

The Wandering Whom? Medical and Mystical Displacement of the Womb in Apuleius' Galli Account

In this roundtable paper, I explore connections between an ancient Roman novelist's description of a group of ritually castrated itinerant priests and symptoms and cures associated with what some Greco-Roman medical and mystical writers termed the "wandering womb" (Faraone, 2011, pp. 1-9). After establishing this connection, I raise three major questions for this project in addition to other questions noted throughout. The novelist in question is Apuleius, who was born in Roman-occupied Numidia in the 2nd century CE. One of his surviving works, *Metamorphoses* or *The Golden Ass*, follows the character Lucius. After a witch's spell goes awry, Lucius is turned into an ass (i.e., donkey) and seeks out a rose—the cure—through a series of comical mishaps. Finally, divine intervention leads Lucius-the-ass to roses in a procession for the goddess Isis. Once cured, Lucius-the-man begins the initiation process into the mystery cult of Isis.

Lucius-the-ass¹ narrates his encounter with several *galli*, itinerant priests of the goddess Cybele who underwent ritual castration in the eighth book (out of eleven).² These *galli* have been at the center of several studies focused on gender identity both within Rome and within the cult of Cybele. Although Adkins argues for a relatively stable identity as a "community of transwomen" (2020, p. 168), Blood (2019) and Mowat (2021) argue for more liminal identities. Blood reads the description of the *galli* as "oscillating male femaling" as opposed to a "migratory trans experience" (Blood, 2019, p. 178); Mowat argues for reading a "non-binary identity" (2021, p. 298). In general, I find arguments for liminal identities most persuasive (and most congruent with my reading below), but the accuracy and utility of modern terminology for explaining the experiences of ancient individuals is worth further discussion.³

Here, I shift from modern frameworks to ancient frameworks to consider how Apuleius, through his narrator Lucius, situates the liminal gender identities of the *galli* within the ancient Greco-Roman model of the "wandering womb."⁴ Starting in the 5th and 4th centuries BCE, Hippocratic medical writers associ-

¹Metamorphoses which leave characters in liminal spaces, including Lucius-the-ass with human mental faculties and Thrasyleon-turned-bear who still needs holes in his bearskin to see and breathe in Book 4, raise questions to how these metamorphoses are related/distinct from the portrayal of the *galli* discussed below.

²Wikipedia has a good plot summary of *The Golden Ass* and a good overview of the *galli*.

³I raise this question in part because all three authors cited here argue for using different modern terminology to describe the experience(s) of the *galli*. For a recent overview of this discussion within the field of Classics, cf. Ormand (2023).

⁴This passage also shows parallels to descriptions of the cult of Dionysus and his *Maenads*. Both Cybele and Dionysus have "eastern" origins—we can further discuss the intersection of foreignness and gender identity in antiquity.

ated a series of symptoms with the movement of the uterus (Greek: *hustéra*, the etymological source of English *hysteria*). In medical texts, symptoms tied to uterine displacement—itsself tied to the build-up of blood or physical activities like dancing—include suffocation and “madness” (*manía*). Fragments of ancient mystical thought add the metaphors of biting and shouting like animals. Medical “cures” revolved around marriage, sex, and especially childbirth. The mystical tradition adds various incantations and rituals. Below are excerpts from four representative texts:⁵

[1] In the Hippocratic medical texts *Diseases of Women* 1 & 2, suffocation arising from a displaced uterus is tied to a lack of sex with men and physical overexertion, including dancing:⁶

1.7: If suffocation suddenly occurs, this happens mainly in women that are not having intercourse with men, and more in older women than in younger ones: for their uterus is lighter. Generally it comes about as follows: when a woman has empty vessels and exerts herself more than she is used to, as her uterus is warmed by the exertion, it turns to the side because it is empty and light: for there is open space into which it can turn, seeing that the cavity is empty...For it moves rapidly upward toward the moisture, since it has been excessively dried by the exertion, and the liver is full of moisture. On falling against the liver, the uterus immediately produces suffocation by occupying the air space around the cavity.

2.29: Any cause may suffice to displace the uterus if it is diseased, since it can result...from dancing...and from other things as well.

[2] In the Hippocratic medical text *Diseases of Young Girls*, the author discusses a related phenomenon where both girls and women suffer from “madness” when blood builds up from a lack of sex and childbirth. The author links this discussion to *The Sacred Disease* (below) and discussions of hostile spirits:⁷

First of all my topic relates to the sacred disease, and concerning apoplexies, and concerning terrors of the sort that people fear so strongly, that they are besides themselves and seem to see certain hostile spirits...Before puberty they were healthy. Afterwards blood is gathered into their wombs for evacuation. Yet, when the mouth of the exit is not opened and more blood flows in due to their nourishment and the increase of their body, then the blood, not having a way to flow out, rushes from the quantity towards the heart and the diaphragm. When these parts are filled, the heart becomes numb; then lethargy seizes them after the numbness, then after the lethargy, madness seizes them...Their spirit, distraught and sorely troubled by the foulness of their blood, attracts bad things, but names something else even fearful things. They command the young girl to wander about [and self-harm]...I urge, then, whenever young girls suffer this kind of malady they should marry as quickly as

⁵Plato's philosophical treatise *Timaeus* (91C) is also often cited in this discussion; see the 1929 Loeb edition [here](#).

⁶Translations from the 2018 Loeb edition. Accompanying Greek text for 1.7 [here](#) and for 2.29 [here](#).

⁷Translation from Hanson and Flemming (1998). Accompanying Greek text [here](#).

possible. If they become pregnant, they become healthy. If not, either at the same moment as puberty, or later, she will be caught by this sickness, if not by another one. Among those women who have regular intercourse with a man, the barren suffer these things.

[3] In the Hippocratic medical text *The Sacred Disease* IV, the author goes on a tangent to note that mystical practitioners blame the Mother of the Gods (= Cybele) if patients make loud noises like animals and also discusses purification practices involving blood:⁸

For example, if patients imitate the bleating of a goat or the roar (sc. of a lion), or have spasms on their right side, they say the Mother of the Gods [= Rhea = Cybele] is to blame...they purify victims of the disease with blood and such things, as if they had some defilement or were being pursued by avenging spirits...when in fact they should apply treatments opposite to these, viz. treat them with sacrifices and prayers, and, bringing them to sanctuaries, make supplications for them to the gods. But, as it is, they do nothing like this, but instead clean them, sometimes hiding the cleanings in the earth...

[4] In the material record, a number of gemstones with depictions of the womb and commands in Greek and Latin to stop moving are contemporary with Apuleius and suggest an earlier oral tradition (Figure 1; cf. Faraone (2011, pp. 19-20)). In addition, a slightly later 4th century CE womb-exorcism in a Greek magical handbook in Egypt reads:⁹

For the Ascent (Anadromê) of the Womb:

I adjure you, womb, [by the] one established over the abyss, before heaven, earth, sea, light or darkness came to be, who created the angels...and who sits over the Cherubim, who bears his own throne(?): return again to your seat and do not lean into the right part of the ribs nor the left part of the ribs, nor take a bite from (apodêksêis) into(?) the heart, like a dog, but stop and remain in your proper places without chewing (memasê[m]enê) as long as I adjure you by the one who in the beginning made heaven and earth and all that is therein. Hallelujah! Amen!

These materials set the necessary background for approaching Apuleius' *galli* account from a Greco-Roman medical/mystical perspective. The *galli* appear in the narrative when the *gallus* Philebus purchases Lucius-the-ass as a beast of burden; immediately the *galli* are seen dancing and shouting:¹⁰

8.26: As soon as we got to the doorway he yelled: "Girls [*puellae*]! Look what a pretty little enslaved-boy I've bought you." These girls were a chorus of *cinaedi*, who immediately danced for joy and raised a discordant shout with their cracked, shrill, *effeminae* voices.

⁸Translation from the 2023 Loeb edition. Greek text is available [here](#).

⁹Translation from Faraone (2011, p. 21).

¹⁰Translation here and below from 1996 Loeb edition with minor changes. Latin text available [here](#).

Lucius then describes a scene in which the *galli* adorn themselves with women's makeup and clothing and break out in dancing again ("[they] chanted and danced, excited by the frenzied beat of the flute music;" 8.27). Once dressed, the *galli* metaphorically invoke the wandering womb with their "wandering" course (*pererratis*) right before displaying symptoms and implementing cures associated with medical and mystical accounts of the wandering womb:

8.27: After passing a number of small cottages in their wandering course, they came to the country house of a rich land-owner. As soon as they reached the entrance-way they frantically flung themselves forward, filling the place with the sound of their discordant shrieks. For a long time they dropped their heads and rotated their necks in writhing motions, swinging their hanging locks in a circle. Sometimes they bit their own flesh with their teeth, and finally they all began slashing their arms with the two-edged blades they were carrying. In the midst of all this one of them started to rave more wildly than the rest, and producing rapid gasps from deep down in his¹¹ chest, as though he had been filled with the heavenly inspiration of some deity, he simulated a fit of madness—as if, indeed, the gods' presence was not supposed to make men better than themselves, but rather weak or sick.

8.28: ...He snatched up the utensil which is the distinctive attribute of these half-men [*semiviri*], a whip with long tassels made of twisted strips of woolly hide studded with numerous sheep's knuckle-bones, and he scourged himself hard with strokes of its many knots, fortifying himself with miraculous obstinacy against the pain from the gashes. You could see the ground growing wet with the filthy, *effeminatus* blood from all this slashing of swords and lashing of whips. I was struck with considerable alarm when I saw this generous profusion of gore from so many wounds. I was afraid that by some chance the foreign goddess's stomach might get a yearning for ass's blood, as some humans' stomachs yearn for ass's milk. At last, however, when they had grown tired, or at least sated with self-laceration, they ceased their butchery and took up a collection.

8.29: ...After tasting only a few salad greens for hors-d'oeuvre before the main meal, those dirty [*spurcissima*], shameful [*propudia*] creatures¹² were driven wild with unspeakable passion to commit the vilest acts of forbidden [*illicita*] lust. They had the young man stripped and lying on his back, and they pressed all around him, forcing their abominable kisses upon him. My eyes could not tolerate such an outrage for very long. I tried to shout out "Help, citizens!", but all that came out was "He...", missing all the other syllables and letters.

On the medical side, we see the *galli* performing self-phlebotomy as they bleed themselves through various means—phlebotomy was part of the ancient Greco-Roman doctor's toolkit for dealing with blood-related imbalances. Further, the *gallus* who "started to rave more wildly than the rest" exhibits the ex-

¹¹"He" and "his" in the translation reflect Lucius' use of grammatically masculine words.

¹²The Loeb's translation uses "creatures" to reflect the grammatically neuter description of the *galli* here.

pected outcome of overexertion causing uterine displacement: gasping for breath indicative of suffocation. This is compounded by “a fit of madness,” which was associated with women who had not undergone childbirth. The scene is framed by references to seeking out husbands (Lucius was jokingly called the husband of Philebus by the other *galli* in 8.26) and sexual acts with men. By Lucius’ account, the *galli* appear stuck in a cycle of inducing symptoms of the wandering womb through dance and temporarily relieving those symptoms through phlebotomy and sex with men; according to the medical writers above, it would be their inability to undergo childbirth which prevents them from attaining a permanent cure. Thus the *galli*’s bodies inhabit a liminal space, wherein they can suffer the symptoms of a wandering womb yet are incapable of effectively treating the condition.

Beyond the strictly “medical,” this scene also encapsulates mystical approaches to the wandering womb. The *galli* biting themselves is reminiscent of the biting womb described in the exorcism above. In addition, the profusion of blood on their bodies and the ground could be linked to ritual blood-purification practices described (and condemned) in *The Sacred Disease* above, where patients are cleansed in blood and the blood is deposited in the earth. One *gallus* is also described as being filled by “some deity,” and while Cybele may not qualify as an evil spirit, she was associated with animal-like shouting in the mystic tradition, as described in *The Sacred Disease*.

This reading, which places the bodies of the *galli* in a liminal space according to Greco-Roman medical and mystical frameworks of the wandering womb, raises several questions I continue to consider. The first question is the extent to which separating medical and mystical in this particular text is appropriate, given Apuleius’ apparent disregard for any distinction in building this fictional scene. In fact, the ancient evidence itself may not support this division, especially among contemporary 2nd century CE authors. Galen, the self-proclaimed doctor-successor of Hippocrates, speaks favorably of the god Asclepius, who is associated with medicine.¹³ On the other hand, the rhetorician Aelius Aristides, who was offered a position as priest of Asclepius,¹⁴ frequently described dreams from Asclepius which were built upon

¹³E.g., *On My Own Books* 18-19 “But [Marcus Aurelius] was prevailed upon to release me on hearing of the contrary instructions of his personal patron god Asclepius—whose servant I, too, professed myself, ever since he saved me from a fatal condition due to an abcess” (translation Singer 1997).

¹⁴*Sacred Tales* 4.101-102 “They unanimously voted me with great pleasure the priesthood of Asclepius...I said it was impossible for me to do anything, either important or trifling, without the God, and therefore it was not possible to think even of serving as a priest, until I had learned this from the God himself. They marvelled and yielded” (translation Behr 1968).

medical theories and prescribed common dietetics like phlebotomy, emetics, and bathing. Also, gems of the type in [Figure 1](#) all use “the traditional medical image of a womb as an inverted jug” (Faraone, 2011, p. 20). Even in the passage of *The Sacred Disease* above, the Hippocratic author is denouncing particular ritual practices outside of sanctuaries, but not practices inside sanctuaries.

Second, Adkins argues that the dialogue found in 8.26 is the *galli* speaking “in their own words” and “identify[ing] as girls—a community of transwomen sheltered within an imported religion on the margins of Graeco-Roman society” (2020, p. 168). As Adkins notes, the *galli* were a marginalized group on multiple levels within Greco-Roman society; by extension, there are no primary sources written by the *galli*. However, the dialogue of the *galli* is embedded within two layers of narrative discourse reported by Lucius the narrator reported by Apuleius the author. In addition, Lucius’ narration is unabashedly pejorative. Terms like *cinaedus* and *semivir* carry connotations that situate the *galli* as distinctly “other” (cf. Eldon Stevens, 2023). Given our narrative degree of separation from the (here fictional) *galli*, how much stock should be placed in their reported speech for understanding how the (historical) *galli* understood their own bodies/identities? Does this text give us insight into anything other than how non-*galli* perceived the bodies and identities of the *galli*?

Finally, and related to this, Blood argues rightly, I think, that individual *galli* could have had distinct identities and “when western classicists and historians use the terms ‘eunuch’ or *cinaedus*, we must remain open to the heterogeneity of those categories by recognizing that their constituent members are driven by a wide variety of internal motivations” (Blood, 2019, p. 178-180). I wonder to what extent the use of frameworks, ancient or modern, runs the risk of flattening individual identities within a group context. That is, arguing that the *galli* are “a community of transwomen” or have a “non-binary identity” or, as even I have argued vaguely, embody a liminal space, risks assuming that the *galli* had a monolithic experience. Yet even in this passage, we see Philebus singled out from the group and a particular *gallus* raving more than the rest and experiencing unique symptoms; this seems to call for a more individualizing approach. To what extent are broad categories useful for discussing the identities of ancient marginalized groups, and to what extent do they simply conform to the narrative perpetuated by the elite authors whose works survived?

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1 Appendix: Gemstone Figure



Figure 1: Hematite gemstone from the Roman Imperial period (overlapping with Apuleius' lifetime), depicting a womb and accompanied by a command to cease movement on the other side (Faraone, 2011, pp. 19-20)

[Back to mention 1](#) [Back to mention 2](#)