

Background on Apuleius and *The Metamorphoses*

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<http://web.eecs.utk.edu/~bmacleenn/papers/Apuleius-long.htm#note>

Biography

Platonic philosopher, popular orator, author of a risqué novel, accused sorcerer: what are we to make of Apuleius? He was born about 125 CE in Madauros (modern M'daurouch, in Algeria), a thriving, multicultural Roman colony. His family was prosperous and his father was the chief magistrate of the colony. Punic was probably his first language, but his family was deeply immersed in Roman culture and he became proficient in both Latin and Greek. He received a thorough education at Carthage, Rome, and Athens, and after extensive travels returned to Carthage to become a popular philosophical orator, a well-respected citizen, and high priest of the imperial cult; statues were erected in his honor. He died some time after 170 CE. In addition to his novel, he wrote music, hymns, poetry, satire, erotica, fiction, and treatises on Platonic philosophy, mathematics, music, astronomy, medicine, history, botany, and zoology, only a few of which survive. His insatiable curiosity, especially about religion, mythology, mysticism, and magic, occasionally got him into trouble.

Prosecution for Magic

When Apuleius had completed his stay in Athens, about 156 CE, and was on his way to visit Alexandria, he was introduced to Pudentilla, a wealthy widow somewhat older than himself, and they married. Some of her relatives, who were probably afraid of losing control of her money, brought a charge of sorcery against Apuleius, alleging that he had seduced Pudentilla by magic. This was a serious charge, for sorcery was punishable by death.

Apparently he was acquitted, and his *Defense (Apologia)* is a valuable source of information about ancient magical practices for, ironically, in the process of his defense he displays considerable knowledge of magic. (Indeed, *Defense* is a comparatively recent title; all the manuscripts call it some variant of *On Magic*.) He says that he is a philosopher, and that philosophers and magicians engage in superficially similar practices (e.g. collecting plants and animals), but for different purposes. He ridicules his accusers for their ignorance of philosophy and for their impious confusion of religious ritual with magic. Overall, it is a masterful rhetorical display (perhaps thanks to some rewriting after the trial).

He was acquitted, but was he guilty? As his *Defense* argues, he had little need of love spells, but that does not prove that he did not practice magic. In particular, it is not implausible that Apuleius practiced *theurgy*, ritual techniques for union with the gods. Theurgical and magical techniques are superficially similar, for they both depend on symbolic associations and make use of objects, incantations, etc. for their symbolic value.

The *Metamorphoses*

Apuleius is most famous for his *Metamorphoses* (*Transformations*), better known as *The Golden Ass*. In a first-person account the hero Lucius tells how, by dabbling in magic, he was accidentally transformed into an ass, and about his subsequent (often vulgar) adventures and eventual salvation. The basic storyline is not original, for we have another version of a similar story attributed to an earlier author. Folktales of this sort are common, and this one may have originated in Egypt. However, Apuleius makes two significant additions to the original story.

The first is an embedded narrative, the well-known tale of Cupid and Psyche (in origin, perhaps, a Northwest African folktale). The story begs for an allegorical interpretation (since "Cupid" and "Psyche" mean Love and Soul), and many have read it as a Platonic allegory of the soul's redemption through love.

The second major change is in the last book of the novel, the so-called "Isis book," in which the hero repents and appeals to the goddess Isis to "restore me to myself" (XI.2). The narrator describes a magnificent epiphany of the goddess, in which she says:

"Behold, Lucius, I am present, moved by thy prayers, I, Nature's mother, mistress of all the elements, the first-begotten offspring of the ages, mightiest of deities..." (XI.5)

After the restoration of his humanity, Lucius decides to become an initiate in the mysteries of Isis, after which he addresses to the goddess a beautiful prayer, which begins:

"Thou, O holy and perpetual savior of the human race, ever bountifully cherishing mortals, dost apply the sweet affection of a mother to the misfortunes of the miserable. Nor is there any day or night, or even a slender moment, which passes unattended by thy blessings." (XI.25)

Later he was initiated into the mysteries of Isis' consort, the god Osiris.

The Isis chapter is suffused with a genuine piety, which contrasts with the wittier and more superficial tone of the earlier books. Nevertheless, the entire novel has been read as an allegory of the transformation of the soul and its salvation from the miseries of an unenlightened life. Even its bawdy parts have been explained as a purification intended to relieve the soul of excessive lust. However, it is difficult to say whether Apuleius intended any such allegorical interpretation. The narrator states at the outset that his intention is to entertain, but the true purpose may be hidden under multiple layers of irony and intentional misdirection. Apuleius was a very sophisticated rhetorician and he toys with his reader.

This leads to the vexed issue of whether the *Metamorphoses* is autobiographical. There are many parallels between the hero Lucius and the author Apuleius. Indeed, until recent times it was taken for granted that they were the same, and the author was often referred to as "Lucius Apuleius." One apparent similarity is the unfortunate consequences of their excessive but

superficial curiosity about magic. Apuleius also drops tantalizing hints, such as when he mentions that the hero comes from Madauros. On the other hand, there are also significant differences, so we cannot take the novel as a source of biographical information. Nevertheless, the real depth of feeling in the Isis chapter and the ritual details, which have been confirmed from other sources, have convinced most scholars that at least this part reflects Apuleius' personal experience. For example, in his *Defense* (sect. 55) he claims to have "learned complex rituals, many rites, and various ceremonies out of an eagerness for truth and service to the gods."

Synopsis of the plot

(<http://thespectaclesofapuleius.weebly.com/summary-of-the-metamorphoses.html#.XZ4yz0ZKg2w>)

Book I

Lucius, traveling through Thessaly encounters a man named Aristomenes who tells the tale of Socrates, a man who was on his way to a gladiatorial show when he encountered a terrible fate at the hands of his witch wife.

Book II

After this tale, Lucius arrives at the home of Milo and his witch wife Pamphile where his curiosity grows, despite the warnings given to him by his relative Byrrhena. At this point, he also engages in an affair with their servant Photis whom he tries to convince to help him in his desire to witness magic. Note also that in this book there is **not** a specific reference to spectacles or gladiatorial combats in the literal sense, however, the term *gladiator* is used as a synonym for sex (i.e. sex is like a gladiatorial combat) and in 2.15 Lucius describes his room as being prepared like that of a gladiator at a banquet for his last meal, right before he is seduced by the wicked seductress Photis. At a later dinner party Lucius hears more tales of witchcraft, further provoking his curiosity. While he drunkenly walks home, he stabs what he believes to be three robbers attacking him.

Book III

Lucius stands trial for killing the men, whom he later discovers to have been goatskin wine sacks – a trick of magic done accidentally by Photis while she was serving her mistress. Lucius convinces Photis to help him witness Pamphile in a magical act, with Photis' help he witnesses Pamphile transform herself into a bird. Lucius begs Photis to help him do the same to himself so that he can not only see, but also experience magic. However, in helping him, Photis accidentally transforms Lucius into an ass. He is subsequently taken away by robbers who invade Milo's house, thereby preventing him from attaining human form again.

Books IV-VI

Until Book XI all of the acts experienced by Lucius are that of him in the form of an ass. Lucius is told the tale of the robbers and Demochares. An old woman tells Lucius the story of Cupid and Psyche (Books IV-VI). Psyche was a woman born of beauty comparable only to Venus

herself. Due to Venus' extreme jealousy she is forced to endure a series of events designed to lead to her downfall. Venus asks her son Eros to avenge her by having Psyche seized with passion for the meanest, most horrible of men. After following oracular advice Psyche is led to an opulent royal palace by the Zephyr where she hears all but does not see anyone including her new husband. She is warned never to lay eyes upon him, a promise which she initially agrees to. However, after several visits from her envious sisters who convince her that her husband is evil, Psyche agrees to a plan to kill her husband. Before carrying it out, Psyche lays eyes on her husband, Eros. She is pricked by an arrow and falls madly in love. However, fearing Venus' wrath Eros flees. In her search for Eros, Psyche encounters a vengeful Venus who torments her with impossible tasks, all of which she completes. Meanwhile Eros had made a deal with Jupiter in which he would receive Psyche as a reward and with the gods' blessing, they are united and married.

Books VII-IX

Lucius learns from the robbers that he is suspected of robbing Milo's house and fears that he can no longer return to human form. He then hears a story from the famous brigand Haemus the Thracian who is inducted into the band of robbers and who betrays them and takes Lucius with him. Book VIII reveals the story of Charite, a girl who had suffered at the hands of the robbers. By Book IX Lucius has been passed around many times to various owners and is in bad shape from the abuse he has endured.

Book X

Lucius is discovered to be an extraordinary donkey, but his true story is not yet known. Thiasus from Corinth is throwing a three-day spectacle and is in Thessaly to gather the most renowned beasts (which Lucius is of course). Lucius enters into an intimate relationship with a woman which is later to be developed into a spectacle. Lucius flees the scene and arrives at Cenchreae before he completes his act.

Book XI

Lucius awakes and purifies himself in the sea, praying to the goddesses for help. Iris appears in a dream and tells him of how he will be saved and how he must dedicate his life to her service. Lucius adheres to her command and at her procession he is transformed to human form. He is initiated into her service and spends his life thereafter in her service.