenden Einfluss auf Werke aus verschiedenen Genres ausübte, darunter philosophische Schriften, mythografische Sammlungen, seriokomische Dialoge und insbesondere die “Eselserzählungen” von Apuleius und Pseudo-Lukian.

Keywords: Homer, *Odyssey*, Circe, transformation into donkey, Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, Pseudo-Lucian, *Onos*.

1 Introduction

The mythical figure of Circe makes her first appearance in the *Odyssey*, where she is portrayed as a fearsome deity (δεινή θεός) living in the faraway island of Aea, inside a palace guarded by the wolves and lions she has enchanted and tamed with harmful drugs (κακά φάρμακα).¹ Circe is responsible for turning Odysseus’ companions into pigs by mixing terrible drugs (φάρμακα λυγρὰ) with their food and touching them with her wand. Until Odysseus’ intervention and their eventual anamorphosis, these men suffer a dramatic debasement of their human condition: while retaining their minds, they are trapped in the bodies of pigs:

ἀνέμισγε δὲ σίτῳ
φάρμακα λυγρὰ, ἵνα πάγχυ λαθοῖατο πατρίδος αἴης.
αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ δῶκέν τε καὶ ἔκπιον, αὐτίκ’ ἔπειτα
ράβδῳ πεπληγυῖα κατὰ συφεοῖσιν ἔεργον·
οἱ δὲ συῶν μὲν ἔχον κεφαλὰς φωνήν τε τρίχας τε
καὶ δέμας, αὐτὰρ νοῦς ἦν ἔμπεδος, ὡς τὸ πάρος περ.
ὡς οἱ μὲν κλαίοντες ἔερχατο, τοῖσι δὲ Κίρκη
πάρ ρ’ ἄκυλον βάλανόν τ’ ἔβαλεν καρπὸν τε κρυνείης
ἔδμεναι, οἷα σύες χαμαιευνάδες αἰὲν ἔδουσιν.

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¹ The Circe episode runs from Hom. *Od.* 10.133–574, on which see the overview in A. Heubeck/A. Hoekstra, *A Commentary on Homer’s Odyssey. Vol. II. Books IX–XVI* (Oxford 1989) 50–52.

She mixed harmful drugs in the food, so that they would utterly forget their homeland. Now after she had given them the potion and they had drunk it off, then she immediately struck them with her wand and confined them to the pigsties: they had heads, voice, bristles, and shape of pigs, but their mind remained unaltered as it was before. So they were penned there weeping, and Circe threw before them acorns and the fruit of the cornel tree to eat, things which wallowing pigs are accustomed to feed upon.²

This Homeric figure and the whole episode left a deep mark in the collective imagination of the ancients which reverberated through later literature in Greek and Latin, from Apollonius of Rhodes to Vergil and Ovid, who retrospectively interpret Circe as the quintessential figure of the female practitioner of magic.³ This study aims to reconstruct an alternative version of this myth attested as early as the sixth century BC, according to which Circe transforms men not only into pigs but also into donkeys. I will then assess the importance of this alternative tradition and its impact on the so-called ass-narratives: I propose that this should be seen as the model for the magical transformation into a donkey which likely plays a central part in the plot of the lost *Μεταμορφώσεις* ascribed to Lucius of Patrae, Apuleius' own *Metamorphoses*, and the tale known as *Λούκιος ἢ Ὄνος* attributed to Lucian (hereafter simply *Onos*).

2 Reconstructing an alternative Homeric tradition

The evidence preserving the tradition according to which Circe transformed men into asses falls into two groups: iconographic, which are also the earliest, and literary sources. A black-figure vase of the *Leagros Group* dating to the late sixth century BC shows the figure of Circe while preparing her noxious philtres in the mixing bowl. Circe is accompanied by two ithyphallic figures with a human body but the head and tail of a donkey, clearly an iconographic convention to indicate humans turned into asinine figures.⁴ A contemporary black-figure lekythos depicts the Homeric scene in which Odysseus holds the unsheathed sword, while he is being offered a cup by Circe, surrounded by anthropomorphic figures with

² Cf. Hom. *Od.* 10.235–243. I follow the text printed in the edition by M.L. West, *Homerus. Odyssea* (Berlin/Boston 2017). Translation adapted from A.T. Murray/G.E. Dimock, *Homer. Odyssey. Books 1–12* (Cambridge, MA 1998 with corr.) 375; 377.

³ Cf. Ap. Rhod. 4.659–752; Verg. *ecl.* 8.70; *A.* 7.10–20; 7.189–191; Ov. *ars* 2.103; *rem.* 263–290; *met.* 14.55–58; 14.312–440. On the reception of the Homeric myth in Greco-Latin literature, see the monograph by A. Galindo Esparza, *El tema de Circe en la tradición literaria: de la épica griega a la literatura española* (Murcia 2015). From a methodological viewpoint, I agree with M.W. Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World* (London/New York 2001) 5, who argues that *μαγεία/magia* and related concepts are still unknown in the Homeric poems.

⁴ LIMC 6.2, 24, no. 5 bis.

the head and tail of a donkey, of a boar, and of a swan.⁵ As Bethe argues, since this iconography depicting Odysseus' companions transformed into donkeys by Circe is already attested on sixth-century vases, it must be derived from an earlier version of the myth.⁶

This iconography continues to be attested in the following centuries. A red-figure krater ascribed to the Persephone Painter and dating to the fifth century BC presents a similar scene with Circe running away from Odysseus, who comes after her, and behind him we find two anthropomorphic figures: one with the head and tail of a donkey, the other with the head and tail of a boar.⁷ Perhaps the most interesting piece of evidence comes from a series of mould-made relief bowls (the so-called Megarian type) from Thessaly which date to the second half of the third century BC. One of these cups portrays Odysseus armed with his sword, while he enters Circe's palace where his theriomorphised companions – ΕΤΑΙΡΟΙ, as the inscription indicates – are; among them there is one called ΦΙΛΙΠΠΕΥΣ with the head of a donkey.⁸ Weitzmann proposes that the iconography of this and other so-called Homeric cups may derive from illustrated scrolls in use during the Hellenistic period, a position rejected in recent scholarship,⁹ whereas Brommer suggests that the imagery of these bowls is probably inspired by Hellenistic epic – expanding upon this alternative Homeric tradition – rather than drama, given that the chorus should have consisted of Odysseus' companions and they should not have specific names, as they do here.¹⁰ One may also wonder whether mime could have been a possible source of inspiration for the imagery in these Homeric cups.

⁵ LIMC 6.1, 52, no. 16. This imagery coincides with the scene in Hom. *Od.* 10.316–322, in which Odysseus resists Circe's supernatural powers by virtue of the herb *moly*, which Hermes bestows upon him, then assaults and threatens Circe with the sword until she adjures to bring him no harm.

⁶ Cf. E. Bethe, "Kirke", *RE* 11,1 (1921) 502.

⁷ LIMC 6.2, 25.

⁸ LIMC 6.1, 45–46. On this cup see also D. Buitron/B. Cohen (eds.), *The Odyssey in Ancient Art* (Annandale-on-Hudson 1992) 93–94. One of the best preserved cups is at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art. There, the name of Philippeus lacks the last letter, but this can be reconstructed by comparing this cup with the fragmentary remains of another cup in the Archaeological Museum of Volos, showing the donkey-headed figure and the last three letters of his name EYE. On these Homeric cups see also U. Sinn, *Die homerischen Becher. Hellenistische Reliefkeramik aus Makedonien* (Berlin 1979) 125–126.

⁹ K. Weitzmann, *Ancient book illumination* (Cambridge, MA 1959) 40–41; *Illustrations in roll and codex* (Princeton 1970) 19–20; against this hypothesis cf. especially L. Giuliani, *Bild und Mythos. Geschichte der Bilderzählung in der griechischen Kunst* (München 2003) 276 and 364, n. 25; J.P. Small, *The Parallel Worlds of Classical Art and Text* (Cambridge 2003) 79–90; M. Squire, *Image and Text in Graeco-Roman Antiquity* (Cambridge 2009) 122–139, who expose Weitzmann's outdated methodology and the insufficient evidence for illustrated manuscripts in the Hellenistic period.

¹⁰ F. Brommer, "Das Kirke-Abenteuer auf Reliefbechern", *AA* 87 (1972–1973) 105–117, at 112–114. This point is taken up in Buitron/Cohen, *loc. cit.* (n. 8) 93, and R. Brilliant, "Kirke's Men: Swine and Sweethearts", in B. Cohen (ed.), *The Distaff Side. Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey* (New York/Oxford 1995) 165–174, at 170.

While the name of Philippeus and the other metamorphized companions of Odysseus remain unattested elsewhere, the oldest literary evidence indicating this diverging version of the Homeric myth dates to the third century dates. If one follows Cherniss' conjecture, a fragment from the Stoic philosopher Chrysippus of Soli, preserved in Plutarch's *De communibus notitiis adversus Stoicos*, might indicate the circulation of this 'pseudo'-Homeric tradition in the context of a philosophical debate on human intellect:

ἀλλ' ὁμως οὔτοι τῆς φρονήσεως ἀντικαταλλάττονται τὴν ὑγίειαν. καὶ γὰρ Ἡρακλείτῳ φασι καὶ Φερεκύδῃ καθήκειν ἄν, εἴπερ ἠδύναντο, τὴν ἀρετὴν ἀφεῖναι καὶ τὴν φρόνησιν, ὥστε παύσασθαι φθειριῶντας καὶ ὑδρωπιῶντας· καὶ τῆς Κίρκης ἐγγχεύουσης δύο φάρμακα, τὸ μὲν ποιοῦν ἄφρονας ἐκ φρονίμων τὸ δ' ὄνους ἐξ ἀνθρώπων φρόνησιν δ' ἔχοντας, ὀρθῶς ἄν τὸν Ὀδυσσεῖα πιεῖν τὸ τῆς ἀφροσύνης μᾶλλον ἢ μεταβαλεῖν εἰς θηρίου μορφήν τὸ εἶδος, ἔχοντα τὴν φρόνησιν – καὶ μετὰ τῆς φρονήσεως δηλονότι τὴν εὐδαιμονίαν.

Nonetheless, these Stoics accept well-being in exchange for wisdom. This is clear from their statements that it would have befitted Heraclitus and Pherecydes, if they could have done so, to give up their virtue and wisdom so that they could dispense with their pediculosis and dropsy and that, if the philtres that Circe poured were two, one making fools of wise men and the other 'asses of human beings but asses with wisdom, it would be right' for Odysseus to have drunk the philtre of foolishness rather than to have changed his form to the shape of a beast, although thereby retaining his wisdom – and alongside his wisdom evidently his happiness.¹¹

The passage expands on and varies the alternative version of the myth by including two different philtres prepared by Circe and mentioning only the donkey as the beast into which humans could be turned. The employment of this alternative account within a philosophical discourse occurs more visibly in the works of Plutarch. In a lengthy fragment from an unidentified work preserved in Stobaeus,¹² Plutarch gives an allegorical interpretation of the Homeric myth of Circe. After a quotation from *Odyssey* 10.239–240, where reference is made to the transformation into pigs only, it is explained that the story can be seen as a version of Pytha-

11 Plut. *Comm. not.* 1064a = *SVF* III, 762. Text after and translation adapted from H. Cherniss, *Plutarch. Moralia. Vol. XIII. Part II* (Cambridge, MA 1976) 696–697, with n. 3 on the attempts to emend the passage. See also at 697, n. d where Cherniss acknowledges Plut. *Mor.* 986b and [Apollod.] *Epit.* 7.14–15, discussed below. F. Collin, "Éléments d'une mythopoétique de la casuistique chez Apulée de Madaure", in E. Plantade/D. Vallat (eds.), *Les savoirs d'Apulée* (Hildesheim/Zürich/New York 2018) 213–245, at 214–215 mentions this passage in a discussion of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* but does not note the importance of this widely-attested tradition.

12 Plut. *fr. inc.* 200, edition by F.H. Sandbach, *Plutarchi Moralia. Vol. VII* (Leipzig 1967) = *Stob. Flor.* 1.49.60, in which the passage is attributed to Porphyry. On the Plutarchan authorship of the fragment, see the discussion by R. Scannapieco, "Circe, la Luna e l'anima. Il frammento plutarco 200 Sandbach", in L. Van der Stockt/F. Titchener/H.G. Ingenkamp/A. Pérez Jiménez (eds.), *Gods, daemons, rituals, myths and history of religions in Plutarch's works* (Málaga 2011) 363–396, at 363, who also gives an overview of previous scholarship.

goras' and Plato's own ideas about metempsychosis, the transmigration and rebirth of people's souls into different bodies depending on one's conduct in life (ἔστι τοίνυν ὁ μῦθος αἰνιγμα τῶν περὶ ψυχῆς ὑπὸ τε Πυθαγόρου λεγομένων καὶ Πλάτωνος). While the soul of philosophically-minded people does not suffer from debasing reincarnations, this is not the case for the more vulgar:

ῶν μὲν γὰρ ἐν τῇ μεταβολῇ καὶ γενέσει τὸ ἐπιθυμητικὸν ἐξανθοῦν ἐπικρατεῖ καὶ δυναστεύει, τούτοις εἰς ὄνωδη καὶ ἄωδη σώματα καὶ βίους θολερούς καὶ ἀκαθάρτους ὑπὸ φιληδονίας καὶ γαστριμαργίας φησὶ γίνεσθαι τὴν μεταβολήν.

Those men whose appetitive element erupts to prevail and dominate at this time of change and birth suffer a transmutation due to their sensuality and gluttony, so Homer means, into the bodies of asses and <swine>, to lead their lives in mud and uncleanness.¹³

Plutarch, therefore, alters the Homeric episode as we know it and draws on the alternative version of the myth that fits well the Platonic-Pythagorean belief expressed in Plato, *Phaedo* 81e, where the Platonic Socrates claims that the souls of those people who indulged in mundane pleasures will be reborn as donkeys and other similar beasts (εἰς τὰ τῶν ὄνων γένη καὶ τῶν τοιούτων θηρίων), an idea which – as I discuss below – plays a key function in the economy of the ass-narratives.

Plutarch refers to this 'pseudo'-Homeric version of Circe's myth in two other works, specifically the *Coniugalia praecepta* and the *Gryllus*. The former is a treatise offering principles that can make a marriage thrive, and Plutarch advises his female readership against resorting to love charms and magic (φίλτρα τινὰ καὶ γοητείας) to seduce their partner:

οὐδὲ γὰρ τὴν Κίρκην ὤνησαν οἱ καταφαρμακευθέντες, οὐδ' ἐχρήσατο πρὸς οὐδὲν αὐτοῖς ὑσὶ καὶ ὄνοις γενομένοις, τὸν δ' Ὀδυσσεῖα νοῦν ἔχοντα καὶ συνόντα φρονίμως ὑπερηγάπησεν.

Circe had, in fact, no profit from the victims of her potions as she could not use them for anything when they became pigs or asses; it was Odysseus, the man of wisdom, who consorted wisely with her, whom she loved dearly.¹⁴

As in the previous cases, there is once again a precise reference to the Homeric myth of Circe with the addition of the ass alongside the swine as the possible ani-

¹³ Translation adapted from F.H. Sandbach, *Plutarch. Moralia. Vol. XV* (Cambridge, MA 1987) 373, and cf. also n. b, where he mentions the reference to the metamorphosis into donkey at Plut. *Mor.* 139a. The Platonic-Pythagorean idea that this physical theriomorphosis matches a spiritual kind of corruption is also stressed in Odysseus' speech to Gryllus at Plut. *Mor.* 986e.

¹⁴ Plut. *Mor.* 139a, edition by W.R. Paton, I. Wegehaupt, and H. Gärtner, *Plutarchi Moralia. Vol. I* (Leipzig 1974). Translation adapted from D. Russell, *Plutarch. Selected Essays and Dialogues* (Oxford/New York 1993) 285.

mal into which men could be turned. The other passage by Plutarch comes from a seriocomic dialogue dealing with popular philosophy and the conduct of life, the *Gryllus*. Here the character Circe argues that Odysseus' request to restore his companions and other people to their human form is simply unjust, since they prefer their new life as animals. Circe thereby says that Odysseus needs to persuade them to become humans again, and exhorts him to talk this over with one of them, a former man named Gryllus who is now transformed into a pig. Odysseus objects incredulously:

τί μου καταγελάς, ὦ μακαρία; πῶς γὰρ ἂν ἡ δοῖεν οὔτοι λόγον ἢ λάβοιεν, ἕως ὄνοι καὶ σῦες καὶ λέοντές εἰσι;

Dear lady, why are you making fun of me? How can they argue with me or I with them so long as they are asses, pigs, or lions?¹⁵

The references to the transformation into asses in these passages from Plutarch foreground not only the popularity, but also the relevance of this alternative version of the Homeric myth in different contexts, including a philosophical discourse, a seriocomic dialogue, and a treatise on marriage. Further evidence of this alternative Homeric tradition comes from the *Bibliotheca* attributed to the Hellenistic scholar Apollodorus of Athens, an organised collection of myths which was likely composed around AD 50–150.¹⁶ The passage describing the story of Odysseus' journey comes from the epitome of book 7, preserved in the *Epitoma Vaticana* (*Vaticanus Graecus* 950) and the Sabbaitic fragments (*Sabbaiticus Hierosolymitanus* 366), and runs as follows:

μίαν δὲ ἔχων ναῦν Αἰαίῃ νήσῳ προσίσχει. ταύτην κατῶκει Κίρκη, θυγάτηρ Ἥλιου καὶ Πέρσης, Αἰήτου δὲ ἀδελφή, πάντων ἔμπειρος οὔσα φαρμάκων. Διελὼν τοὺς ἐταίρους αὐτὸς μὲν κλήρω μένει παρὰ τῆ νηί, Εὐρύλοχος δὲ πορεύεται μεθ' ἐταίρων εἰκοσιδύο τὸν ἀριθμὸν πρὸς Κίρκην. καλούσης δὲ αὐτῆς χωρὶς Εὐρυλόχου πάντες εἰσίσσιν. ἡ δ' ἐκάστῳ κυκεῶνα πλήσασα τυροῦ καὶ μέλιτος καὶ ἀλφίτων καὶ οἴνου δίδωσι, μίξασα φαρμάκῳ. Πιόντων δὲ αὐτῶν, ἐφαπτομένη ράβδῳ τὰς μορφὰς ἡλλοίου, καὶ τοὺς μὲν ἐποίει λύκους, τοὺς δὲ σῦς, τοὺς δὲ ὄνους, τοὺς δὲ λέοντας.

With one ship he landed on the island of Aea, where Circe lived. She was the daughter of Helios and Perse and the sister of Aeaetes, and was an expert in all kinds of drugs. Odysseus divided his companions into two groups. After picking lots, he himself stayed by the ship, while Eurylochus went to Circe with companions,

¹⁵ Plut. *Mor.* 986b, edition by C. Hubert/H. Drexler, *Plutarchi Moralia. Vol. VI.1* (Leipzig ²1959). Translation adapted from Russell, *loc. cit.* (n. 14) 338.

¹⁶ This dating is tentatively proposed by S. Trzaskoma, "Mythography", in D.S. Richter/W.A. Johnson (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook to the Second Sophistic* (Oxford 2017) 463–475, at 464, while J.-C. Carrière/B. Massonnie, *La Bibliothèque d'Apollodore* (Paris 1991) 9–12, followed by A. Cameron, *Greek Mythography in the Roman World* (Oxford 2004) 94, consider the Augustan period as the *terminus post quem* and AD 200 as the *terminus ante quem*.

twenty-two in number. She invited them in, and they all went except for Eurylochus. She gave to each of them a drink filled with cheese, honey, barley-groats, and wine after mixing it with a drug. After they drank it, she touched them with a wand and changed their forms. Some she turned into wolves, some into pigs, some into donkeys, and some into lions.¹⁷

This passage is a summary of *Odyssey* 10.135–244 that closely reflects the narrative structure and the descriptive features of the Homeric account,¹⁸ except for the detail concerning the metamorphosis of Odysseus' companions into donkeys and other animals. The transformation of these men into wolves and lions likely derives from a reinterpretation of *Odyssey* 10.212–213, where the palace of Circe is said to be protected by wild wolves and lions that Circe enchanted and domesticated through her harmful drugs (ἀμφὶ δέ μιν λύκοι ἦσαν ὀρέστεροι ἢ δὲ λέοντες, / τοὺς αὐτὴ κατέθελξεν, ἐπεὶ κακὰ φάρμακ' ἔδωκεν). The author of the *Bibliotheca* probably considered Circe's enchantment as an act of transformation of other humans into beasts rather than as an act of taming and controlling wild animals.¹⁹ Far from being new, this interpretation circulated already in the sixth century BC as can be inferred from the iconography on black-figure vases,²⁰ and is reprised in the accounts by Apollonius of Rhodes, Ovid, and Vergil.²¹ Yet, we are left to wonder as to the origin of the tradition concerning the transformation into a donkey. As in the case of the figurative evidence, neither the original nor the intermediary sources of Pseudo-Apollodorus can be traced precisely: it is only possible to infer that he probably summarises information taken from earlier mytho-

¹⁷ [Apollod.] *Epit.* 7.14–15. I follow the text edited by R. Wagner, *Mythographi Graeci. Vol. I* (Leipzig 1926) 230–231. The translation is adapted from S. Trzaskoma in R. Scott Smith/S. Trzaskoma, *Apollodorus' Library and Hyginus' Fabulae. Two Handbooks of Greek Mythology* (Indianapolis/Cambridge 2007) 90.

¹⁸ Apart from eliminating the dramatic remarks of the first-person narrator, Pseudo-Apollodorus' summary closely follows the *Odyssey* even in the description of specific details: for example, the number of men accompanying Eurylochus is twenty-two in both accounts (cf. Hom. *Od.* 10.208), and the content of Circe's philtre in [Apollod.] 7.15 (ἢ δ' ἐκάστῳ κυκεῶνα πλήσασα τυροῦ καὶ μέλιτος καὶ ἀλφίτων καὶ οἴνου δίδωσι) mirrors that in Hom. *Od.* 10.234–235 (ἐν δὲ σφιν τυρόν τε καὶ ἄλφιτα καὶ μέλι χλωρόν / οἴνωι Πραμνείωι ἐκύκα).

¹⁹ Heubeck/Hoekstra, *loc. cit.* (n. 1) 55–56 observe that the latter is the original sense of the Homeric passages.

²⁰ Cf. e.g. *LIMC* 6.2, 24–25, no. 5 and 14.

²¹ Cf. Ap. Rhod. 4.673–675, who describes Circe's transformed victims as monstrous creatures made of composite limbs, both human and animal; Ov. *met.* 14.255–256; 14.412–415; Verg. *Aen.* 7.15–20. Here Vergil depicts the roaring of the lions at night using the verb *rudo* (*Aen.* 7.15–16: *hinc exaudiri gemitus iraeque leonum / uinclā recusantum et sera sub nocte rudentum*), creating an acoustic effect that could recall the donkey's bray since, as Servius notes, 'the term *ruditus*, however, indicates properly the braying of the donkeys' (Serv. *Aen.* 7.16: *ruditus autem proprie est clamor asinorum*). For the theme of the metamorphosis into lions and wolves and other beasts, cf. also Plut. *Mor.* 985d; 986a; *frg. inc.* 200, on which see Sandbach, *loc. cit.* (n. 13) 373, n. c.

graphic works, commented editions, *hypotheses*, and especially prose summaries of the Epic Cycle.²²

Equally significant evidence of this ‘pseudo’-Homeric tradition comes from Lucian’s *De saltatione*, a dialogue on dance. Lycinus, one of the interlocutors, convinces the sceptical Crato to appreciate the beauty and the charming effect of pantomimic dancing, and claims:

εἰ δὲ βουλευθείης κοινωνῆσαι μοι τῆς θέας, εὖ οἶδα ἐγὼ πάνυ ἀλωσόμενόν σε καὶ ὀρηστομανήσοντά γε προσέτι. ὥστε οὐδὲν δεήσομαι τὸ τῆς Κίρκης ἐκεῖνο πρὸς σὲ εἰπεῖν, τό

θαῦμά μ’ ἔχει ὡς οὔτι πιὼν τάδε φάρμακ’ ἐθέλχθης (Hom. *Od.* 10.326),
θελχθήσῃ γάρ, καὶ μὰ Δί’ οὐκ ὄνου κεφαλὴν ἢ συὸς καρδίαν ἔξεις, ἀλλ’ ὁ μὲν νόος σοι ἐμπεδώτερος ἔσται, σὺ δὲ ὑφ’ ἡδονῆς οὐδὲ ὀλίγον τοῦ κυκεῶνος ἄλλω μεταδώσεις πιεῖν.

If you should care to join me in looking on, I know very well that you will be wholly enthralled and will even catch the dancer-craze. So I shall not need to say to you what Circe said:

Wonder holds me to see that you drank this drug unenchanted, and, in fact, you shall be charmed, and by Zeus it will not be any donkey’s head or pig’s heart that you will have, but your mind will be more firmly established and you will be so enthralled that you will not give even a tiny bit of that brew to anyone else to drink.²³

As with the Stoic Chrysippus, Plutarch, and Pseudo-Apollodorus, Lucian refers openly to the *Odyssey*, and even gives a line from the Circe episode, but then he alters the content of the passage in *Od.* 10.239–240 by mentioning the transformation into the head of a donkey and the heart of a pig, in place of the Homeric reference to the heads of pigs (συῶν κεφαλᾶς).

It is necessary at this point to draw some preliminary conclusions about the alternative tradition of this myth which I have so far attempted to reconstruct. Circe’s powers to change people into asses, as well as other animals, is represented in the iconography of sixth-century pottery, and this myth continues to be attested in figurative art spanning several centuries: the Rondanini tablet, a replica of a Roman relief in marble from the Augustan period, also presents the scene with Circe, Odysseus, and among his theriomorphised companions there is a donkey-

²² For a discussion of the possible sources of Pseudo-Apollodorus, cf. M.L. West, *The Orphic Poems* (Oxford 1983) 125; Cameron, *loc. cit.* (n. 16) 93–104; U. Kenens, “The sources of Ps.-Apollodorus’s *Library*: a case-study”, *QUCC* 97 (2011) 129–146, at 143–146.

²³ Lucian *Salt.* 85, edition by M.D. MacLeod, *Luciani Opera. Tomus III* (Oxford 1980). Translation adapted from A.M. Harmon, *Lucian. Vol. V* (Cambridge, MA 1936) 289. While discussing Pseudo-Lucian’s *Onos*, T. Whitmarsh, *Beyond the Second Sophistic. Adventures in Greek Postclassicism* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 2013) 79, n. 11 mentions this passage and wonders about the reason for this reference to the donkey, as he does not detect the recurrence of this ‘pseudo’-Homeric tradition and its consequent influence on the ass-stories.

headed man.²⁴ Literary evidence in Greek ranging from the Hellenistic to the Imperial periods confirms the circulation of this alternative Homeric tradition, but in default of clear evidence it remains impossible to further speculate on its origin and its relationship with the versions of the Homeric poems circulating in antiquity. This brings about an obvious methodological issue when I describe this alternative version of Circe's myth as 'pseudo'-Homeric. This definition comes from a modern perspective, and is due to the fact that the surviving manuscripts transmitting the *Odyssey* and their ancestors²⁵ do not attest this alternative account of Circe's powers to transform people into asses, and neither do the Homeric scholia nor the Byzantine commentators.

Yet, the widespread circulation of this alternative myth alongside its literary and philosophical reception, especially on a Platonic-Pythagorean level, beg the following questions: what would have been the meaning of the donkey in the Circe episode, and what did this animal stand for in the collective imagination of the ancients? It is known that asses were used as beasts of burden, carrying imposing weights for their size, and this contributed to the development of a negative and debasing understanding of these animals.²⁶ The physical features of the donkey probably led to the commonplace idea that they were lazy, greedy, and lustful, an opinion already expressed in the seventh century BC by the iambographer Semonides, who satirically compares a low type of wife to the donkey.²⁷ This early evidence suggests that donkeys could, therefore, have been easily paired with swine, to which similar sordid features were ascribed,²⁸ and this would have contributed to the creation of an alternative version of this Homeric myth. Later the Aesopic tales, Plato himself, comedy playwrights, and then Plutarch keep underscoring similar debasing ideas about the donkey's nature, particularly its proverbial stupidity, indicating how this animal was seen as the level zero in the natural hierarchy

²⁴ LIMC 6.2, 29, no. 50 (the second of the *hetairoi* from the right). Cf. the discussion in Brilliant, *loc. cit.* (n. 10) 172.

²⁵ On the transmission of the *Odyssey*, cf. the overview in A. Heubeck/S. West/J.B. Hainsworth, *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey. Vol. I. Introduction and Books I–VIII* (Oxford 1988) 33–48; M. Finkelberg, "Regional Texts and the Circulation of Books: the Case of Homer", *GRBStud* 46 (2006) 231–248, at 231–236.

²⁶ On the donkey in the Greco-Roman world, see recently K.F. Kitchell, *Animals in the Ancient World from A to Z* (London/New York 2014) 57–59.

²⁷ Cf. Semon. 7.43–49: τὴν δ' ἔκ τε σποδιῆς καὶ παλιντριβέος ὄνου, / ἢ σὺν τ' ἀνάγκῃ σὺν τ' ἐνπιῆσιν μόγις / ἔστερξεν ὧν ἅπαντα κάπονῆσατο / ἀρεστά· τόφρα δ' ἐσθίει μὲν ἐν μυχωῖ / προνύξ προῆμαρ, ἐσθίει δ' ἐπ' ἐσχάρῃ. / ὁμῶς δὲ καὶ πρὸς ἔργον ἀφροδίσιον / ἐλθόντ' ἑταῖρον ὄντινῶν ἐδέξατο (another type of woman is fashioned from an ash-coloured (?) donkey, which is the object of repeated blows. When forced and berated she consents with difficulty to everything and does acceptable work. But meanwhile all day and all night she eats in an inner room and eats at the hearth. And, likewise, as for lovemaking she accepts any companion who comes along). The Greek text follows M.L. West, *Iambi et elegi Graeci ante Alexandrum cantati. Vol. II* (Oxford 1992) 103. Translation adapted from D.E. Gerber, *Greek Iambic Poetry. From the Seventh to the Fifth Centuries BC* (Cambridge, MA 1999) 309.

²⁸ Cf. Kitchell, *loc. cit.* (n. 26) 150–153.

of animals.²⁹ For this reason in the parodic Netherworld depicted in Lucian's *Menippus*, 20, the souls of rich and powerful people, who mistreated the poor in life, are sentenced to suffer a humiliating reincarnation into donkeys (τὰς δὲ ψυχὰς ἀναπεμφθείσας ἄνω εἰς τὸν βίον καταδύεσθαι εἰς τοὺς ὄνους). This is also the reason why the transformation into a donkey, eminently represented in this 'pseudo'-Homeric myth, becomes the central event that sets into motion the plot of the ass-narratives, where a young and well-born protagonist finds himself accidentally imprisoned in the physical shape of the humblest of all animals.

3 'Pseudo'-Homeric Circe and the ass-narratives

The primary feature of the ass-narratives is the magical transformation of the protagonist Lucius into a donkey. According to the *Onos*, to Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, and consequently their common Greek source – perhaps Lucius of Patrae's *Metamorphoseis* – the protagonist gets accidentally transformed into an ass in a vain attempt to imitate a powerful metamorphic enchantress, be this the unnamed wife of Hipparchus in the *Onos* or the fearsome Pamphile in Apuleius, and the existence of a myth in which Circe turns people into donkeys would have been an inevitable point of reference for the common source to which Apuleius and Pseudo-Lucian looked back.

Before analysing the passages from the ass-stories that could substantiate this idea, it is necessary to offer an overview of the ass-stories themselves and their structural affinities. According to the much-debated information in the *Bibliotheca* (codex 129) of the Byzantine patriarch Photius,³⁰ Lucius of Patrae was the likely author of a lost story entitled *Metamorphoseis* that was imitated and abridged in the *Onos*, which both Photius and the manuscripts transmitting this work ascribe to Lucian of Samosata.³¹ No other information about Lucius of Patrae or fragments of his production have survived. Mason tentatively proposes that Lucius of Patrae's *floruit* falls after the settlement of a Roman colony at Patrae in 14 BC and

²⁹ Cf. Pl. *Phd.* 81e; Aesop. 179; 180; 182; 184–186 ed. B.E. Perry, *Aesopica* (Urbana, IL. 1952); Plu. *De Is. et Os.* 363c; 371c. On the sayings concerning the asses in Greek comedy see F.P. Bianchi, *Cratino: Archilochoi – Empipramenoi (fr. 1–68). Introduzione, traduzione, commento* (Heidelberg 2016) 333–334.

³⁰ The most thorough and useful study on the question to date is still H.J. Mason, "Greek and Latin Versions of the Ass-Story", *ANRW* II,34,2 (Berlin/New York 1994) 1665–1707. See also the bibliographical updates in A. Stramaglia, *Eros. Antiche trame greche d'amore* (Bari 2000) 50–51.

³¹ Against the Lucianic paternity of this work see especially H.-G. Nesselrath, "Language and (in-) Authenticity: The Case of the (Ps.-)Lucianic *Onos*", in J. Martínez (ed.), *Fakes and Forgers of Classical Literature. Ergo decipiatur!* (Leiden/Boston 2014) 195–205, who offers a comprehensive discussion of earlier scholarship. However, Whitmarsh, *loc. cit.* (n. 23) 84–85 cautiously suggests that the un-Lucianic style of this work *per se* should not be seen as evidence against Lucian's authorship.

before the publication of Apuleius' novel (ca. AD 170).³² Although Photius does not mention the Latin *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius, its close narrative proximity with the *Onos* and Apuleius' reference to the fact that his story is of Greek origin (*Met.* 1.1.6: *fabulam Graecanicam incipimus*) points to the fact that both Apuleius and Pseudo-Lucian might have drawn upon and refashioned a pre-existent story, possibly Lucius of Patrae' *Metamorphoseis*.³³ This may also be the case for a fragment of an ass-story written in the third century AD (P.Oxy. LXX 4762), which depicts the intercourse between the donkey and a lustful lady, a spicy episode that mirrors that in *Onos* 51–52 and *met.* 10.19.3–22. However interesting, this papyrus fragment offers no direct evidence to evaluate the influence of the alternative myth of Circe on the ass-stories; this seems, rather, a detached mime adaptation of a notoriously dirty scene from the ass-narratives.³⁴

The importance of the 'pseudo'-Homeric myth is observable from the longer surviving ass-stories, namely the *Onos* and Apuleius' novel. In the *Onos* Abroea, who introduces herself as a close friend of the protagonist's mother, tries to persuade Lucius to stay in her house while he is visiting the Thessalian city of Hypata. When Abroea learns that Lucius is lodging in Hipparchus' house, she warns him against his host's wife:

μάγος γάρ ἐστι δεινὴ καὶ μάχλος καὶ πᾶσι τοῖς νέοις ἐπιβάλλει τὸν ὀφθαλμόν· καὶ εἰ μὴ τις ὑπακούσει αὐτῇ, τοῦτον τῇ τέχνῃ ἀμύνεται, καὶ πολλοὺς μετεμόρφωσεν εἰς ζῶα, τοὺς δὲ τέλεον ἀπώλεσεν.

32 Mason, *loc. cit.* (n. 30) 1681. On the idea that Apuleius' novel was likely written around the AD 170s, see S.J. Harrison, *Apuleius. A Latin Sophist* (Oxford 2000) 9–10; L. Graverini, *Literature and Identity in The Golden Ass of Apuleius. Translated by B.T. Lee* (Columbus 2012) 180–193; S. Tilg, *Apuleius' Metamorphoses. A Study in Roman Fiction* (Oxford 2014) 14–15.

33 See H.J. Mason, "The *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius and its Greek sources", in H. Hofmann (ed.), *Latin Fiction. The Latin Novel in Context* (London/New York 1999) 87–95; W. Keulen, *Apuleius Madaurensis. Metamorphoses. Book I. Text, Introduction and Commentary* (Groningen 2007) 7–8; 19–20; 90.

34 The papyrus has been the subject of an intense scholarly debate. E. Puglia, "Considerazioni sul papiro della donna e dell'asino (POxy LXX 4762)", *Papyrologica Lupiensia* 22 (2013) 85–104, dates the text itself to the third century and expands upon the idea proposed by M.L. West, "The Way of a Maid with a Moke: P. Oxy. 4762", *ZPE* 175 (2010) 33–40 that this would be the script for a mime performance. Lacking clearer evidence, I find attractive the hypotheses of A. Stramaglia, "Le *Metamorfosi* di Apuleio tra iconografia e papyri", in G. Bastianini/A. Casanova (eds.), *I papiri del romanzo antico* (Florence 2010) 165–192, and G. Zanetto, "P.Oxy. LXX 4762 e il Romanzo dell'asino", in G. Bastianini/A. Casanova (eds.), *I papiri del romanzo antico* (Florence 2010) 51–63: the former suggests that the fragment might come from a short anthology of dirty tales for private use; the latter argues that it could have been part of a work of *Trivalliteratur* comparable to the *Vita Aesopi*. R. May, "An Ass from Oxyrhynchus: P.Oxy. LXX.4762, Loukios of Patrae and the Milesian Tales", *Ancient Narrative* 8 (2010) 59–83 stresses the mimic features of the fragment, but the idea that it might derive from Aristides' lost *Milesian Tales* seems less probable, as Puglia observes.

She is, in fact, an experienced and lustful witch and fixes her gaze on every young man: and if someone does not submit to her, she takes revenge on him with her craft: she transformed many into beasts, while she destroyed others utterly.³⁵

While the common trope of the Thessalian ‘witches’ is certainly influential,³⁶ the whole idea of the metamorphic powers of the witch comes evidently from the Homeric figure of Circe, who – alongside Medea – was the γυνή μάγος *par excellence* in the Imperial period. Given the relevance of the ‘pseudo’-Homeric tradition of Circe turning men into donkeys and its literary resonance especially during the first two centuries AD, readers of the *Onos* or its model could not fail to see Lucius’ accidental transformation into a donkey (*Onos* 13), caused by his uncontrolled desire to witness some supernatural wonder (*Onos* 4.1: θεάσασθαι τι παράδοξον), as a refashioning of this alternative Homeric tradition.³⁷

In Apuleius’ lengthier and more complex treatment of the ass-story, these fearsome skills are not only ascribed to the Latin counterpart of Hipparchus’ wife, Pamphile,³⁸ but also to the Thessalian witch and innkeeper Meroe in Aristomenes’ story (*Apul. met.* 1.5–19). On his way to Hypata, Lucius converses with other fellow travellers and one of them, by the name of Aristomenes, retells the strange story of a friend called Socrates, who was seduced, trapped, and eventually slain by this witch. Aristomenes reproduces Socrates’ speech, who narrates Meroe’s terrible actions against lovers and rivals alike:

Amatorem suum, quod in aliam temerasset, unico uerbo mutauit in feram castorem,

³⁵ [Lucian] *Asin.* 4.6–7. I follow the edition and paragraph subdivision by H. van Thiel, *Der Eselsroman. II. Synoptische Ausgabe* (München 1972); my translation.

³⁶ On this see O. Phillips, “The Witches’ Thessaly”, in P. Mirecki/M. Meyer (eds.), *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World* (Leiden/Boston/Köln) 378–386, and L. Costantini, “The Entertaining Function of Magic and Mystical Silence in Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*”, in E. Cueva/G. Schmeling/P. James/K. ní Mheallaigh/S. Panayotakis/N. Scippacercola (eds.), *Re-Wiring the Ancient Novel. Volume 2: Roman Novels and Other Important Texts* (Groningen 2018) 117–133, at 118–120. For methodological remarks on the term ‘witch’ to describe female practitioners of magic in the Greco-Roman world, see M.T. Paule, “*Quae saga, quis magus*: On the vocabulary of the Roman witch”, *CIQu* 64 (2014) 745–757, at 754, n. 1.

³⁷ Loukios is specifically interested in understanding whether he would retain his human psyche once turned into a bird (*Onos* 13.2: ἡβουλόμην γὰρ πείρα μαθεῖν εἰ μεταμορφωθεὶς ἐκ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν ὄρνις ἔσομαι). For the empirical tone of this passage, see Whitmarsh, *loc. cit.* (n. 23) 78–79.

³⁸ See especially *Apul. met.* 2.5.7: *tunc minus morigeros et uilis fastidio in saxa et in pecua et quoduis animal puncto reformat, alios uera prorsus extinguit* (then, those men who are less submissive or worthless due to their contempt for her, she turns them on the spot into stone or sheep or any animal you can think of, while others she destroys completely). The text of the *Metamorphosis* follows M. Zimmerman, *Apulei Metamorphoseon libri XI* (Oxford 2012), my translation. On the similarity with the passage in *Asin.* 4.6–7, see D. Van Mal-Maeder, *Apuleius Madaurensis. Metamorphoses. Livre II: Texte, Introduction et Commentaire* (Groningen 2001) 126–127.

quod ea bestia captiuitati metuens ab insequentibus se praecisione genitalium liberat, ut illi quoque simile [quod uenerem habuit in aliam] proueniret. Cauponem quoque uicinum atque ob id aemulum deformauit in ranam, et nunc senex ille dolio innatans uini sui aduentores pristinos in faece submissus officiosis roncis raucus appellat. Alium de foro, quod aduersus eam locutus esset, in arietem deformauit, et nunc aries ille causas agit.

With a single word she transformed into a beaver a lover of hers, who had committed a violation with another woman, since when this animal fears to be captured escapes the hunters by cutting off its genitals, and she wanted something similar to befall him. She also turned an innkeeper into a frog because he was her neighbour and competitor, and now that old man calls to his former customers croaking obsequiously while he swims in his own wine barrel, deep down in the wine-lees. She changed another one, an advocate who pleaded against her, into a ram, and now that ram conducts cases in court.³⁹

The effects of the witch's metamorphic powers are fleshed out with details taken from proverbs and metaphorical expressions,⁴⁰ but the dynamics are the same as in Pseudo-Lucian. And, as with the *Onos*, Lucius in the *Metamorphoses* is led astray by his *curiositas* about magic,⁴¹ until his dabbling into this forbidden craft causes his inadvertent acquisition of an asinine body instead of that of a bird (*met.* 3.24).⁴² The presence of references to the *Odyssey* in Apuleius' novel has long been acknowledged,⁴³ and in this case it seems likely that his main thrust was to impress his readership by expanding upon the Greek ass-narrative and offering a new list of animals which did not feature either in the Homeric or in the 'pseudo'-Homeric episode of Circe. Yet, this alternative version of Circe's myth was particularly suitable to the Platonic veneer of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*. Some scholars see in Lucius-ass and his final anamorphosis due to the goddess Isis' benevolent intervention a reference to the defeat of her enemy, the Egyptian donkey-shaped

³⁹ Apul. *met.* 1.9.1–5.

⁴⁰ Further remarks on this passage in Keulen, *loc. cit.* (n. 33) 212–218.

⁴¹ On the meaning and function of curiosity in Apuleius' novel, see lately M. Leigh, *From Polypragmon to Curiosus. Ancient Concepts of Curious and Meddlesome Behaviour* (Oxford 2013) 136–150.

⁴² On this passage see L. Costantini, *Apuleius Madaurensis. Metamorphoses. Book III. Text, Introduction and Commentary* (Leiden 2021, forthcoming).

⁴³ Cf. S.J. Harrison, "Some Odyssean Scenes in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*", *Materiali e discussioni per l'analisi dei testi classici* 25 (1990) 193–201; S.A. Frangoulidis, "Charite's Literary Models: Vergil's Dido and Homer's Odysseus", in C. Deroux (ed.), *Studies in Latin literature and Roman history, VI* (Brussels 1992) 445–450; "Homeric allusions to the Cyclopeia in Apuleius' description of the robbers' cave", *La Parola del passato* 47 (1992) 50–58; "Epic inversion in Apuleius' tale of Tlepolemus/Haemus", *Mnemosyne* 45 (1992) 60–74; S. Montiglio, "You Can't Go Home Again: Lucius' Journey in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* set against the background of the *Odyssey*", *Materiali e discussioni per l'analisi dei testi classici* 58 (2007) 93–113; Graverini, *loc. cit.* (n. 32) 141–154; "Circe a Roma", *Studi italiani di Filologia classica* (forthcoming).

deity Seth-Typhon,⁴⁴ while others frame Lucius' metamorphosis within Apuleius' Platonic knowledge, stressing the affinities with Plato, *Phaedo* 81e (οἷον τοὺς μὲν γαστριμαργίας τε καὶ ὕβρεις καὶ φιλοποσίας μεμελετηκότας καὶ μὴ διηυλαβημένους εἰς τὰ τῶν ὄνων γένη καὶ τῶν τοιούτων θηρίων εἰκὸς ἐνδύεσθαι, 'for example, those who have indulged in gluttony, immoral behaviour, and love of drinking and have not been on their guard against them are likely to take the form of the family of asses and similar beasts'),⁴⁵ a dialogue which Apuleius even translated into Latin.⁴⁶ This ties in perfectly with the Platonic interpretation of the alternative Circe story itself, as shown in Plutarch (*fr. inc.* 200 ed. Sandbach, discussed earlier), an author well known to Apuleius.⁴⁷ These two interpretations of Lucius' transformation into a donkey in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* are, of course, not mutually exclusive. Nonetheless, especially the philosophical ideas concerning the donkey lent themselves so well to Apuleius' refashioning of the ass-story because of the circulation and bearing of this 'pseudo'-Homeric tradition, which was also an influential model for the Greek ass-narrative upon which Apuleius and Pseudo-Lucian drew.

4 Conclusion

To sum up, by examining iconographic and literary sources it has been possible to reconstruct an alternative version of the Homeric myth of Circe transforming Odysseus' companions into asses, already attested in the sixth century BC, and to cast new light on its long-lasting influence on different genres, including philosophical works, mythographic collections, seriocomic dialogues, and – most of all – the ass-stories. Although scholars offer two different interpretative lines to explain the meaning of Lucius' transformation into an ass in Apuleius' novel, namely a

44 This Egyptian myth was well known in the Greco-Roman world and was a topic of philosophical debate, cf. e.g. Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 363a. On the Typhonian reading of Lucius-ass, see particularly J.G. Griffiths, *Apuleius of Madauros. The Isis Book (Metamorphoses, Book XI)* (Leiden 1975) 5; 25–31; 162; J.J. Winkler, *Auctor & Actor. A Narratological Reading of Apuleius's Golden Ass* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 1985) 277–279; W. Keulen/S. Tilg/L. Nicolini/L. Graverini/S.J. Harrison/S. Panayotakis/D. Van Mal-Maeder, *Apuleius Madaurensis. Metamorphoses. Book XI: the Isis Book. Text, Introduction and Commentary* (Leiden 2015) 20; 34–36; 539–540.

45 Translation adapted from C. Emlyn-Jones/W. Preddy, *Plato. Eutyphro. Apology. Crito. Phaedo* (Cambridge, MA 2017) 391. See the discussion in Tilg, *loc. cit.* (n. 32) 69–71; Keulen *et al.*, *loc. cit.* (n. 44) 537. For a further discussion of this passage from the *Phaedrus* and its influence on [Lucian] *Asin.* 13, see the thought-provoking remarks in R. Hunter, *Plato and the Traditions of Ancient Literature* (Cambridge 2012) 236–238.

46 *Apul. frg.* 9–10, on which cf. Harrison, *loc. cit.* (n. 32) 23; R. Fletcher, *Apuleius' Platonism. The Impersonation of Philosophy* (Cambridge 2014) 27–30.

47 On Apuleius and Plutarch, see P.G. Walsh, "Apuleius and Plutarch", in H.J. Blumenthal/R.A. Markus (eds.), *Neoplatonism and Early Christian Thought* (London 1981) 20–32; V. Hunk, "Plutarch and Apuleius", in L. De Blois/P. Erdkamp/O. Hekster/G. de Kleijn/S. Mols (eds.), *The Representation and Perception of Roman Imperial Power* (Leiden 2003) 251–260; Tilg, *loc. cit.* (n. 32) 59.

Typhonian and a Platonic reading, by acknowledging the relevance of this 'pseudo'-Homeric version of the myth we can appreciate fully Apuleius' own re-elaboration of this tradition, in connection with earlier Platonic takes on this myth, as well as its overarching importance for the ass-narratives as a whole.

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