

Handbook of Diachronic Narratology



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Robert Kirstein

Unreliable Narration in Antiquity

1 Definition

Modern theories of unreliable narration (UNn) were initiated by Wayne C. Booth's monograph *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, first published in 1961 (for the following s. Kirstein, 2019). Booth takes his starting point from the difference between "self-conscious narrators, [. . .] aware of themselves as writers" (e.g., *Tristram Shandy* or *Dr. Faustus*) and "narrators [. . .] who rarely if ever discuss their writing chores" (e.g., *Huckleberry Finn*; Booth [1961] 1983, 155). Apart from whether the narrator is part of the story (*homodiegetic*) or not (*heterodiegetic*), there is always a "degree and kind of distance that separates them from the author, the reader, and the other characters of the story" (155). Booth explores this aspect of distance further and argues that a narrator is reliable when and insofar as he/she narrates in compliance with the norms of the work as a whole. If he/she deviates from this norm, modes of unreliability evolve. The effect of such deviation is a kind of dramatic irony, "and a secret communion occurs between the latter [i.e., the implied author] and the reader behind the narrator's back" (Shen 2013). Since Booth relates the unreliable narrator (UNr) to the implied author of the text, his line of argumentation builds upon an inner-textual understanding. His theory has initiated a wide-ranging and ongoing discussion on the mechanisms of literary unreliability. Today, especially in postmodern discourses, unreliability is recognized as a fundamental category of narrative. The concept has undergone manifold modifications since Booth, especially by Kindt (2008, 28–67), Margolin (2015), A. Nünning (1997, 1998), V. Nünning (2015a), Shen (2013), and Sternberg and Yacobi (2015). Schmid ([1973] 1986; 2010, 36–51, esp. 40–42) has introduced the term "abstract reader" to avoid the moral undertones implicit in Booth's notion of "implied reader" (cf. Berendsen 1980). A criticism of the concepts of both implied author and abstract author has been formulated by Bal (1981, 208–209; cf. de Jong 2014b, 19).

One of the changes since Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction* has been a shift away from the implied author as point of reference to the real reader of the text, thus replacing the original inner-textual model with an extra-textual one (A. Nünning 1997). In complex texts with embedded narratives (like Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; see section 3 below), the norm giving reference can then be located both outside the text in the reader's world or within the text among the inner-textual recipients of the embedded narrative. A further modification has been proposed by Phelan and Martin, who have established three axes: an axis of facts, an axis of value, and an axis of knowledge (1999, 94). This taxonomy results in a distinction between six types

of unreliability falling into two major groups. Dan Shen uses this approach for a basic definition of unreliability: a narrator is unreliable or untrustworthy if she/he “misreports, -interprets or -evaluates, or if she/he underreports, -interprets or -evaluates” (2013, nos. 5–6, with reference to Phelan and Martin 1999; Phelan 2005).

In ancient texts, intertextuality seems to be of central importance for an understanding of the narrative mechanisms of UNn. Per Krogh Hansen has introduced a model which lends itself well for this purpose. His model contains a taxonomy of four categories (Hansen 2007, 241–243):

- (1) Intranarrational “designates the ‘classical’ definition – that is unreliability established and supported by a large stock of discursive markers.”
- (2) Internarrational “designates the situation in which a narrator’s version of incidents is contrasted by another or several other narrators’ versions. [. . .] In opposition to the intranarrational version, internarrational unreliability is not necessarily marked discursively in the unreliable narrator’s discourse, but comes into being by the framing of other voices and a non-correspondence with what is taking form as the factual story on their behalf.”
- (3) Intertextual is “based on manifest character types that, on behalf of their former existence, in their configuration or paratextual mentioning [. . .] already direct the reader’s attention towards their reliability.” (Examples provided by Hansen are typical figures such as Naifs and Clowns.)
- (4) Extratextual: “designates unreliability depending on the reader’s direct implementation of own values or knowledge in the textual world. [. . .] this category is the most ambiguous.”

The value of this model is that it does not center on the typical textual markers of UNn as such (1: *intranarrational*). Instead, it lays emphasis on the communication between different voices, be they part of one and the same text (2: *internarrational*) or generated in part by the reader’s knowledge which is positioned outside the text itself (4: *extratextual*). The third category (*intertextual unreliability*) is suitable, for example, for typical figures in comedy and in the novel.

Hansen also discusses an approach developed by Dorrit Cohn (2000) that offers a distinction between unreliable and discordant narration. Discordance is used here to determine unreliability when it occurs not on an axis of facts but rather on an axis of ideology, creating a distance between the author and the narrator of a text (Hansen 2007, 243; cf. Fludernik 2005). Hansen also points to the historical dimension of interpretation. As an example, he refers to the interpretation of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1900) and the ideological problem of colonialism, of which it may or may not be critical.

Furthermore, narratological model building after Booth’s *Rhetoric of Fiction* has also emphasized possible *bonding effects* of UNn in contrast to its distanc-

ing and estranging effects. Phelan (2007, 226–232) proposes six subtypes of such bonding unreliability: “literally unreliable but metaphorically reliable,” “playful comparison between implied author and narrator,” “naïve defamiliarization,” “sincere but misguided self-deprecation,” “partial progress toward the norm,” and “bonding through optimistic comparison” (cf. Phelan and Rabinowitz 2012, 33–37; V. Nünning 2015a, 10; 2015b, 102).

2 Exploring UNn in Ancient Texts

2.1 Preliminary Remarks

The project of a diachronic and comparative narratology that addresses UNn and other central aspects of narrative is still in its early stages (Fludernik 2003; de Jong 2014a; von Contzen and Tilg 2019; on unreliability as future topic, von Contzen 2018, 29). There are already individual studies on individual authors, genres, and epochs within antiquity in which one has identified characteristics of UNn. What is missing, however, is a comprehensive and systematic survey of the phenomenon as we find it in modern and contemporary European literature (a brief survey is provided by Kimmerle 2015, 130–132). It is therefore not surprising that Stefan Tilg (2019, 78; similarly Feddern 2021, 2) only briefly touches on the subject of the UNr in his chapter on the narrator, and that Dan Shen includes a historical treatment of the subject among the open research desiderata (2013).

2.2 The Ancient Novel

2.2.1 Introduction

UNn is among the aspects of narrative that are often associated with modernity. It shares this feature with other linguistic and literary phenomena such as, for example, ambiguity (for a discussion of ambiguity as a “modern” phenomenon, see Vöhler 2021; Kirstein 2021, 159–160). Diachronic studies thus tend to place the starting point of modernity at the end of the eighteenth century with a glance back to the literature of the Middle Ages (Zerweck 2001; A. Nünning 2000; Plotke 2019, 268; see, however, Martínez and Scheffel 2019, 106, on Apuleius and Lucian). Only recently have there been approaches that examine UNn in ancient texts within a larger diachronic framework. An obvious candidate is the ancient novel (its general narrativity is discussed by Whitmarsh 2008, 242–245 and, for the Greek novel, by

Morgan 2004), although this genre was established relatively late in ancient literature – far later than epic, tragedy, or historiography.

2.2.2 Petronius, *Satyrica*

Early attempts include Conte's study *The Hidden Author* (1996) providing a narratologically inspired analysis of Petronius's *Satyrica* (sometimes referred to as *Satyricon*), a Roman novel dating from the first century CE that was rediscovered in the early fifteenth century. The work has survived only in fragments, its best-known part being the largely complete *Cena Trimalchionis* (made into a film by Federico Fellini in 1969), the story of a banquet given by the freedman and nouveau riche Trimalchio. The novel is told in the first person by its main character, Encolpius. Conte identifies two properties of this homodiegetic narrator – the “agent ‘I’” and the “narrating ‘I’” – while the author Petronius himself remains “covert” (*absconditus*), communicating with the reader behind the backs of the acting and narrating characters:

Behind the protagonist's narrative we meet the “hidden author”, who is also listening, along with the reader, to Encolpius' narration – and, along with the reader is smiling at it. [. . .] the protagonist is also the narrator, so that the problem of parody becomes the problem of “first person narrative”. The “I” in the *Satyricon* is not the author but an unreliable narrator, and the hidden author (Petronius) takes advantage of this ambiguity to create a many-sided discourse, a discourse into which are woven many other discourses. (Conte 1996, 21–22, 117; see also Whitmarsh 2008, 242; Bartsch 2008, 245–250).

Conte's approach has been taken up by other interpreters (Schmeling 1994/1995, 207; avoiding the term “unreliability,” however, Schmeling 2011, xxvi–xxvii).

2.2.3 Apuleius, Lucian, Achilles Tatius

There are similar approaches to the *Golden Ass*, a Roman novel of the second century CE (Martínez and Scheffel 2019, 106). The *Golden Ass* tells us in the first person the story of the protagonist Lucius, who travels to Thessaly (a land of witchcraft and magic), experiences numerous adventures, and is accidentally transformed into an ass without losing his human consciousness. The novel has a highly complex and much-discussed narrative structure resulting, among other things, from the main character's metamorphosis (hence the probable original title *Metamorphoses in 11 Books*) into an animal and the resulting shift of perspective (for narrative structure, see Winkler 1985; Harrison 2000, 226–235; Benson 2019, 3, 28–29). Similar to Petronius's *Satyrica*, Apuleius's novel contains numerous individual narratives, the

most famous of which and often alluded to since the Renaissance is the story of Cupid and Psyche. The “duplicities of auctor/actor” (Winkler 1985, 135–179) – in the person of the homodiegetic narrator Lucius, and the unclear identity of the speaker of the prologue – have prompted numerous analyses in which the aspect of UNn plays an important role (Lytle 2003, 352; cf. Wright 1973, 218; Bartsch 2008, 250–251). On this basis, Apuleius’s novel has been seen as a fundamental (metapoetic) discussion of the extent to which a fictional work can negotiate and communicate matters of reality (May 2013, 28). A question that is also being discussed in connection with Lucian’s *Vera Historia* (*A True Story*), a Greek novel also written during the second century CE (Martínez and Scheffel 2019, 14–15, 106). Whitmarsh (2008, 243–244) observes aspects of UNn in another Greek novel, *Leucippe and Clitophon*, by Achilles Tatius, from the end of the second century CE (cf. also Whitmarsh 2011; more cautiously, Morgan 2004, 497).

2.2.4 General Observations

Not insignificant for a historical discipline, in Classics unreliability is also linked to the question of the credibility of the text as a historical source in itself. This can be found for example with regard to religious issues, which play an important role in ancient novels. As Bowie and Harrison put it: “if for example the text of Apuleius is narratologically ‘unreliable’, what price its historical reliability as a source for contemporary *mentalité* [. . .]?”; 1993, 173; cf. Nicolini 2009).

All in all, then, UNn has entered into the interpretation of ancient novels. However, this is often done in a conceptually heterogeneous way in conjunction with aspects of multiperspectivity, polyphony, invisibility, notions of (ironic) distance between narrator and author/reader, and other qualities that render the first-person narrators of the individual novels and their surrounding world as destabilized, agency-less, and crisis-ridden in some way (for the interplay of multiperspectivity and unreliability, see Menhard 2009). The destabilization of the protagonists is also placed in relation to the reconstructed social context of the time in which the novels came to life (cf. Bartsch 2008, 256, for the “transgressive play with voice, gender and class”).

2.3 Historical Epic

Among the representatives of historical epic are the *Pharsalia* by the Roman poet Lucan, who wrote in the first century CE. It is a remarkable work because, among other things, the sphere of the intervening Olympian gods (*Götterapparat*) is left

out, thus departing from the literary practices of the Homeric tradition. New and unusual are also the quantity and detail with which military violence is described in this poem (Nill 2018). The subject of the *Pharsalia* is a critical phase of the Roman Civil War at the end of the Roman Republic, the confrontation between Caesar and Pompey and the forces of the Senate. This explains the alternative title *On the Civil War* (*De Bello Civili*). A recent narratological analysis has brought to light the relevance of UNn for this work, which wavers between ideologies of the late Republic and the early imperial age (Kimmerle 2015, 117–146; cf. Hardie 2013, 225). Extra-textual references such as the overshadowing Alexander-figure (356–323 BCE) play a role, as do text-internal inconsistencies between the actions and speech of the main characters (especially Caesar and Pompey) on the one hand and the auctorial narrative voice on the other. This results in a “fractured voice” within the narrative itself (see also Nill 2018, 68). On this basis, Kimmerle concludes that, from a historical perspective, no political tendency can be detected in the *Pharsalia*. The work is then “republican” only on its surface. What it does instead is to describe the “failure to offer an unambiguous view of past and present” (2015, 308, also 266–267; cf. also Pausch 2017, who offers a brief interpretation of UNn in Virgil’s more mythological epic *The Aeneid*).

2.4 Historiography and Biography

2.4.1 Introduction

Not only the historical epic but also historiography has drawn on research dedicated to UNn. It may sound surprising that in Classics, of all things, a rather factual genre such as historiography raises questions of literary theory whose discussion within modern literature revolves around fictional texts. However, this observation can be explained by the high degree of literary stylization and the historically evolved affinity with fictional genres such as the epic. For this reason, Irene de Jong (2014b, 172) argues that ancient historiographical texts can be analyzed with the same narratological toolbox used for literary genres (for a general discussion of the credibility of narrators in non-fictional texts, cf. A. Nünning 1998, 36; Martens 2015).

2.4.2 Herodotus, *Histories*

Of particular interest to narratologists are the *Histories* of Herodotus, the famous fifth-century-BCE author who is considered the “father of historiography” (Cicero, *De legibus* 1.5). The question of the credibility of Herodotus’s *Histories* as a his-

torical source has been discussed by scholars all along and continues to this day (Baragwanath and Bakker 2012, 2–10). More recently, studies have increasingly been carried out that are more concerned with Herodotus's narrative technique than with the verification of the historical accuracy and the *realia* mentioned in the text (e.g., Fehling [1971] 1989; Grethlein and Krebs 2012; de Jong 2004; 2012; 2014b, 192–195; 2019; Bakker 2019). Drawing on a reader-response approach and the implied-author model, Baragwanath (2008) has described elements of UNn in some parts of Herodotus's work. According to Baragwanath, this device aims to sharpen the general attentiveness of readers and to heighten the authority of the text. Discussing a chapter of the *Histories* in which Herodotus expresses doubts about the Athenian rumor that the Alkmeonids, as supporters of the Tyrannis, had collaborated with the Persians at Marathon (6.121–131), Baragwanath concludes that Herodotus's remarks here work against the information he offers in the surrounding text (2008, 33; for a critical discussion of this approach, see Flower 2009).

2.4.3 The *Historia Augusta*

No less debated than Herodotus's credibility as a historical source is another work of ancient historiography, the *Augustan History* (*Historia Augusta*). The work comprises thirty biographies of rulers and usurpers of the second and third centuries CE, ranging from Hadrian to Carinus. Almost everything about this collection is highly controversial, from the question of dating and authorship to the problem of historical credibility. Dennis Pausch (2010) proposed to consider the text's sometimes contradictory statements and judgments about individual events and imperial figures as a deliberate strategic use of the device of UNn. It is observed, with Syme, that there are close links between the literary techniques employed in the *Historia Augusta* and those found in the ancient novel (Pausch 2010, 115–116; Syme 1968, 205). In an analysis of the *Vita Aureliani*, for example, Pausch comes to a conclusion similar to Baragwanath's on Herodotus by drawing on multiperspectivity and reader-response theory, comparing it especially with Heliodorus's *Aithiopika*, a novel dating from the late third or fourth century CE (Pausch 2010, 131, see also 121, and Pausch 2007).

2.4.4 General Observations

Overall, the treatment of the model of UNn in history-related texts turns out to be similar to that in the field of the novel. The concept is already present and contributes to a more precise understanding of the narrative structure of a variety of

texts, but it is not yet firmly established. The research conducted so far can offer initial building blocks for the project of a diachronic narratology from a vertical perspective; at the same time, like other studies on related narratological topics, it also uncovers references horizontally between different types of texts within the epoch of ancient literature, such as those between the historiographical genre and the novelist and epic traditions.

3 UNn in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

3.1 Introduction

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* seem a particularly suitable subject for an analysis of UNn. On the one hand, ancient epic poetry as a major narrative genre can be regarded as a precursor of the modern novel, through which concepts of unreliability are primarily developed. In addition, the fifteen books of the *Metamorphoses* – totaling nearly 12,000 lines – are characterized by a highly complex narrative structure, with a multitude of internal narrative voices and audiences making it a highly attractive text for interdisciplinary and diachronic research. Hardly any other author of antiquity has been so closely related to the positions and aesthetics of postmodernism as the late Augustan poet Ovid, who is author not only of the *Metamorphoses*, but also of the *Tristia* (*Sorrows*) and the *Epistulae ex Ponto* (*Letters from the Black Sea*), both works that are regarded as foundations of European exile poetry (Fowler 2000; Harrison 2001; Roynon and Orrells 2019; Kirstein 2019, 2021).

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* – in many ways a predecessor of Lucan's *Pharsalia* (see 2.3 above) – consist of about 250 individual narratives, which generally offer etiological explanations for existing natural phenomena, names, customs, cults, and so on. It has already been observed that etiological narratives are often connected to the notion of UNn (cf., e.g., Solodow 1988, 64). Since legitimation is one of the traditional key functions of etiology, UNn is of particular importance here due to its destabilizing effect (Waldner 2014, 28).

This is true not only for the *Metamorphoses*, but also for another of Ovid's grand poems. In his *Fasti* – a calendrical poem on the origins of Roman cults and festivals, of which only the first six books survive – Ovid exploits UNn by various narrative strategies. For example, holidays important to Roman national identity, such as the *Parilia* in *Fast.* 4.783–806, are obscured by techniques of “multiple explanations” typical of antiquarian ritual exegesis (Beard 1987), resulting in a high degree of what Feeney (1998, 133) refers to as “defamiliarisation” of the conventional. The narrating voice of the *Fasti* himself is “noticeably unreliable” (Newlands 1992, 47;

cf. Newlands 1995, 51–86; Williams 1991), and reveals his lack of knowledge to an increasing extent in the course of the six books. Correspondingly, the number of his human and divine informants becomes more and more extensive, especially in the last two books (cf. Newlands 1995, 79–86). However, these secondary informants also contribute to a further confusion of the origin stories, since they themselves sometimes act as unreliable narrators (Newlands 1995, 65–77; cf. Harries 1989). This is perhaps most evident in the Muses appearing in *Fasti* 5.7–110. The Muses are traditionally attested as *reliable* sources of poetic inspiration. In the *Fasti*, however, even the Muses “disagree” (*dissensere deae*; 5.9) and come into dispute over the etiology of the name of the month of May (cf. Barchiesi 1992). The technique of UNn applied at various levels thus results in an “epistemological crisis” (Newlands 1995, 52). This is particularly problematic in the *Fasti* because a calendrical commentary is actually a medium that seeks to provide reliable information by explaining individual myths and cults.

In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, for example, the first love story (“*primus amor*”; 1.452) introduces the reader to the god Apollo not only as a god who fails in the business of love, but also as a god who, despite his position as an Olympian oracular god of prophecy, proves to be unable to control his own future:

Phoebus amat visaeque cupit conubia Daphnes,
quodque cupit sperat suaque illum oracula fallunt.

(Phoebus caught sight of her, fell in love and longed to possess her. Wishes were hopes, for even his powers of prophecy failed him; *Met.* 1.490–491, trans. Raeburn)

Apollo does not appear here as the narrator of an etiological story. Nevertheless, his failure is noteworthy and has an indirect, yet momentous effect on etiological storytelling in the *Metamorphoses*. Since Apollo is not only the god of oracle but also, in a very Callimachean sense (cf. *Aitia* frg. 1.22 Harder), the inspiring divinity of poetry, the story of Apollo and Daphne may very well be read as a marker which gives the reader an idea about the possibly unreliable nature of the primary narrator himself, thereby providing directions on how to read the *Metamorphoses* as a whole.

3.2 Ways of Introducing UNn

3.2.1 Embedded/Framed Speech

The technique of framing subordinate narratives within a larger context is a fashionable practice among Hellenistic poets (Myers 1994, 20; cf. Wheeler 1999, 185–193; Barchiesi 2006; Goldhill 1991, 240). The reader is confronted with two (or

more) narrative voices which offer different or even opposing views and evaluations of a given context. An example can be found in the eighth book of the *Metamorphoses*. The book concludes with three embedded (or framed) narratives, as part of the story of Theseus visiting the river god Achelous (*Met* 8.547–884). All three narratives recount a metamorphosis; two of them are told by the host Achelous himself and one by a figure called Lelex, an aged and distinguished man and an old friend of Theseus. In terms of the disposition of the passage as a whole, it is highly complex and noticeably “Callimachean,” carrying a wealth of intertextual references, especially to Callimachus’s Hymn to Apollo and to the *Hecale* (Hollis 1970 *ad loc.*; Hutchinson 1988, 345–352; Myers 1994, 90). An Ovidian invention of some irony seems to be the choice of the river god Achelous as internal narrator, because he is introduced at the beginning using rather non-Callimachean metapoetic words such as “swollen” river (*imbre tumens*; *Met* 8.550). According to Hinds, Ovid is here “de-Callimachizing Callimachus” (2006, 36; cf. Barchiesi 2006, 277). Perhaps it is no coincidence that this Callimachean passage stands almost exactly in the middle of the fifteen books of the *Metamorphoses*, which can easily be interpreted as a structural marker in line with the Callimachean passages at the beginning and the end of the work (Holzberg [2007] 2015, 79).

Of special interest here is the middle of the entire passage in which Lelex recounts the story of Philemon and Baucis in an embedded narrative (*Met.* 8.547–884). At first sight, Lelex’s story appears to be of decent origin and solid reliability. His speech is the direct reply to a brief statement by the son of Ixion, Pirithous. Pirithous, as a *spretor deorum* (a despiser of the gods), had discredited Achelous’s previous story of the origin of two Greek Islands (Echinades and Perimele; *Met* 8.577–610) by calling into question the power of the Olympian gods:

Amnis ab his tacuit, factum mirabile cunctos
 moverat; inridet credentes, utque deorum
 spretor erat mentisque ferox, Ixione natus:
 “ficta refers nimiumque putas, Acheloe, potentes
 esse deos” dixit, “si dant adimuntque figuras.”
 obstipuere omnes nec talia dicta probarunt,
 ante omnesque Lelex animo maturus et aevo
 sic ait: “inmensa est finemque potentia caeli
 non habet et quicquid superi voluere peractum est.”

(The river-god held his peace. His amazing story had moved the whole of the company. One poured scorn on their credulous wonder, Pirithoüs, a young tearaway, who had no use for the gods. “Pure fiction!” he said. “Acheloüs, you credit the gods with too much power, if you think they create and then alter the shapes in Nature.” All were aghast at these blasphemous words and voiced disapproval, especially Lelex, whose mind reflected his riper years. “The power of heaven cannot be measured,” he answered firmly. “It knows no bounds. Whatever the gods decree is accomplished”; *Met.* 8.611–619, trans. Raeburn)

This seems to be the beginning of a reliable story, and Lelex does everything to back up his claims regarding the veracity of his tale: he believes in the power of the gods, the story has been told to him by old men who have no reason to lie, and he has been in Phrygia and actually seen the trees into which Philemon and Baucis were transformed with his own eyes:

quoque minus dubites, tiliae contermina quercus
collibus est Phrygiis, medio circumdata muro
ipse locum vidi.

(To ease your impious doubts, you should visit the Phrygian hills to look at an oak tree and linden nearby, both ringed by a low wall. I've been to the place myself; *Met.* 8.620–622, trans. Raeburn)

haec mihi non vani (neque erat, cur fallere vellent)
narravere senes.

(The story was told me by trustworthy elders who had no reason to lie or deceive; *Met.* 8.721–722, trans. Raeburn)

Through this affirmation, the Lelex figure connects the reality outside the story with the story itself in a manner typical for etiological storytelling (Waldner 2007, 219). The conventional phrasing of the transition between the *here and now* of the etiological object and the explanatory story of the past is depicted in the adverb *adhuc*, “until now”:

ostendit adhuc Thyneius illic
incola de gemino vicinos corpore truncos

(Still to this day the peasants of Phrygia point to the oak and the linden nearby; *Met.* 8.719–720)

For aetiological formulas such as *adhuc and nunc quoque*, see Solodow (1988, 176n30) and Loehr (1996, 35, 134–136 with n215); for the formula *quia, quod*, and so on, cf. Loehr (1996, 82). In addition, the local flavor and the rich detail of the story support the story's overall trustworthiness.

However, if one looks at this embedded narrative more closely, doubts arise as to whether this story and the other two stories might be told by a UNr. The very fact that Piriouthos classifies Achelous's earlier story about the origin of the two islands as *ficta* (*Met.* 8.614) leaves one with an uneasy feeling and a general sense that there might be UNn at work in the story of Philemon and Baucis (and in the two related stories). The reader is encountered with two possible but opposing views and evaluations of a given context: “Readers tend,” as Feeney has put it, “to be either Lelex or Piriouthos” (1991, 230). The Lelex passage has been interpreted in this metapoetic manner as disillusioning along these lines many times (e.g., Feeney 1991, 230; Myers 1994, 91–93; Waldner 2007, 219). As Feeney and Myers point out, however, it is not

Ovid's agenda to destabilize and deconstruct what remains, even in an embedded story, but rather to make visible the (poetic) mechanisms in which etiological storytelling works. Here, and in many other passages, Ovid gives us a glimpse into the poetic "workshop of fiction" (Feeney 1991, 230–231; Myers 1994, 93).

Two further aspects also need to be taken into consideration. First, although *ficta* belongs primarily to the voice of Pirithous in the Lelex and Pirithous episode (*Met* 8.614), it can also be read as an "atmospheric marker" for the entire passage in the sense of Genette ([1972–1976] 1980, 75: "advance mentions"; cf. also Barthes 1966, 7, who uses the term "germe"). Second, what Feeney (1991, 230–231) convincingly explains as "double vision [. . .] as a necessary condition for reading our fictions" can also be described as "strategic ambiguity," which seems to be a key feature of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (cf. Bauer et al. 2010; Knape and Winkler 2015; on Ovid, Kirstein 2021).

3.2.2 Multiple Explanations

The technique of embedded or framed narratives is not the only way texts can enhance the use of UNn. Unreliability can also occur when a text offers a multiplicity of views, explanations, and evaluations. This narrative device, often called multiple explanations (*Mehrfacherklärungen*), seems to have been highly popular among authors of the Hellenistic and the Augustan ages (for Callimachus's use of direct speech to generate multiple perspectives, see Harder 2012, vol. 1, 55). Multiple explanations can, but need not, be narrated by multiple narrative voices, as when, for example, embedded or internal narratives are applied. Multiple explanations can also be presented using one and the same narrative voice.

As an example, one might take a look at the three etiological stories in the first book of the *Metamorphoses* that tell the story of the creation of human beings (*Met* 1.76–88, 158–162, 367–415). Schmidt reads these key passages in the light of an anthropological interpretation (1991, 35). All three stories belong to one and the same narrative voice, the primary narrator of the *Metamorphoses* being interrupted only by Jupiter telling the story of Lycaon (*Met* 1.211–239; Loehr 1996, 168–170). There is some evidence that this technique of multiple explanations also dates back to Callimachus: the *Milan Diegesis* reports a triple explanation of the cult of the Diana Lucina, and there was also a multiple explanation of the origins of the Charites (Loehr 1996, 194–198).

3.2.3 Direct Characterization of Narrative Voices

In addition to the techniques of embedded narrative and multiple explanations, there is yet another possible way of introducing UNn into etiological contexts. Often,

the narrative voices are characterized as unreliable not because of the content of their narration and aspects which might not be in accordance with other voices and views, but rather through their direct characterization. The literary tradition of etiological storytelling has one particular kind of figure that invites the question of UNn: etiologies are often narrated in a dialogue configuration of question and answer (Harder 2012, vol. 1, 1–56). Responsibility for the answer is given to a voice which is regarded as especially reliable.

In the first two books of Callimachus's *Aitia*, the Muses take over this role of answering. In the story of Philemon and Baucis in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, it is the character's old age that makes the figure of Lelex a trustworthy senior informant. When we look at religious *aitia* (*Kult-Aitien*) explaining the origins and institutions of cults, rituals, and other practices, statues of gods and goddesses are often used as narrators. Such speaking statues or objects were popular among Hellenistic poets in general. One need only think of their extensive use in the literary epigram, and it is likely that Callimachus deliberately played with elements deriving from different genres, as Annette Harder has argued (1998; 2012, 2:894–895, with further parallels). In etiological texts such as Callimachus's *Aitia*, the authoritative nature of the divinity speaking to him- or herself was mostly exploited for narrative purposes. Unreliability (or the possibility of UNn) comes into play when a statue speaks not only from a limited, “personal” perspective about its own (local) cult, but also when it extends the general and etiological information it offers beyond its proper area of influence and control (Waldner 2007, 223; Barchiesi 1997). Here, one could possibly apply Genette's term *paralepsis* ([1972–1976] 1980, 195), a category that forms part of the theory of focalization to describe situations in which a figure offers more information than it ought properly to have. This happens, for example, when external focalization slides into internal focalization and the figure continues to speak like an external voice. When this happens, one might suspect that the authoritative voice is being undermined by an untrustworthy expansion of possible knowledge.

In a surviving fragment of the *Aitia*, Callimachus applied this technique of speaking statues in an interplay of questions and answers. In this story, which may have been part of the third book, a statue of the Delian Apollo answers the question of an unidentified interlocutor (frag. 114 Harder; the statue carries a bow and the *Charites* (Graces) in its hands; see Harder 2012, vol. 2, 892–906). A contemporary of Ovid, Propertius, transforms this motif by passing the voice to the statue of Vertumnus (*Elegy* 4.2). In Rome, the statue of Vertumnus, the god of seasons, gardens, and fruit, had a prominent location in the city, thus fitting perfectly into the Propertian program of creating a “nationalized” Roman etiological world history (for literary and epigraphical evidence on the Roman cult of Vertumnus, see Myers 1994, 117–118; Hutchinson 2006, 86–87; Waldner 2007, 22n78). Clearly, this is a reference to the Callimachean model of Apollo speaking (Myers 1994, 113–132, esp.

120; Loehr 1996, 82–84, 198–206; Barchiesi 1997, 186–187). In Ovid, examples of speaking statues are more prevalent in the *Fasti* than in the *Metamorphoses* (Myers 1994, 120). Still, in the *Metamorphoses* the god Vertumnus appears again, notably in the last love story of the work in the fourteenth book (*Met* 14.622–771). Here, the reader sees Vertumnus in the role of a lover, which reminds us of the first love story in the *Metamorphoses*, in which Apollo unsuccessfully woos Daphne. The last love story of the *Metamorphoses* ends on a somewhat more positive note than the first one (Myers 1994, 125, 114; Holzberg [2007] 2015, 108): Vertumnus has fallen in love with Pomona, but he cannot win her over. He disguises himself as an old (Italian) woman and gives her a warning by telling the story of Iphis and Anaxarete: Anaxarete does not respond to Iphis’s love, Iphis hangs himself, and Anaxarete is turned into a stone (*Met.* 14.698–764). In this story Anaxarete is described as *dura* (hard, unyielding) in the well-known terminology of the Roman love elegy (Myers 1994, 123; for a gendered reading, see Wheeler 1999, 57–58). Vertumnus affirms that his story is not fictive and that even in his time a statue of Anaxarete could be visited in Salamis in a temple of Venus:

neve ea ficta putes, dominae sub imagine signum
servat adhuc Salamis, Veneris quoque nomine templum
Prospicientis habet.

(To prove this isn’t an idle fiction, Salamis still preserves Anaxarete’s statue. It also possesses a shrine dedicated to Venus the watcher; *Met* 14.759–761, trans. Raeburn)

In the Ovidian version of Vertumnus, the god does not speak as a statue, but narrates an etiological story revolving around another statue, the statue of Anaxarete. Although Vertumnus does not speak through a statue, the intertextual link to Propertius’s *Elegy* 4.2 and through Propertius also to Callimachus’s *Aitia* makes one think of the Ovidian Vertumnus “as both a statue and an aetiological internal narrator” (Myers 1994, 120, 119, on the intertextual links to Propertius in Ovid’s version; on the etymological wordplay in the elegy of Propertius with its multiple explanations, see Loehr 1996, 206; Barchiesi 1997, 187). As a result, in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* Vertumnus appears as an etiological storyteller of reduced and questionable reliability. Again, Ovid metapoetically offers a glimpse into the making of etiologies and into his workshop of fiction.

3.3 Modern Theoretical Approaches and Models of UNn Relevant to the Analysis of Ovid

So far, it has been argued that UNn is one aspect of etiological storytelling which enables the poet to cause the reader to reflect upon the fictional status of the text

by breaking the illusion of a concordant or unified world view. The popularity of embedded narratives with their potential for generating unreliability is in line with the Hellenistic preference for intertextuality. Both techniques – distinct theoretically, though often intertwining – are similar in their effect of creating a highly complex and dense textual universe through a multiplicity of voices and viewpoints (for intertextual voices in Callimachus, see, e.g., Cusset 2011).

At this point, the model of UNn as proposed by Phelan and Martin (1999) seems suitable for further analysis of the structure of the Ovidian text. One could argue that Vertumnus uses or rather abuses the etiological story of Iphis and Anaxarete for the purpose of courtship. Thus, on the *axis of value* one might assume that he *misevaluates* the story because the emphasis is put on his personal moral of the metamorphosis: “don’t be a *dura puella!*” As noted by Myers, “Vertumnus underlines the moral lesson of this metamorphosis, a maneuver unusual in the rest of the *Metamorphoses*” (1994, 123). On the other hand, given the practices of Hellenistic *intertextuality*, he fully complies with Ovid’s advice to lovers in his *Amores* and *Ars Amatoria*. On the *axis of knowledge*, one could argue that the Ovidian Vertumnus does not *under-report* but rather *over-report*. In the story of Anaxarete and her image at the temple of *Venus Prospiciens* at Salamis, he displays a kind of far-reaching knowledge which seems to be beyond his natural sphere. In the Lelex episode in the eighth book of the *Metamorphoses*, it is again the *axis of evaluation* that is of importance. Much like the god Vertumnus (who uses his story in an attempt to win love), the aged Lelex introduces his story of Philemon and Baucis for the purpose of refuting Pirithous’s criticism of the gods. The possibility that Lelex *misevaluates* his story arises less from the story itself than from the story’s context and its intra-textual references to the two other stories within the same passage, which are told by the swollen river god Achelous (*Met* 8.550). The characterization of Achelous as “swollen” has been interpreted as an intertextual reference to the metaphorical categories of Callimachean poetics, holding a prominent position in the middle of the *Metamorphoses*. Since the entire passage transports a plethora of intra- and intertextual references which are decoded and supplemented in reader-response activity, the Lelex episode displays a mode of *over-reporting* rather than of *under-reporting*.

In the passages of Vertumnus and Lelex, one could apply Hansen’s category of *internarrational unreliability* (2007) because in both instances unreliability is, at least partly, the outcome of framing (embedding) voices or the confrontation of accumulated framed voices. In addition, one could argue that Ovid, through an intertextual reworking of Propertius, evokes the possibility of a *discordant unreliability* in the referred text as discussed by Cohn (2000) and Hansen (2007, 243): having read Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, a reader may be able to detect and decode silent signals of discordance in Propertius’s *Elegy* 4.2. At the same time, Ovid reveals

a metapoetic view of his own poetry as well as of poetic production in general. This interpretation falls into line with the observation that Ovid uses the Vertumnus episode explicitly to “override” Propertius’s decisively Roman approach to enact a decentering by widening the view to the Greco-Roman world and its literary tradition as a whole. A mode of decentering and overwriting (*Überschreibung*; Walde 2000) is very Ovidian and can be found in different parts of his oeuvre, notably in the *Heroides* and his exile poetry where he gives a voice to those who are unheard otherwise.

Does Ovid, in the end, fall victim to his own playfulness with the borders of fiction? Does his voice as the implied author of the *Metamorphoses* become unreliable itself? In the first instance, unreliability bears a negative weight that calls for some kind of counterbalance. However, critics have also taken a more positive approach to this phenomenon. Solodow understands UNn in Ovid as part of poetic self-doubt and self-criticism (1988, 64). This observation fits in well with the observation that unreliability has a certain affinity with self-analysis (Bal [1985] 2009, 131) with regard in particular to autobiographical genres. This invites a connection with Phelan’s considerations on the potential for the bonding effects of UNn. Features such as playful comparison or bonding through optimistic comparison in particular seem to be promising for research on the intertextual poetry of Ovid or other ancient authors.

4 Summary

The research situation does not yet allow for a systematically complete and diachronic overview of the different types of UNn in ancient literature. Already existing but still sporadic analyses show that UNn is a narrative technique that can be traced in the ancient novel, but also in genres such as historiography and biography. Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, due to the multitude and complexity of the narratives presented, offer an inherently high potential for the use of UNn. A tentative analysis of selected stories of the *Metamorphoses* reveals that Booth’s theory of UNn and the ongoing development of this approach can be fruitfully applied to ancient texts and contribute to their more accurate understanding. The reason for the discussed tendency of *over-reporting* in Ovid can be found in the high degree of intertextuality and the preference for embedded narratives which is typical of the literary production of the Hellenistic and Augustan ages. Since modern theories of UNn build upon texts starting from the eighteenth century, this makes an interesting statement about the special features of this earlier period. It might also be seen as an affirmation that ancient texts can contribute to the expansion of theory building in diachronic narratology.

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