

# ‘Seeing the Truth’: Some Remarks on Color(s) and Meaning in Apuleius’ *Golden Ass*

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As far as I know, Apuleius’ use of color terms in the *Golden Ass* has not yet been dealt with comprehensively, although many remarks on it can be found scattered throughout studies concerning color in Latin literature, language and culture,<sup>1</sup> and throughout major commentaries and studies on Apuleius himself. In this paper I argue that investigation of this topic might enrich the global interpretation of the novel.<sup>2</sup>

## *I. Color and meaning*

The issue of color is a very fascinating and puzzling one, as color(s) and its meaning(s) in general are anything but static and monolithic.<sup>3</sup> This is obviously true for Latin color terminology,<sup>4</sup> which in addition often was—and sometimes still is—‘schiacciata fra lo sforzo di farla combaciare con la terminologia greca, da un lato, e la ricerca di corrispondenze precise con le lingue moderne dall’altro’ –

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. André 1949 and Baran 1983.

<sup>2</sup> I quote the Latin text of the *Metamorphoses* from Zimmerman 2012, the English translation from Hanson 1989. I leave aside Apuleius’ other works, which themselves would deserve closer analysis in this respect: see e.g. the abundance of color terms in the description of parrot in *Flor.* 12,1–2. The English translations of Greek and Latin texts are those found in the Loeb Classical Library, unless otherwise stated; those of modern texts are mine.

<sup>3</sup> As a matter of fact, any attempt to define color(s) results from an arbitrary and culturally determined selection within a *continuum* originating from three varying elements: hue (to which the Greeks and Romans were admittedly less sensitive than we are), saturation, and brightness; hence, it is not by chance that color(s) seem to play a crucial role as an argument for cultural relativism (see Sassi 2003, 10).

<sup>4</sup> Besides the works mentioned in footnote 1, see Romano 2003 and the overall survey by Bradley 2009, 1–30.

‘somewhat squeezed between the effort to have single Latin terms correspond with Greek ones on the one hand, and the search for univocal translations in the modern languages on the other’.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, I am well aware that Apuleius’ testimony is definitely literary: in his novel we should not expect to meet with a consistent and exact—i.e. denotative, and somewhat technical—usage of color terms. Rather, we will be confronted with what I dare call a ‘poetic’ use of them. By ‘poetic use’ (ποιητικός) I mean a use ‘which creates meaning’, and suggests an interpretation of the text.<sup>6</sup> Under this respect, a point which is crucial for my purpose has been made by Bradley: in his study, focusing on the Roman discourse on color(s), he stresses the ‘flexibility and negotiability’ of Latin color terms,<sup>7</sup> and most importantly upholds a not merely aesthetical appreciation of them, even within literary texts. He suggests that Roman color should be viewed within the Greek and Roman philosophical debate on epistemology, and reasserted as an ‘essential unit by which the object of vision is perceived and understood’.<sup>8</sup> Color

both in ancient perception and in general literary use [the one I am dealing with], was a highly versatile unit of information. It was the primary visual index for describing an object, a person, a building or a landscape, as well as an evaluative category of ‘character’ in the broadest sense. Color is a basic cultural building block by which we can gauge how educated Romans saw the world around them. An appreciation of this principle can enrich our understanding of ekphrasis and other forms of literary description and evaluation [...] *color*, and all the categories that made it up, contributed to a Roman moral discourse crucially concerned with the ability to distinguish the true from the fake.<sup>9</sup>

Bradley re-establishes color as a crucial informative unit about seen objects, one we derive from perception, and remarks that the main concern in the Roman philosophical, rhetorical, and literary debate on color is whether vision provides us with right/true or wrong/false information about the objects we see: in sum, does what we see correspond to reality?

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<sup>5</sup> See Romano 2003, 44–45. For this reason I definitely leave aside the issues of the denotative value(s) of color terms and of their translation.

<sup>6</sup> On this ‘poetic’ use of color terms, see also Moretti 2016 (dealing with Ambrose of Milan’s *Exameron*).

<sup>7</sup> A feature the Romans themselves were aware of, as is famously shown by a difficult passage of Gellius’ *Noctes Atticae* (2,26), discussed i.a. by Bradley 2009, 229–233.

<sup>8</sup> Bradley 2009, 220–222.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 227–228.

As far as Apuleius is concerned, it can be no surprise that knowledge through vision—grasping the truth from visual symptoms, i.e. ‘seeing the truth’—plays a crucial role in a novel whose *auctor* from the very beginning claims he will present his readers with an admittedly changing, unstable, and therefore most of the time deceptive reality: *figuras fortunasque hominum in alias imagines conversas et in se rursus mutuo nexu refectas*, 1,1,2 – ‘men’s forms and fortunes transformed into other shapes and then restored again in an interwoven knot’.<sup>10</sup> Under this respect, also Apuleius’ relationship to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* should be mentioned as deserving further investigation: as a matter of fact, besides the richness of Ovid’s palette,<sup>11</sup> even in his changing and unstable reality color in some cases plays an important informative—sometimes deceptive—role.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, the concern with how to make reliable inferences from things’ surface to things’ depths,<sup>13</sup> a theme which is ultimately rooted in the Platonic tradition, is a distinctive feature also of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century sophistic culture to which Apuleius belongs.<sup>14</sup> In this respect, Lucius’ portrait spoken by his aunt Byrrhaena in *Met.* 2,2<sup>15</sup> might be viewed as a paradigm of Apuleius’—and Lucius-*auctor*’s—view of reality, and hence of his attitude towards readers. Physiognomic doctrine<sup>16</sup> imbuing

<sup>10</sup> On *Met.* 1,1,2, cf. Harrison and Winterbottom 2005, 11–12. See also Lucius-*auctor*’s remarks on the things he gazes upon, when he wakes up in the Thessalian town of Hypata (2,1,3): *Nec fuit in illa civitate quod aspiciens id esse crederem quod esset, sed omnia prorsus ferali murmure in aliam effigiem translata...* – ‘Nothing I looked at in that city seemed to me to be what it was; but I believed that absolutely everything had been transformed into another shape by some deadly mumbo-jumbo...’.

<sup>11</sup> On color terms in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, see at least Barolsky 2003.

<sup>12</sup> See for instance the pivotal role color plays in the story of Pyramus and Thisbe (cf. also Rhorer 1980), which is itself presented as an etiology explaining the color metamorphosis of mulberries (*Met.* 4,51–52, and 4,55–166). The tragic conclusion of the story is hinted at by color signs, such as Thisbe *ora...buxo / pallidiora gerens* – ‘paler than boxwood’, after recognizing her lover (*Met.* 4,134–135); see Barchiesi and Rosati 2007, ad loc., on boxwood as a plant abhorred by Venus, whose mention would foreshadow the unhappy end of the love story. Most importantly, at *Met.* 4,107 the color of Thisbe’s ‘cloak..., smeared with blood’ (*vestem...sanguine tinctam*), causes Pyramus to falsely believe that Thisbe is dead; moreover, at *Met.* 4,132 the color of the mulberry-fruits—which have already turned into blood red (*Met.* 4,125–127; see Barchiesi and Rosati 2007, ad loc., on this earlier and somewhat provisional color metamorphosis, foreshadowing the later and definitive one which will take place after Thisbe’s prayer, at *Met.* 4,165)—causes Thisbe to hesitate whether she is in front of the right tree, before she sees Pyramus: *Sic facit incertam pomi color; haeret an haec sit [scil. arbor]* – ‘still the color of its [scil. of the mulberry-tree] fruit mystifies her’.

<sup>13</sup> I paraphrase Gleason 1995, 55.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Harrison 2000.

<sup>15</sup> I shall return to this passage further below.

<sup>16</sup> See Barton 1994, esp. 95–132; Gleason 1995, 21–54, 55–81.

Lucius' description is 'part of the general outlook and interest in Apuleius' times'.<sup>17</sup> This description is full of signs that must be deciphered: owing to its ultimate ambiguity, the *lector doctus*, who should also be aware of the philosophical background of Apuleius' text (Plato, Plutarch, Apuleius' Platonic writings), 'is invited to subject Lucius to a scrutiny *ad amussim* that goes beyond physical appearance, and to reveal his internal substance or expose the lack of it';<sup>18</sup> there is

a dichotomy between external appearance and internal substance in Lucius' characterisation, which foreshadows the 'lesson' taught to Lucius in the final book, where he learns that 'extraneous features' like noble birth turn out to be of little moral worth [cf. *Met.* 11,15]. Moreover, in the eyes of the re-reader, this dichotomy and the 'curse' implied by Lucius' beauty anticipate a different dichotomy between external appearance and internal essence, ensuing from Lucius' impending metamorphosis into a 'cursed animal', the ass [cf. *Met.* 11,6].<sup>19</sup>

Actually, if on the one hand this dichotomy reaches its climax in Lucius-*actor* (animal appearance vs. human substance), on the other hand it might be said to underlie reality as a whole, at least as it is portrayed in the novel. In Keulen's words, Lucius' physiognomy turns out to be 'a site of multiple readings and of detecting both the limitations and the depths of individual perceptions':<sup>20</sup> in my view, the same is true both for reality as a whole and for color(s), which should be definitely viewed as part of this dialectic of visual perception.

## II. Apuleius' palette

Here follows an overall survey of color terms in Apuleius' novel, based on André's seminal work, which is still 'the only detailed sourcebook for Latin colour usage'.<sup>21</sup> In the first section of André's work ('Étude sémantique') color terms are arranged into nine categories, roughly corresponding to different hues. In the following table, the left column lists André's categories; the central column spells out lexical items taken into consideration—adjectives, verbs, nouns—following

<sup>17</sup> Keulen 2006, 173.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Bradley 2009, 13.

André’s order; the right column encompasses the total number of items pertaining to each category.

<b>Yellow</b>	<i>flavus, flavens; fulgeo/-ere, fulgens, fulguro/-are; luridus, luror; pallor; exsanguis; luteus; crocus, croceus; buxans, buxeus; aureus, aurum</i>	<b>105</b> [aurum/aureus: 62]
<b>Red</b>	<i>rubens, rubor; russeus; punico/-are; purpura, purpuro/-are, purpureus, murex; flammeus, flammidus; mineus; roseus, rosarius, rosae; cruentus; sanguis, sanguino/-are</i>	<b>89</b> [rosa/rosarius/roseus: 60]
<b>White</b>	<i>peralbus, inalbeo/-ere, inalbo/-are, albus; candens, candeo/-ere, candidus, candor; niveus; lacteus; eburnus; argenteus, argentum</i>	<b>58</b> [argentum/argenteus: 15]
<b>Grey</b>	<i>canities, semicanus; cinis, cinerosus</i>	<b>20</b>
<b>Blue</b>	<i>caerulus; lividus; caesius</i>	<b>7</b>
<b>Green</b>	<i>virens, viridis; vitreus, vitrum</i>	<b>6</b>
<b>Black</b>	<i>ater, atratus; niger, nigredo</i>	<b>4</b>
<b>Brown</b>	<i>fuscus, suffusculus</i>	<b>4</b>
<b>Violet</b>		<b>0</b>

I have tried to classify words according to the meaning they have within the Apuleian context: e.g. I have taken into account words such as *vitrum*, when they seemingly bear a coloristic connotation, although they are not color terms properly;<sup>22</sup> I have ruled out some terms analyzed by André (like *herbidus* and *oleagineus*) when they do not bear a color connotation. I have omitted words indicating light and darkness *per se*.<sup>23</sup> The task of providing an exact list is quite difficult, mostly due to the blurred—and even arbitrary—boundary between what is and what is not color. E.g. due to the lack of hue connotation, I have excluded the disquieting *vitalis color* that foreshadows Socrates’ death at 1,19,2 (*Sic denique eum vitalis color turbaverat...*), where *vitalis* is most likely to be

<sup>22</sup> See for instance 1,19,8 (*et haud ita longe radices platani lenis fluvius in speciem placidae paludis ignavus ibat argento vel vitro aemulus in colorem* – ‘Not far from the plane-tree’s roots a gentle stream lazily flowed along in the likeness of a quiet pool, rivalling the colour of silver or glass’), where *argentum* and *vitrum* suggest ‘clarity and translucency’ (GCA 2001, 351).

<sup>23</sup> Such as *nox, tenebrae, caligo, lumen*, and so on, which are taken into consideration by André because they might be crucial in order to characterize a writer’s use of color terms (see e.g. Moretti 2016, 164–165, on Ambrose of Milan).

interpreted as a ‘euphemistic antiphrasis’, in light of its narrative context;<sup>24</sup> and the *maturus color* that autumn breathes on apples and grapes in the overwhelmingly baroque description of Byrrhena’s *atrium* at 2,4,7–8.<sup>25</sup>

Sub extrema saxi margine poma et uvae faberrime politae dependent, quas ars aemula naturae veritati similes explicuit. Putes ad cibum inde quaedam, cum mustulentus autumnus maturum colorem adflaverit, posse decerpi.

‘Up under the very edge of the rock hung apples and the most skilfully polished grapes, which art, rivalling nature, displayed to resemble reality. You would think that some of them could be plucked for eating, when wine-gathering Autumn breathes ripe color upon them’.

Anyway, despite its lack of exactness,<sup>26</sup> the above-mentioned list bears witness to the *varietas* of Apuleius’ palette, and shows the prominence of colors belonging to the semantic fields of ‘yellow’, ‘red’, and ‘white’. These semantic fields seemingly point to objects which turn out to be crucial in the narrative: first, roses (*rosa*, *rosarium*, sometimes *roseus*), that are the main target of Lucius’ most of the time deluded *queste*, and second, perhaps less obviously, gold (*aurum*, *aureus*)<sup>27</sup>. Moreover, the white color of Lucius’ horse, presumably meant as a sign of its owner’s prestige because white was the most appreciated color in matter of

<sup>24</sup> Petronius attests the same meaning (*GCA* 2001, 343; May 2013, 184): *vitali lecto* ‘bier’ (42,6), and *vitalia* ‘grave-clothes’ (77,7). The description of the *locus* (deceivingly) *amoenus* follows that of Socrates’ near-to-death complexion (1,19,1): *Quo facto et ipse aliquid indidem sumo eumque avidè essitantem aspiciens aliquanto intentiore macie atque pallore buxè deficientem video* – ‘After that I took something from the sack for myself too, and observed him greedily devouring his food. I saw him weakening with a rather more drawn emaciation and a pallor like boxwood’. The *iunctura* has been understood variously by modern translators: ‘his lively colour faded away’ (Adlington); ‘le teinte si mortellement altéré’ (Vallette); ‘his deadly complexion had so distorted him’ (Hanson); ‘il suo colorito era così alterato’ (Nicolini); ‘so much had his lifeless colour changed his appearance (May). André’s remark (1949, 217: ‘la teinte rose, marque de la vie et de la bonne santé’) seemingly misunderstands the text.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *GCA* 2001, 105–108.

<sup>26</sup> E.g. I follow André in listing *fulgens* and *purpureus* as related to a single hue, although these words often refer to mere brightness.

<sup>27</sup> See e.g. the golden ornaments mentioned twice (*Met.* 6,28,6; 10,18,4) as setting Lucius’ ass apart from his fellow beasts, and possibly foreshadowing his final *reformatio* to man: cf. Vielberg 2006, 117. The adjective *aureus* (= Greek πυρρός), which features in the novel’s title as attested by Augustine (*Asinus aureus*: Aug. *CD* 18,18), is interpreted as related to Typhon’s ass and hence to Isis’ cult by Martin 1970; see also Gianotti 2014, 52–57.

horses,<sup>28</sup> is also mentioned repeatedly in the novel (1,2,2; 7,2,1), and might point to Lucius’ restoration to ‘his former identity as a young aristocrat’<sup>29</sup> and even to his *reformatio* to man.<sup>30</sup>

### III. Color terms as literary tools

Expectedly in many passages, color terms seemingly work as mere literary tools, enriching the coloristic palette of the superbly skillful writer,<sup>31</sup> as in the descriptions of Venus on stage as a character featuring in the *iudicium Paridis* at 10,31,1–2,<sup>32</sup> and in the brief and almost formulaic dawn scenes opening books 3 and 7, which ultimately draw on epic models.<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore—as I will argue in what follows—colors of Apuleius’ palette are often exploited to create meaning and suggest interpretation. In a world where everything is subject to change and most of the time things are not as they seem reliability of visual perceptions is questioned: visual elements—including color terms—must be accounted for in light of the overall meaning of the novel, as they enhance Apuleius’ rejection of a too exterior and superficial view of the world, and invite the *lector scrupolosus* to unveil the truth underlying the surface of things, of people, of events.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>28</sup> See André 1949, 26, 339.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *GCA* 2014, 351.

<sup>30</sup> In book 11 (20,1–7) Lucius’ dream of a slave named *Candidus* being restored to him is interpreted as foreshadowing the recovery of his white horse; in addition, the whiteness of the horse has been viewed as a Platonic symbol of Lucius’ immortal soul, being restored to him after his re-transformation: cf. Drake 1968.

<sup>31</sup> On Apuleian stylistic *artificium*, cf. Bernhard 1927, who provides a still useful list of the most prominent phenomena.

<sup>32</sup> *Super has introcessit alia, visendo decore praepollens, gratia coloris ambrosei designans Venerem [...] Ipse autem color deae diversus in speciem: corpus candidum, quod caelo demeat, amictus caeruleus, quod mari remeat* – ‘After these another girl made her entrance, surpassingly beautiful to look at, with a charming ambrosian complexion, representing Venus as Venus looked when she was a virgin [...] The very coloring of the goddess offered variety to the eye—her body white because she comes down from heaven, her robe blue because she comes up from the sea’. On this passage, cf. *GCA* 2000, 378–379.

<sup>33</sup> 3,1,1: *Commodum punicantibus phaleris Aurora roseum quatiens lacertum caelum inequitabat...* – ‘No sooner had Aurora begun to ride with crimson caparisons across the sky, sharing her rosy arm...’; 7,1,1: *Ut primum tenebris abiectis dies inalbebat et candidum solis curriculum cuncta conlustrabat...* – ‘When darkness had been cast away at day’s first whitening, and the sun’s bright chariot illumined all the world...’. See also Harrison 2013.

<sup>34</sup> Under this respect, I find some of Louis Callebat’s studies still unequalled: cf. Callebat 1978; 1987; and 1993.

*IV. Color as a sign: an invitation to go beyond the appearance*

*IV.1 Lucius' caesii eyes*

At 2,2,7–9 we read the already mentioned description of Lucius' physical appearance, in his aunt Byrrena's words:<sup>35</sup>

'Vereor', inquam, 'ignotae mihi feminae', et statim rubore suffusus reiecto capite restiti. At illa, optutum in me conversa, 'En' inquit 'sanctissimae Salviae matris generosa probitas. Sed et cetera corporis execrabiliter ad amussim congruentia: inenormis proceritas, succulenta gracilitas, rubor temperatus, flavum et inadfectatum capillitium, oculi caesii quidem,<sup>36</sup> sed vigiles et in aspectu micantes, prorsus aquilini, os quoquoversum floridum, speciosus et immeditatus incessus'.

"I am embarrassed in front of a woman whom I do not know", I answered, suddenly blushing; and I just stood there looking at the ground. Then she turned and stared at me. "He inherited that well-bred behaviour", she said, "from his pure and virtuous mother Salvia. And his physical appearance is a damnably precise fit too: he is tall but not abnormal, slim but with sap in him, and of a rosy complexion; he has blond hair worn without affectation, wide-awake light blue eyes with flashing glance just like an eagle's, a face with a bloom in every part, and an attractive and unaffected walk" (transl. Keulen 2006).

As already mentioned, Keulen (2006) rightly underscores the ambiguity of the visual signs we are presented with in this passage: Lucius' appearance, in an age definitely obsessed with the idea of *κάνών*, seems to be that of a noble Greek *καλοκαγαθός* (*ad amussim...congruentia*), but the *lector scrupolosus* should also grasp signs (such as the adverb *execrabiliter*)<sup>37</sup> pointing to the 'cursedness' of such appearance. As regards eyes—a prominent element in physiognomic descriptions—Keulen dwells on their being 'sparkling', a positive feature, hinting

<sup>35</sup> On this description, see at least van Mal-Maeder 1997, 177–185; *GCA* 2001, 70–79; Goldman 2013, 110; Harrison 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Manuscript F reads *caeci quidem*: see *GCA* 2001, 77–78; Zimmerman 2012, apparatus ad loc.

<sup>37</sup> A difficult word, which in fact has been discussed—and even emended—by scholars: see Keulen 2006, 184 n. 70; Zimmerman 2012, apparatus ad loc.



at both Lucius’ noble *prosapia* and his acute-mindedness,<sup>38</sup> whereas he neglects a more ambiguous feature, their *caesius* color.<sup>39</sup> *Caesius*<sup>40</sup> (= Greek γλαυκός, *glaucus*<sup>41</sup>), one of the pupil colors resulting from the humours contained within the eye,<sup>42</sup> is usually attributed to the eyes of exceptionally vigorous people, such as barbarian Northerners;<sup>43</sup> moreover, Julius Caesar’s, Nero’s, Jovian’s, and Valentinian’s eyes are remembered as being *caesii* (and Augustus’ eyes as *glauci*).<sup>44</sup> The testimony of physiognomic writers reinforces the ambiguity of this feature: a γλαυκός eye-color was most of the time correlated to negative features in the

<sup>38</sup> Keulen 2006, 183 n. 64, 184 n. 68. See Julian’s portrait in Amm. 25,4,22: *venustate oculorum micantium, qui mentis eius argutias indicabant* – ‘his eyes were fine and full of fire, an indication of the acuteness of his mind’; cf. also den Boeft et al. 2005, ad loc.

<sup>39</sup> As already remarked by Mason 1984; cf. also Opeku 1979.

<sup>40</sup> See André 1949, 178–180; Bradley 2009, 136–137, 142–143.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Don. Ter. *Hec.* 440: *caesius*] *glaucis oculis*. Latin *caesia* corresponds to Greek γλαυκῶπις as a traditional epithet of Athena/Minerva (Gell. 2,26,19); Cic. *n.d.* 1,83 mentions *caesios oculos Minervae*.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Cels. 7,7,13c.

<sup>43</sup> Vitr. 6,1,3: *quae sub septentrionibus nutriuntur gentes immanibus corporibus, candidis coloribus, directo capillo et rufo, oculis caesiis, sanguine multo ab umoris plenitate caelique refrigerationibus sunt conformati* – ‘the races of the north receive nourishment, and are characterised by tall stature, fair complexion, straight red hair, blue eyes, fullness of blood, owing to the abundance of moisture and the cool climate’.

<sup>44</sup> See *SHA. Ael.* 2,3 (Julius Caesar): *Caesarem [...] eum, qui primus sic appellatus est, doctissimi viri et eruditissimi putant dictum, vel quia mortua matre, sed ventre caeso, sit natus, vel quod cum magnis crinibus sit utero parentis effusus, vel quod oculis caesiis et ultra humanum morem vigerit* – ‘Men of the greatest learning and scholarship aver that he who first received the name of Caesar was called by this name [...] because he was brought into the world after his mother’s death and by an incision in her abdomen, or because he had a thick head of hair when he came forth from his mother’s womb, or, finally, because he had bright grey eyes and was vigorous beyond the wont of human beings’; Suet. *Ner.* 51 (Nero): *oculis caesiis et hebetioribus* – ‘his eyes blue and somewhat weak’ (Svetonius does not mention blue eyes as a positive feature ‘reserved for the description of gods’, as assumed by Goldman 2013, 104–105); Amm. 25,10,14 (Jovian): *Incedebat autem motu corporis gravi, vultu laetissimo, oculis caesiis, vasta proceritate et ardua, adeo, ut diu nullum indumentum regium ad mensuram eius aptum inveniretur* – ‘He walked with a dignified bearing; his expression was very cheerful. His eyes were grey. He was so unusually tall that for some time no imperial robe could be found that was long enough for him’; cf. den Boeft et al. 2005, ad loc.; Amm. 30,9,6 (Valentinian): *Corpus eius lacertosum et validum, capilli fulgor colorisque nitor cum oculis caesiis, semper obliquum intuentibus et torvum...* – ‘His strong and muscular body, the gleam of his hair, his brilliant complexion, his grey eyes, with a gaze that was always sidelong and stern...’; cf. Passarella 2015, 240. On Augustus, see *infra*, n. 52.

physiognomic treatise written by the sophist Polemon of Laodicea (2<sup>nd</sup> AD),<sup>45</sup> at least as far as we can judge from Adamantius' 4<sup>th</sup> century Greek epitome of Polemon.<sup>46</sup> Likewise, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century *De physiognomonia liber* (falsely attributed to Apuleius by Albertus Magnus), whose author draws mostly on Polemon, we read:

Oculi stantes glauci sine splendore indicant hominem dolis et audacia plenum, pervigilem et exquisitorem malitiae (22); Oculi parvi trementes glauci sine pudore, sine fide, sine iustitia sunt, aluntur autem malis alienis (23); Oculi glauci parvas habentes pupillas serviles, doli plenos, avidos lucri pronuntiant mores. Glauci oculi multas habent species: nam sunt alii cyanei, alii felliti coloris, alii variati diversis coloribus, alii sicci. Qui quidem sicci, satis feros mores aperiunt. Cyanei igitur, qui plerumque inveniuntur humidi, multo meliores sunt siccis. Glauci et albidum et fugacem vehementer hominem nuntiant. Secundum ea igitur omnia erit nobis optima species glaucorum qui fuerint humidi, tranquilli, magni, perlucidi, verum scias etiam in hac specie oculorum animosum esse ingenium (24); Loxus<sup>47</sup> [...] glaucis nimium [*scil. oculis*] adimit fortitudinem, impudentiam relinquit (81).

'Fixed eyes which are light blue without brightness indicate a man full of deceits and daring, very watchful and a searcher after malice' (22); 'Eyes which are trembling and small and light blue are without shame, without trustworthiness, and without justice, and are nourished by the sufferings of others' (23); 'Light blue eyes with small pupils declare that the character is servile, full of deceit and greedy for money. Light blue eyes have many types of appearance; for some are sea-blue ones, some are of the color of bile, some have a variety of different colors, some are dry. Those which are dry reveal a very wild character. And so the sea-blue ones, which are generally found to be moist, are much better than dry ones. Light blue and white eyes announce a man who is timid and very prone to flight. And so following all these things

<sup>45</sup> Where a wide display of color terms was made: cf. Elsner 2007, 218–224 (on color in physiognomy, see also Goldman 2013, 99–134). On Polemon, see Barton 1994, 95–132; Gleason 1995, 21–54; Swain 2007b, and therein esp. Swain 2007a and Repath 2007b.

<sup>46</sup> See Adamant. *physiogn.* 10–12, *passim*; cf. also Polem. *physiogn.* I, 246 Foerster: *glaucus in oculo color defectum humanitatis et indolis rigorem indicat* – 'Blue eye colour reveals lack of humanity and harsh temper'; I quote from the modern Latin translation of the Arabic preserved text.

<sup>47</sup> Loxus is the other major source the author of the *De physiognomonia liber* draws on; Loxus' chronology is uncertain: 4<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> century BC (cf. Raina 1994, 39–40; Boys-Stones 2007, 58–64: 59).

the best appearance of light blue eyes will be those which are moist, still, large and very bright, but you should know that even in this appearance of eyes the character is spirited’ (24); ‘Loxus [...] disallows bravery to very light blue eyes and leaves them impudence’ (81) (transl. Repath 2007a).

Lucius’ blue eyes are ‘unusual’ (eyes of the εὐφυής man are usually *χαροποί*, *ravinigri*), and suggest ‘cowardice, inhumanity, rashness and *impudentia*, and are more significant for his character than are his other, ostensibly praiseworthy, features’.<sup>48</sup> Therefore we might think that blue eyes are a further hint at Lucius’ cursedness, foreshadowing his inhuman transformation.<sup>49</sup> *Caesius*, together with the adverb *execrabiliter*, dwelt upon by Keulen, invites the reader to grasp the contradictions underlying Lucius’ physical appearance, and allows him/her to foresee Lucius’ destiny.<sup>50</sup> As Harrison remarks,<sup>51</sup> ‘the text complicates the issue of Lucius’ identity even before his bestial metamorphosis’, and ‘the presentation of Lucius in *Metamorphoses* 1–3 shows him to be an ass in waiting’.<sup>52</sup>

#### IV.2 The mineus color of laurel-roses

Lucius-ass is on his way to the cave of the thieves, carrying the wealth stolen from Milo’s house. Firstly he is offered an opportunity for rescue by some roses gleaming in a garden he passes by, but he gives up his intention of eating them, fearing

<sup>48</sup> Mason 1984, 308–309.

<sup>49</sup> Goldman 2013, 112, is thus definitely right in remarking that ‘the organization and placement of the physiognomic attributes, as well as the combination of color-terms, should alert Apuleius’ readers’, although she is wrong in viewing in Lucius’ ‘blue eyes’ as an attractive feature.

<sup>50</sup> Another possible reading of Lucius’ ambiguous portrait is hinted at in James and O’Brien 2006, 237, who remark that ‘Lucius’ comeliness is so eagerly looked at and looked over when he encounters his aunt Byrrhaena and her entourage we might suspect that he has been chosen as the sacrifice cum scapegoat for the festival at this point’; on Lucius as the scapegoat for the *Risus* festival, see at least McCreight 1993, 46–52.

<sup>51</sup> Harrison 2015, 3, 14.

<sup>52</sup> Notice that Augustus’ *glauca* eyes are said by Pliny the Elder to be like those of horses: *n.h.* 11,54,143: *Divo Augusto equorum modo glauci fuere superque hominem albicantis magnitudinis, quam ob causam diligentius spectari eos iracunde ferebat* – ‘The late lamented Augustus had grey eyes like those of horses, the whites being larger than usual in a human being, on account of which he used to be angry if people watched his eyes too closely’; see also *ibid.* 11,53,141: *Oculi homini tantum diverso colore, ceteris in suo cuique genere similes et equorum quibusdam glauci, sed in homine numerosissimae varietatis atque differentiae* – ‘Man alone has eyes of various colours, whereas with all other creatures the eyes of each member are alike. Some horses too have grey eyes; but in man the eyes are of extremely numerous variety and difference’.

that, if suddenly restored to his human shape, the thieves would possibly mistake him for a sorcerer and kill him (3,29). Then, when the thieves stop in a village, Lucius, after overindulging in vegetables in a garden, has a look around in search of a *candens...rosarium* – ‘a rose-bed gleaming’ in the vicinity (4,1). At some point (4,2) the *mineus color* of some flowers Lucius sees far away misleadingly makes him think he has finally come across his *salus*.<sup>53</sup> Lucius’ hope likely transfigures the perception—and therefore the description—of the *convallis umbrosa* where these flowers gleam; at the beginning the valley overtly evokes a literary *locus amoenus* and inspires, to Lucius’ not yet totally *ferina praecordia*, the thought that this is a *lucus* sacred to Venus and the Graces (4,2,1–2):

Ergo igitur cum in isto cogitationis salo fluctuarem, aliquanto longius video frondosi nemoris convallem umbrosam, cuius inter varias herbulas et laetissima virecta fulgentium rosarum mineus color renidebat. Iamque apud mea non usquequaque ferina praecordia Veneris et Gratiarum lucum illum arbitrabar, cuius inter opaca secreta floris genialis regius nitor relucebat.

‘Therefore, as I tossed upon this sea of thought, a little distance away I saw a leafy wood in a shady vale; in the midst of its various plants and flourishing greenery shone the crimson color of glistening roses. In my not totally animal heart I judged that this must be a grove of Venus and the Graces, within whose dark recesses gleamed the royal splendour of the festal flower’.

Then, when he gets closer to them, reality betrays his expectations, as the flowers actually turn out to be lethal *rosae laureae*, which end up inspiring him with the intention of suicide (4,2,5–8; 3,1):

Iam enim loco proximus non illas rosas teneras et amoenas, madidas divini roris et nectaris, quas rubi felices, beatæ spinæ generant, ac ne convallem quidem usquam nisi tantum ripae fluvialis marginem densis arboribus septam video. Hae arbores in lauri faciem prolixè foliatae pariunt in modum floris odori porrectos caliculos modice punicantes, quos equidem fragrantis minime rurestri vocabulo vulgus indoctum rosas laureas appellant, quarumque cuncto pecori cibus letalis est [...] sponte illum venenum rosarium sumere gestiebam.

<sup>53</sup> This episode also features in the *Onos* (see below, n. 58). On Apuleius’ description of the *loci* where it takes place, cf. Di Biasi 2000, 217–219, and Mattiacci 2001, 853–858.

‘when I came close to the place I no longer saw those delicate, charming roses, wet with divine dew and nectar, such as spring up amid happy brambles and blessed briars; nor did I even see a valley at all, but only the edge of a river-bank hedged in with thick-set trees which have long copious foliage resembling the laurel and produce long, pale red, cup-shaped blossoms like the fragrant flower: although these have no scent at all, uneducated folk call them by the rural name “laurel roses”, and they are deadly poisonous to all grazing animals [...] I...voluntarily made ready to consume that rosy poison’.

*Rosae*, a crucial object in Apuleius’ novel, appear for the first time in the seduction scene of 2,16,<sup>54</sup> and for the last time in the *reformatio* scene of 11,13<sup>55</sup>, where *fulgurabat*, ‘apart from producing a strong visual effect, appropriately highlights the fundamental means of salvation for Lucius’;<sup>56</sup> moreover, a few scenes, where Lucius’ attempts—or hopes—to be rescued by means of roses fail, are scattered throughout the novel.<sup>57</sup>

Actually, the asinine protagonist being deceived by laurel-roses is also found in ps.-Lucian (*On. 17*)<sup>58</sup>; however, the detail of deceptive *color*, which on closer inspection turns out to belong to *in modum floris odori porrectos caliculos modice punicantes*,<sup>59</sup> is an addition by Apuleius.

<sup>54</sup> *Commodum cubueram et ecce Photis mea [...] laeta proximat, rosa sarta et rosa soluta in sinu tuberante* – ‘I had just reclined when suddenly Photis [...] entered gaily with rose wreaths and loose roses swelling in the fold of her gown’. Cf. *GCA* 2001, 247–249.

<sup>55</sup> 11,13,1–2: *At sacerdos [...] confestim restitit et ultro porrecta dextera ob os ipsum meum coronam exhibuit. Tunc ego trepidans, adsiduo pulsu micanti corde, coronam, quae rosis amoenis intexta fulgurabat, avido ore susceptam cupidus promissi devoravi. Nec me fefellit caeleste promissum: protinus mihi delabatur deformis et ferina facies* – ‘But the priest [...] stopped at once and spontaneously stretched out his hand and held the wreath of roses in front of my face. I trembled, my heart jumped and beat rapidly, and the wreath, which gleamed with the lovely roses woven into it, I took up with greedy mouth and, eager for the promised results, most eagerly devoured [Hanson reads: *cupidus promissi cupidissime devoravi*]. The heavenly promise did not fail me: at once my ugly animal form slipped from me’.

<sup>56</sup> *GCA* 2014, 259.

<sup>57</sup> One of them (3,27) is famously commented upon by von Albrecht 1989, 167–176.

<sup>58</sup> ...τὰ δὲ ῥόδα ἐκεῖνα οὐκ ἦν ῥόδα ἀληθινά, τὰ δ’ ἦν ἐκ τῆς ἀγρίας δάφνης φυόμενα· ῥοδοδάφνην αὐτὰ καλοῦσιν ἄνθρωποι, κακὸν ἄριστον ὄνω τοῦτο παντὶ καὶ ἵππῳ· φασὶ γὰρ τὸν φαγόντα ἀποθνήσκειν αὐτίκα – ‘... but these roses were not proper roses, but grew on the wild laurel. They are called rose-bays and make a bad breakfast for any ass or horse, for they say that to eat them is instant death’.

<sup>59</sup> Both *mineus*, pointing to the (red) hue of *minium*, and *punicans* (= *puniceus*) are seemingly created by Apuleius, the first also being found in Isidorus: cf. *ThLL* 8, 998.10–15 and 10/2, 2649.63–69 respectively.

Once again, color invites the reader not to be content with his/her first impression: rather, (s)he should look deeper and grasp truth beyond the appearance of things.

*V. Color oxymora as pointing to paradoxical aspects of reality*<sup>60</sup>

*V.1 Slaves' sub-human condition in the pistrinum*

After escaping from the priests of the *Dea Syria*, Lucius is bought by the *pistor* and ends up in the mill, working at the millstone with both fellow-animals and fellow-slaves. There, his eyes dwell for a while on the poor slaves working in the *pistrinum* (9,12,3–4):

Dii boni, quales illic homunculi vibicibus lividis totam cutem depicti, dorsumque plagosum scissili centunculo magis inumbrati quam obtecti, nonnulli exiguo tegili tantum modo pubem iniecti, cuncti tamen sic tunicati ut essent per pannulos manifesti, frontes litterati et capillum semirasi et pedes anulati, tum lurore deformes et fumosis tenebris vaporosae caliginis palpebras adesi atque adeo male luminati, et in modum pugilum qui pulvisculo perspersi dimicant farinulenta cinere sordide candidati.

‘Good gods, what stunted little men they were! The whole surface of their skin was painted with livid welts. Their striped backs were merely shaded, not covered, by the tattered patchwork they wore: some had thrown on a tiny cloth that just covered their loins, but all were clad in such a way that you could discern them clearly through their rags. Their foreheads were branded, their heads half-shaved, and their feet chained. They were hideously sallow too, and their eyelids were eaten away by the smoky of scorching murk until they were quite weak-sighted; like boxers who fight sprinkled with dust, they were dirtily white-washed with a floury ash’.

In this passage a double oxymoron closes a long and stylistically quite contrived section:<sup>61</sup> homeoteleuta and parallelisms, lexical elements evoking slaves of

<sup>60</sup> On Apuleius' use of oxymoron, see Bernhard 1927, 238–240; as clearly stated by Augello (1981, 761), ‘esso [*scil.* the oxymoron] fu talora qualcosa di più di una figura letteraria; esso fu, pur in mezzo ai molti giuochi verbali, come uno strumento di decifrazione del vero; un modo “suo” di sentire la contraddittoria radice delle cose’.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. *GCA* 1995, 120–124.

comedy (*homunculi, anulati, litterati*), and finally some color terms scattered throughout the passage: *lividus, luror, fumosae tenebrae vaporosae caliginis* (darkness and air thickness, due to flour floating in the air). I am well aware that we should resist the temptation of taking a rhetorical play too seriously. However, in *farinulenta cinere sordide candidati*, an opposition of ‘white’ and ‘dark grey’ is evoked by *farinulentus* (i.e. assumably ‘white’) vs. *cinis* (‘ash-grey’), and by *candidati* (‘made white’) vs. *sordide* (‘dirtily’).

I argue that the oxymora should be taken as pointing somewhat compassionately to the sub-human condition of the people Lucius-actor is gazing at. This is true also for another oxymoronic expression, featuring in an earlier passage likewise describing Lucius-ass’ and his fellow-animals’ condition at the mill (9,11,1–3):

Ibi complurium iumentorum multivii circuitus intorquebant molas ambage varia, nec die tantum, verum peteti etiam nocte prorsus instabili machinarum vertigine lucubrabant pervigilem farinam [...] die sequenti molae quae maxima videbatur matutinus adstituor et ilico velata facie propellor ad incurva spatia flexuosi canalis, ut in orbe termini circumfluentis reciproco gressu mea recalcan vestigia vagarer errore certo.<sup>62</sup>

‘There the multiple circuits performed by numerous beasts kept turning millstones of varying circumference, and not merely by day but throughout the night they would sleeplessly produce flour with the non-stop rotation of the machines [...] the next day I was attached early in the morning to what appeared to be largest of the mill-wheels. My head was covered and I was immediately given a push along the curved track of a circular channel. Within an orbit circumscribed all round, ever going back over my own path, I retraced my very footsteps and blindly wandered on an invariable course’.

Besides the oxymoron (*vagarer errore certo*), in these passages stylistic complexity, not to say ‘stylistic contortion’, likely corresponds to the sorrowful inhuman object which is portrayed.

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<sup>62</sup> On Lucius’ fellow animals, see also 9,13,1–2.

*V.2 Divine Isis*

In the last book we are presented with the saving goddess' almost 'cinematic' epiphany,<sup>63</sup> embracing two chapters (11,3–4). Lucius sees a *divina facies*—her name will be revealed only at 11,5,3—emerging from the waves. The robe (*vestis*) she wears is wondrously iridescent; the cloak (*palla*), scattered with gleaming stars and moon, perplexes, i.e. confounds or refutes,<sup>64</sup> Lucius' sight mostly due to its somewhat oxymoronic bright black (11,3,5–4,1):

<Vestis><sup>65</sup> multicolor, bysso tenui pertexta, nunc albo candore lucida, nunc croceo flore lutea, nunc roseo rubore flammida; et quae longe longeque etiam meum confutabat optutum palla nigerrima splendescens atro nitore, quae circumcirca remeans et sub dexterum latus ad umerum laevum recurrens, umbonis vicem deiecta parte laciniae, multiplici contabulatione dependula, ad ultimas oras nodulis fimbriarum decoriter confluctuabat. Per intexam extremitatem et in ipsa eius planitie stellae dispersae coruscabant, earumque media semenstris luna flammeos spirabat ignes. Quaqua tamen insignis illius pal-lae perfluebat ambitus...

'Her robe,<sup>66</sup> woven of sheer linen, was of many colors, here shining with white brilliance, there yellow with saffron bloom, there flaming with rosy redness; and what most especially confounded my sight was a deep black cloak gleaming with dark sheen, which was wrapped about her, running under her right arm up to her left shoulder, with part of its border let down in the form of a knot; it hung in complicated pleats beautifully undulating with knotted tassels as its lower edge. Along the embroidered border and over the surface of the cloak glittering stars were scattered, and at their centre the full moon exhaled fiery flames. Wherever streamed the hem of that wondrous robe...'

We should not forget that both color details—the variety of the *vestis* and the black hue of the *palla*—belong to Isis' vestment, as Plutarch testifies:<sup>67</sup> black is

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Griffiths 1975, 123–137, and *CGA* 2014, 123–145; moreover, see Callebat 1993, 1661–1662. On 'the "cinematic" qualities of the Isis book', due to the prominence of visual elements, cf. *GCA* 2014, 66–67.

<sup>64</sup> *GCA* 2014, 136.

<sup>65</sup> In the Latin text a noun working as subject needs to be added (*GCA* 2014, 134): both *vestis* and *tunica*, suggested by editors, would fit.

<sup>66</sup> Hanson, the Loeb translator, reads *tunica*.

<sup>67</sup> *GCA* 2014, 136–137.



the Greek color of mourning robes, the one Isis displays after Osiris is stolen from her by Typhon, and with which some of her statues are covered, to indicate ‘the concealments and obfuscations in which she [*scil.* Isis-moon] longingly pursues the sun [*scil.* Osiris]’ (transl. Griffiths);<sup>68</sup> on the other hand, her very robes are ‘variegated in color (for her essential power concerns the material, which becomes everything and receives everything—light and darkness, day and night, fire and water, life and death, beginning and end)’, whereas the ‘simple color of light’ characterises the robes of Osiris, who represents ‘the origin of things’, which ‘is unadulterated’, and ‘the primal element’, which ‘is spiritually intelligible and un-mixed’ (transl. Griffiths).<sup>69</sup> Although ‘it is hardly to be expected that figures or statues of Isis will embody the colors described’ here, we can definitely assume that Apuleius ‘has conflated more of one type [*scil.* of Isis’ portraits] seen by him in various cult-centres’.<sup>70</sup>

However, the depiction of both the *vestis* and the *palla* no doubt also reflects a search for stylistic and rhetorical affectation. As to the *vestis*, we have a tricolon, built on a strict parallelism: anaphora of *nunc*, color adjectives (two of them ending in *-eus*),<sup>71</sup> nouns ending in *-or* (two of them color nouns), and color adjectives (among them, the quite uncommon *flammidus*<sup>72</sup>). As to the *palla*, a double oxymoron jeopardizes Lucius-actor’s sight: *nigerrima* and *atro* (the second one almost never associated with gleaming black<sup>73</sup>) vs. *splendescens* and *nitore*. What amazes Lucius is the ‘brightness’ of ‘opaque black’, its paradoxical luminosity.

No doubt the exuberance of details and display of rhetorical skills serve Lucius-auctor’s purpose to utter what is unutterable, to speak what is unspeakable:<sup>74</sup> in such a context, iridescence is the first coloristic sign of something extraordinary

<sup>68</sup> Plut. *Is.* 356E, where she is said to wear a πένθιμον στολήν; *ibid.* 372D: τῶν ἀγαλμάτων αὐτῆς [...] τοῖς δὲ μελανοστόλοις ἐμφαίνεσθαι τὰς κρύψεις καὶ τοὺς περισκιασμοὺς ἐν οἷς διώκει ποθοῦσα τὸν ἥλιον. Cf. Griffiths 1970, 501.

<sup>69</sup> Plut. *Is.* 382D: στολαὶ δ’ αἱ μὲν Ἰσιδος ποικίλαι ταῖς βαφαῖς (περὶ γὰρ ὕλην ἢ δύναμις αὐτῆς πάντα γινομένην καὶ δεχομένην, φῶς σκότος, ἡμέραν νύκτα, πῦρ ὕδωρ, ζωὴν θάνατον, ἀρχὴν τελευτήν)· ἢ δ’ Ὀσίριδος οὐκ ἔχει σκιὰν οὐδὲ ποικιλμόν, ἀλλ’ ἐν ἀπλοῦν τὸ φωτοειδές· ἄκρατον γὰρ ἢ ἀρχὴ καὶ ἀμιγῆς τὸ πρῶτον καὶ νοητόν. Cf. Griffiths 1970, 562–563.

<sup>70</sup> Griffiths 1975, 128, 137.

<sup>71</sup> Notice also the unusual *iunctura* of *albus*, usually associated with ‘opaque white’, and *candor*, ‘bright white’. On the difference between the two, which was not at all clear-cut in literary usage, however, cf. André 1949, 25–38.

<sup>72</sup> Found only in Apuleius: besides this passage, cf. *Socr.* 8 and 9; *mund.* 21.

<sup>73</sup> André 1949, 43–59. The use of *ater* as referred to gleaming black in *Met.* 11,3,5 is rightly remarked by André 1949, 44 as ‘due...à la recherche d’une alliance hardie’, just like *albo candore* in the same passage.

<sup>74</sup> As demonstrated also by the sophisticated study of this passage by Pigeaud 1983.

and divine taking place in front of Lucius,<sup>75</sup> the second sign being the oxymoronic color of the *palla*, which is explicitly said to blur his sight.

Both at 9,12 and at 11,3 color oxymora not only give Lucius-*auctor* the opportunity of showing off his skills as a rhetor, but also point to something either unnatural or supernatural.

### *VI Conclusion*

To sum up, in the *Metamorphoses*, indisputably ‘a sophisticated work of literature with a deeper meaning’,<sup>76</sup> Apuleius

da buon filosofo vuole...rendere accessibile anche al di fuori delle scuole un nucleo dottrinale di derivazione medioplatonica, perché serva da orientamento nel disordine della storia umana e nell’incertezza della realtà sensibile.<sup>77</sup>

‘as a philosopher, intends to disseminate outside the philosophy class-room a body of doctrines deriving from Middle Platonism, so that it might serve as a guide in order to face the chaos of human history and the ambiguity of physical reality’.

Appearance as the object of visual perception, and vision allowing to grasp truth through, beyond and even against appearance, are quite prominent themes owing to both the cultural environment the novel belongs to and the narrative it develops. In line with the Roman discourse on color and with Apuleius’ own stylistic contrivance, color terms, when subjected to attentive scrutiny by the *scrupolosus lector*, either hint at or unfold the ambiguity—and possible failure—of visual perception in an unceasingly changing reality, and hence call on the reader to go relentlessly beyond the surface of things and words.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> On *multicolor* as peculiarly ‘applied to something divine’, both in Apuleius and elsewhere (e.g. in Prudentius), see Goldman 2013, 153–154.

<sup>76</sup> *GCA* 2014, 6.

<sup>77</sup> As summarised by Gianotti 2000b, 172–173; see also Gianotti 2014, esp. 87–88.

<sup>78</sup> I wish to thank those who listened to my presentation at ICAN 2015 (Houston, TX) and gave suggestions: among them, Luca Graverini, Silvia Mattiacci, and Rachel B. Goldberg.

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