

Martianus Prae/Postmodernus?¹

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The commonplace of the modernist reception of Martianus Capella's *De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* have been bafflement, distaste and disagreement about its significance. This late-antique encyclopedia, preceded by a programmatic allegory drawing eclectically on rituals of the mystery religions but interspersed throughout with elements of parody and burlesque, has been variously characterized as "the last Latin exponent of the religion of culture" by Marrou;² as a "grand attempt . . . consciously designed to present a synthesis of the total pattern of the cosmos" by Lemoine;³ as a not-so-learned school textbook by Stahl;⁴ as a "crypto-pagan mystagogic compendium" by Shanzer;⁵ as a baffling "juxtaposition of the ridiculous and the sublime" by Westra;⁶ and, with particular reference to Book II, as a radical form of intertextuality by Kupke.⁷

One approach is to look at this varied dish (*lanx satura*) in terms of the combination of apparently disparate genres, unequal at least in terms of the classical hierarchy of genres. But there are precedents: encyclopedic learning and Menippean satire had already been connected by Varro; Menippean satire derives from the diatribes of the Cynics who would mock Homer, the fountain of wisdom, and has affinities with the humorous and carnivalesque

1. This article is a modified version of a paper presented at the Eighth International Conference on Mikhail Bakhtin, University of Calgary, 20–25 June 1997. An earlier, trial version was presented at the Elfde Symposium van de Onderzoekschool Mediëvistiek with as subject Encyclopedische Literatuur in de Middeleeuwen, which took place at Vught (Netherlands), 1–3 June 1995.

2. H.I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (New York, 1956), 100–01.

3. F. Lemoine, *Martianus Capella: A Literary Re-evaluation* (Munich, 1972), 229.

4. W.H. Stahl and Richard Johnson, with E.L. Burge, *Martianus Capella and the Seven Liberal Arts, Volume I: The Quadrivium of Martianus Capella* (New York-London, 1971), 234; cf. p. 239.

5. Danuta Shanzer, *A Philosophical and Literary Commentary on Martianus Capella's De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii, Book I* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1986), 43.

6. "The Juxtaposition of the Ridiculous and the Sublime," *Florilegium: Carleton Annual Papers on Classical Antiquity and the Middle Ages* 3 (1981): 198–214.

7. Haijo Jan Westra and Tanja Kupke, eds. *The Berlin Commentary on Martianus Capella's De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii, Book II* (Leiden, 1998), 145–60, esp. 159.

elements of Socratic dialogue and symposium literature. In addition, Lucian's burlesque of the mystico-philosophical elements of astral journey and apotheosis may have played a role, as well as Apuleius' (highly debated) desacralisation of mystical initiation in the *Golden Ass*.

The problem for the modernist reception of *De Nuptiis* is the combination of satire and encyclopedia, two apparently opposite and mutually exclusive modes of discourse, simultaneously presenting and undermining a dominant world view through a character such as the bumbling, fumbling author / main character as the "authoritative" source of knowledge, which creates a destabilising effect when compared with the sacrality of Homer's "epic encyclopedia" or Dante's "visionary journey of discovery," in Frye's terms.⁸ As a medieval example of the procédé, Frye cites the continuation of the *Roman de la Rose*; one might add here that, like *De Nuptiis*, this work also exploits the burlesque potential of allegory. In this connection, another medieval example that could have been adduced is Book 2 of Chaucer's *House of Fame*.⁹ Frye thus establishes an outline of a genre of satirical encyclopedia in which the value of book knowledge is questioned and ridiculed by Burton, Rabelais, Swift and Sterne.

Along with the philosophical notion of salvation through *paideia* (the pagan cult of learning) or the attainment of divine knowledge through religious revelation with *paideia* as propaedeusis, we find the ridiculing of any such claim in ancient Menippean satire. In a valuable and provocative recent study,¹⁰ Joel Relihan, using Bakhtin's analysis of "menippea," emphasises the latter and basically claims that the genre provides a self-parodic framework that undermines its message.¹¹ I intend to show that the burlesque of learning and the self-parody of the author and other generic features of Menippean satire in *De Nuptiis* have a very definite and well-established, didactic and pedagogical purpose, and that these features are not to be conflated with the educational, epistemological and ontological malaise of post-modernism.

8 *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, 1957), 309–12; 91–92; 54–58; cf. 317–23.

9. Cf. F.N.M. Diekstra, "Chaucer and the Romance of the Rose," *English Studies* 69 (1988): 12–26, who identifies some of the characteristic features of Menippean satire without naming the genre.

10. Joel C. Relihan, *Ancient Menippean Satire*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993). Various reviewed, but rejected out of hand as a thesis by Shanzer in *Speculum* 71 (1996): 752, who writes: "In the case of Martianus, how reasonable is it to posit a three-hundred-odd page encyclopedia of evidently respectable content that aims to undermine its own intellectual validity?"

11. See Relihan, 10, 20, 26, 35, 133 for various *mises en abîme*, and 137–51 for his analysis of Martianus, esp. 149; cf. 153.

Relihan bases his analysis on the fourteen characteristics of menippea as established by Bakhtin in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*,¹² which can be summarised as follows for the present discussion: the use of humour and burlesque; the combination of religion and the sublime with elements of low life; unusual vantage points (in Martianus, the celestial senate of the gods); fantastic fictions and a "many-coloured" style (*poikilia*); deliberate breaks with aesthetic canons; scandalous treatment of the gods; split personalities and insanity; and ridicule of the pretence of knowledge. Payne¹³ adds another essential element: "a dialogue between two persons of very different perceptions ... [and hence] the lack of a figure of unquestionable authority."

Next, Relihan traces the historical origins of Menippean satire in antiquity and applies the Bakhtinian definition to a series of authors, from Varro, Lucian and Julian the Apostate to Martianus Capella, Fulgentius, and Ennodius. In the following, I will highlight the application / applicability of the Bakhtinian definition to Martianus Capella as signalled by Relihan, but I will conclude by disputing Relihan's claim that Martianus' Menippean encyclopedia is designed to be its own undoing.

The split personality, the essential unreliability of the author (and the instability of the genre), as well as the dialogue with a hostile interlocutor are very much in evidence in Martianus' conflicts with his alter ego, the (self-invented) Muse Satira, who furiously abandons the author for disgracing her by indulging in buffoonery and who complains of a lost opportunity to present her as a serious, philosophical Muse.¹⁴ She questions his sanity and compares him to a goat (the name Capella suggests as much). At the end of the work, the author refers to his own rantings and ravings as doglike, which, as Relihan suggests, may hint at the Cynic origins of Menippean satire.¹⁵ The ridicule of the author actually starts right at the outset of the work. Immediately after the sublime invocation of Hymen, the sacred, cosmic principle of harmony, in the opening hymn of Book I, the author is introduced as an old man making a fool of himself by chattering silly trifles (*ineptas nugulas*) and as a sleepy priest chanting a hymn before remembering to open the temple doors, all this from the point of view of his own son, who is the typically unwilling addressee of all the edification to follow.¹⁶ The ridicule of book learning and the burlesque of the gods is evident throughout the frame

12. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. R.W. Rotsel (1973), esp. 93–97.

13. F. Anne Payne, *Chaucer and Menippean Satire* (Madison, 1981), 10–11.

14. *De Nuptiis* 8.806–07; W.H. Stahl and R. Johnson, with E.L. Burge, trans., *Martianus Capella and the Seven Liberal Arts, Volume II: The Marriage of Philology and Mercury* (New York, 1977), 315–16, hereafter referred to as Stahl.

15. Relihan, 15.

16. *De Nuptiis* 1.1–2; Stahl, 4–5.

narrative of Books III–IX in the way the celestial senate of the Olympian gods is bored, irritated, over-impressed or even frightened by the appearance or recitation of their respective fields of knowledge by the various Arts. A good example is the scene created by the triumphal entry of Dame Rhetoric, rendered in mock-epic hexameters in the best satirical tradition:

Meantime the trumpets sounded, their strident song pierced the sky and the heaven re-echoed with an unfamiliar din; the gods were frightened and confused, the host of heaven's minor inhabitants quaked; unaware of the reason, their hearts stood still and they recalled the charges made about the battle at Phlegra [i.e. the Gigantomachy] long ago But while a great group of the earth gods was disturbed by such thoughts, in strode a woman (Rhetoric) of the tallest stature and abounding self-confidence ...; the arms with which she used either to defend herself or wound her enemies shone with the brightness of lightning When she clashed her weapons, you would say that the broken booming of thunder was rolling forth with the shattering clash of a lightning cloud She was said to have brought under her control the people of Romulus and had caused the utmost confusion throughout Greece.¹⁷

After completing her learned summary of the art of rhetoric, this formidable woman exits as follows:

But as Rhetoric reached this point, the Cyllenian [Mercury] nodded to her to move across into the company of her sisters and the service of the bride [Philology]. Seeing his signal, she concluded her address and with ready confidence went to Philology's throne, kissed her forehead noisily—for she did nothing quietly, even if she wanted to—and mingled with the company and fellowship of her sisters.¹⁸

Relihan interprets this treatment of Rhetoric as a serious questioning of traditional book learning and as a device to “shock bookish sensibilities and question the importance of the textbook material presented,” in order to raise the question: “is rhetoric divine, and can one scale heaven by a ladder whose rungs are the Seven Liberal Arts?”¹⁹ Before addressing this line of interpretation, it may be useful to look at the most extreme example, namely the burlesque of Dialectic:

Into the Assembly of the gods came Dialectic, a woman whose weapons are complex and knotty utterances Her eyes constantly darted about In her left hand she held a snake twined in immense coils; in her right hand a set of [propositions] carefully inscribed on wax tablets ... held on the inside by a hidden hook;... her left hand kept the crafty device of the snake hidden under her cloak, her right hand was offered to one and all. Then if anyone took one of those propositions, he was soon caught on the hook

17. *De Nuptiis* 5.425–27; Stahl, 155–56.

18. *De Nuptiis* 5.565; Stahl, 213.

19. Relihan, 26.

and dragged towards the poisonous coils of the hidden snake which presently emerged and after first biting the person relentlessly with the venomous points of its sharp teeth then gripped him in its many coils and compelled him to the intended position. If no one wanted to [grant any of the propositions], Dialectic confronted them with some questions; or secretly stirred the snake to creep up on them until its tight embrace strangled those who were caught and compelled them to accept the will of the interrogator.²⁰

In this description of Dialectic in particular there seems to be an element of hostility, not just ridicule, to this branch of learning. Relihan comments extensively on this aspect of menippeia, and he suggests that the genre is utterly de[con]structive of philosophical learning. In my opinion, he is wrong, because even an “anatomy of folly,” as we have it here, is instructive, as Frye would have argued. In any case, this question leads to the central issue, namely the function of humour, ridicule and burlesque in the frame narrative vis-à-vis the serious content of the discourses of the various Arts. Significantly, this issue is raised several times in the work itself, once after a particularly riotous scene describing a drunk Silenus who has passed out at this orgy of learning:

In the meantime wrinkled Silenus ... had been standing behind, leaning for support. Perhaps the weariness of age was too much for him; then again it may have been the strain of concentrating on the remarkable discourse of the learned lady [Astronomy]; or perhaps the occasion of the marriage ceremony had gotten the better of him—swollen from earlier drinking bouts—and he had drenched himself in an overdraft of wine. For some time now he had been relaxed in slumber and quietly snoring, when suddenly he belched like a croaking frog.²¹

The subsequent description of raucous mirth among the gods is followed immediately by a problematisation of the function of humour in *De Nuptiis*, in the form of a rebuke of the author by his enraged Muse, Satira:

While this animated mirth [surrounding Silenus] was at its height, Satire, who always considered it her responsibility to edify and reprove my thoughts, said: “you Felix, or Capella, or whoever you are, with a sense to match the beast’s whose name you bear, are you going out of your mind with the intrusion of this unseemly jesting?... Soundly cudged by such stern and fell reproaches from Satire—a charming lady at other times [*Satirae alioquin lepidulae*—and condemned by my own apologies for my impudent conduct, I asked her which of the [Arts] was being prepared for introduction.”²²

20. *De Nuptiis* 4.327–28; Stahl, 106–07.

21. *De Nuptiis* 8.804; Stahl, 314.

22. *De Nuptiis* 8.806–07; Stahl, 315–16.

But almost immediately the poet succumbs again to the mood to banter (*denuo me risus invasit*). After Satira's accusation of inappropriate jest, Martianus in turn accuses her of inappropriate seriousness, reminding her of the true nature of the Menippean genre:

What has suddenly happened to you ever-ironical and subtle contempt for the bombast and conceits of the poets, whereby you content yourself with chaffing and witticisms while consigning their poetry to the realm of absurdity? Is there any reason to rage madly at me and to chide me in a superior and contemptuous way ...?²³

This dispute is foreshadowed in an earlier "conversation" between the author and his Muse. At the beginning of Book III, after completing his allegory of the marriage of Mercury and Philology, Martianus proposes to present the serious studies of the Seven Liberal Arts in a non-allegorical, literal manner. His Muse mocks him in truly burlesque fashion:

But with a laugh she joked at this and said: "Let us tell no lies, and yet let the Arts be clothed. Surely you will not give the band of sisters naked to the bridal couple? Surely they will not go like that before the senate of the Thunderer and the heavenly gods?"²⁴

It is precisely this internal debate about the role of humour that brings into focus the dual nature and purpose of Menippean encyclopedia, namely to instruct and to entertain. This is already structurally evident in the combination of a satirico-allegorical frame narrative with dry, handbook learning in Books III–IX and in the allegory with burlesque touches in Books I–II. Inevitably, this leads to a problem in terms of breaches of classical notions of decorum, in which Martianus catches himself. He also is very much aware of the fact that his penchant for ribald jest (rather than urbane wit) detracts from his serious purpose.²⁵ Why then does he use this medium? The basic reason for the use of allegorical fiction and humour in *De Nuptiis* is pedagogical, necessitated by the limited attention span of his audience, in the first instance his son, the contemptuous Martianus Jr., and, by extension readers like him. As the author puts it to his alter ego, Satira: "Am I to dispense with all imaginary figments and introduce no pleasantry or mirth to relieve the boredom of my readers?"²⁶ In other words, the somewhat problematic generic construction of menippea and encyclopedia is intended to relieve the tedium of learning and to "delight and instruct," an utterly con-

23. *De Nuptiis* 8.809; Stahl, 317.

24. *De Nuptiis* 3.222; Stahl, 64.

25. For decorum and jest versus wit, see my article on the juxtaposition of the ridiculous and the sublime in Martianus, n.6, above.

26. *De Nuptiis* 8.809; Stahl, 317.

ventional goal of classical literature. It is simply not necessary, therefore, to interpret the problems that arise from this unusual construction (allegory / burlesque frame narrative / encyclopedia) as evidence of a deliberate (or unconscious) deconstruction of antique learning, as Relihan does. As usual, deconstruction finds back its own agenda rather than the historical object in context. In the background one also senses Bakhtin's rather dated and hackneyed analysis of the "Zeitgeist" of late antiquity as "an epoch of decay of the tradition of a nation [?] and the destruction of those ethical norms which made up the antique ideal of seamliness in an epoch of intense struggle ..."²⁷

There is, however, a more valid connection to be made between the pre- and the postmodern, again through the medium of genre. Borrowing a concept from Peter von Moos' discussion²⁸ of *The Name of the Rose*, namely "unterhaltende Enzyklopaedie," I would suggest that Martianus' use of a frame narrative, fiction, humour and ribaldry are essential elements of a deliberately self-mocking and entertaining strategy that is an enduring mask for instruction rather than an undercutting of the message. Through the use of an entertaining frame narrative based on the modern genre of the crime / detective novel, Eco is able to present a highly informative body of knowledge on medieval monasticism and heresy. Even the deliberate mistakes / anachronisms contribute to this purpose: they need to be spotted. Throughout this body of handbook knowledge, one constantly notices the medievalist's file-cards and bookmarks popping up. The handbook material has been interwoven with Eco's highly specialised doctoral research on the missing second Book of Aristotle's *Poetics*. The disappearance of this book on comedy (partially retained in the arcane *Tractatus Coislinianus*) has been recast as a deliberate suppression of a dangerous tract to be solved through a "whodunit" of a series of murders. All of this is presented as the learning experience of a novice monk who, *en passant*, gains both scientific and carnal knowledge. His teacher is a very learned man who can be a comic figure as well. In addition to the seriocomic and the self-irony as an educational strategy, one senses a shared aesthetic, the telltale Menippean predilection for the multi-coloured page (*poikilia*) and the mélange of genres. In the case of *The Name of the Rose*, this does not preclude an (ironic) exploration of some of the weightiest hermeneutical issues; in *De Nuptiis*, it involves an equally ironic treatment of the late-antique cult of learning.

27. Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky*, 97.

28. "Umberto Eco's Offenes Mittelalter: Meditationen ueber die Historik des Romans," in "... eine finstere und fast unglauibliche Geschichte?" *Mediaevistische Notizen zu Umberto Eco's Moenchsroman "Der Name der Rose"* (Darmstadt, n.d.), 128–68, esp. 137–40.

The best example of this strategy, however, is Socratic teaching. The carnivalesque aspects of sympotic literature and the ancient connection of the symposium with menippea are noted by Bakhtin; indeed, the *Symposium* itself can be read as a parody of a mystery ritual.²⁹ Mythical narratives are introduced to entertain and / or evoke the most exalted philosophical visions. The ribaldry of the (failed) seduction of Socrates by Alcibiades is vastly entertaining while at the same time proving Socrates' main philosophical point. Hermeneutically, the aporetic "conclusions" of the Socratic dialogues suggest self-deprecation: no dogma and no *mise en abîme*, but a question mark and an ongoing, intellectual self-examination, i.e. truth as search rather than outcome. If Menippean satire indeed derives its driving force from the mockery of the seriousness and self-importance of the philosophers by the Cynics, it is surely prefigured in the self-mocking persona and ironic pedagogy of Socrates. In the case of Martianus Capella, the juxtaposition of the ridiculous and the sublime was difficult to reconcile (from a modernist perspective) with classical notions of decorum and the ancient hierarchy of genres. The merit of Relihan's book is to demonstrate how Menippean encyclopedia actually operates on a serious and an ironic level at one and the same time by questioning the search for truth while providing learning, but one need not agree that this undermines learning; instead, this *procédé* reflects a pedagogical strategy that is both challenging and entertaining.

29. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. R.W. Rotsel (1973), 99; cf. Relihan, 71–72 on the role of Varro in connecting menippea, symposium and the ironic treatment of encyclopedia.