

Transforming the Genre: Apuleius' *Metamorphoses**

STAVROS FRANGOULIDIS
University of Crete

Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* recounts Lucius' relationship with the slave girl Photis, his metamorphosis into an ass through magic, his subsequent wanderings and his final redemption through the intervention of the goddess Isis. As is well known, the *Metamorphoses* reveals affinities with the entertaining narrative in pseudo-Lucian's *Onos*. Beyond this, the work may also invite a comparison with the ideal novels, in which the protagonists fall in love, undergo a series of adventures either separately or together, are reunited through chance circumstances and finally return home.¹ What is perhaps most striking is that Apuleius alters the dynamics of the plot-line of the romance novels, by emphasizing Lucius' pursuit of slavish pleasure, and by introducing a model of marriage between the mortal and the divine. This alteration is determined by the religious end to the work, where Lucius becomes Isis' devotee: far from striving to rejoin Photis, the protagonist rejects his initial lover in favour of divine redemption. Such a comparison between the plot of the *Metamorphoses* and the ideal novels is best displayed in the mirror tale of *Cupid and Psyche*, which lies at the heart of Apuleius' work

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¹ There are a number of intriguing points of contact between the *Metamorphoses* and pseudo-Lucian's *Onos*. Space here does not permit comparison between the two narratives, but particularly striking points of contrast are indicated in the notes as we proceed.

and exhibits an ‘ideal’ structure, as if the author wished to offer a key to interpreting the surrounding frame.

Critical approaches to the novel have either examined in detail the affiliation of the *Metamorphoses* with the *Onos*,² or analysed the relationship between the *Onos* and Petronius’ *Satyrical*, both viewed as parodies of the ideal novels.³ They have further explored the affinities of the *Metamorphoses* with the ideal novels from the perspective of narrative technique, common themes and social milieu,⁴ yet the extent to which Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* departs from the plotline of the ideal romances has never been elucidated.⁵ Changes are seen not only in the lengthy narrative of Lucius’ adventures as an ass, but also in the framing narrative, consisting of Lucius’ relationship with Photis, the separation of the couple, and Lucius’ symbolic union with the goddess Isis through religion. In what follows, I shall attempt to show how Apuleius transforms the norm of the ideal romances, in alignment with the novel’s central theme of metamorphosis.

The first aspect of the plot we shall examine is the theme of love and the initial presentation of the couple. Lucius of Corinth arrives at Hypata, the capital of Thessalian magic, to stay at the house of Milo. Lucius follows the advice of his aunt Byrrhena to stay away from Pamphile the witch, the libidinous wife of his host, who is known for her predilection for handsome young men such as Lucius (2.5). Instead, the protagonist makes a conscious decision to involve himself in an affair with Pamphile’s maid-cum-apprentice, the young slave girl Photis, who has already expressed some interest in him (2.6). A liaison between them will enable Lucius to satisfy his curiosity for magic. The fact that Photis is a young and inexperienced witch provides an adequate explanation for why Lucius’ eventual fate is better than that of Socrates, Aristomenes or Thelyphron, for they are all victims of *powerful* witches in the novel. The handsomeness of both Lucius and Photis establishes a connection with the pair in the ideal novels, whose external appearance is such that they are often mistaken for gods, as happens, for example, with Callirhoe in Chariton (1.1),⁶ Anthia in Xenophon (1.2) and Charicleia in

² Schlam 1992, 22, Holzberg 1995, 73–74; Zimmerman 2000, 136, 229.

³ Holzberg 1995, 75.

⁴ Sandy 1994, 1512–18, 1531–33, 1564, offers an excellent review of all previous scholarship on thematic parallels between the *Metamorphoses* and the love romances, though he dismisses most of these connections as unconvincing (p. 1518). See also Mason 1999, 108.

⁵ A hint at this idea is found in Frangoulidis 2001.

⁶ On Callirhoe’s divine beauty see discussion in Schmeling 2005, 37–39, and *passim*. For Lucius’ physiognomy, see Keulen 2006, 177–84.

Heliodorus (1.2). The connection becomes stronger as Photis is a would-be witch, and thus in some sense may also be compared to the witch Meroe, pointedly labelled as *femina divina* (1.8). Yet unlike the true love of the pair in the ideal novels, Lucius has an ulterior motive in his relationship with his social inferior Photis; and unlike the lovers in the romance novels, who abstain from sex until their marriage, except when it is impossible to do otherwise,⁷ Lucius' involvement with Photis is overtly sexual (2.6–3.24).⁸ This is understandable, given the fact that Lucius seems to be incapable of true love before he encounters Isis in the novel's final book. In some sense his overall relationship with Photis, which may be read as designed to foreshadow that of Cupid's secret union in the mountain estate with Psyche, may establish a parallel with the older novels of Chariton and Xenophon, in which the lovers are married at the beginning of the novel, soon after falling in love (1.1).⁹

The shift from the basic plot of the ideal novels is further seen in the way the separation of the pair comes about. In the *Metamorphoses*, Lucius embarks on a series of adventures as a direct consequence of his own actions and those of Photis, rather than on account of external forces (3.28–10.35). Lucius exploits his 'beloved', begging her to arrange for him to see Pamphile practising her magical arts (3.19). He is completely unmindful of the ridicule he has already suffered at the Laughter Festival following the wine-skin episode, which *he knows* was brought about by his lover's mishandling of magic (3.1–11). As an inferior witch when compared to her mistress Pamphile, Photis makes yet another blunder in mixing up the magic boxes, and Lucius is transformed into an ass (3.24), an appropriate form of punishment, given the reputation of the ass for foolishness, sexual appetite and obstinacy. The particular choice of animal highlights the protagonist's advance knowledge, which proves completely inadequate to guard him from the dangers of eroticism and unbridled desire to get access to magic. Lucius' initial plans to take revenge on his lover (3.26) are only tempered by the reflection that

⁷ In Achilles Tatius' *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, Kleitophon makes love to Melite once he is sure that his beloved Leukippe is safe (5.27).

⁸ See Schmeling and Montiglio 2006, 32–38, for a superb discussion of the image of appetites in Lucius' sexual relation with Photis.

⁹ Lucius' somewhat long relationship with Photis contrasts with pseudo-Lucian's *Onos*, where Lucius involves himself in a relatively shorter relationship with the slave girl Palaestra in order to gain access to magic (5). Her name Palaestra, which implies wrestling, alludes to Lucius' ensuing sexual fights with her and brings to the fore the milesian character of pseudo-Lucian's story, in contrast to Apuleius' novel, where the emphasis falls on magic.

Photis is his single source of roses, the antidote to his metamorphosis, which she has promised to bring him the next morning.

The co-related concept of blame and revenge without the intervention of a third party, which is due to the fact that Lucius holds Photis directly responsible for his metamorphosis (3.26), is alien to the ideal romances and thus, for example, presents a strong contrast with Chariton's *Callirhoe*, where Chaereas falls victim to intrigues set by his wife's rejected suitors and kicks her in the belly, taking the blame for her apparent death and burial (1.5).¹⁰ In that case, the revenge attack is brought about by the slander of the suitors and not by any differences arising as a result of the lovers' own actions.¹¹

Turning now to the lengthy narrative of adventures, we see further discrepancies between the *Metamorphoses* and the ideal novels. Lucius' series of ordeals begins with the robbers bursting into Milo's house and removing him to their mountain lair from the stable of his host, where he has withdrawn to await the roses (3.28). On first sight, this feature recalls analogous ordeals of the protagonists in the novels, as for instance in Chariton: soon after her burial, Callirhoe is abducted by the tomb robber Theron (1.9) and sold to the wealthy Dionysius in Ionia (1.14). In a divergence from this pattern, Lucius' ordeals serve to emphasize his emotional distance from Photis, and his resentment towards her for bringing about the metamorphosis, as becomes clear from several negative comments made thereafter (3.27, 8.13, 11.20). On the other hand, in the romance novels the ordeals of the couple serve to underscore their mutual love and unflinching efforts to become reunited.¹²

Deviation from the plotline of ideal romances is further observed with regard to the reunion of the couple. The *Metamorphoses* departs from the traditional plot: Lucius is not reunited with his original lover, with whom he was involved in a merely sexual relationship (2.7–3.24). Instead, his contact with the goddess Isis and his redemption are set in train only after he flees

¹⁰ For discussion of the scene see Philippides 1988, 182–89. Philippides draws attention to the conflict between the realistic elements of the description and the anti-realistic nature of the structure of the romance, with its typical plot line of love, separation adventures and reunion of the couple.

¹¹ Perhaps here one could observe a parallel with the tale of *Cupid and Psyche* where Psyche's sisters bring about her fall from happiness through slander. Panayotakis 1996, 42–51, explores the motif of slander in the tale.

¹² On the other hand, in the *Onos* Lucius completely forgets Palaestra during his adventures, except once, when he curses her for turning him into an ass rather than a dog, which would be able to eat human food (27).

from the amphitheatre at Corinth in fear for his life. Thus, as his turning away from base sexuality is implicitly made clear, so is his unplanned arrival at the port of Kenchreae, a site dedicated to Isis' cult, where he delivers a pious prayer to the goddess for help (11.2).¹³ We should also note that Isis promises to restore Lucius-ass to his human form on the condition that he remains celibate (11.6: *castimoniis*). His ensuing retransformation during Isis' spring festival, which constitutes a form of rebirth, is the result of careful execution of orders, where everyone is aware of his role.¹⁴ In any case, Lucius cannot reunite with the witch Photis, who was responsible for his alienation from his former self (via his metamorphosis into an ass). Instead, he turns to her substitute Isis, as goddess of a different kind of magic in the world. In a way, Lucius' encounter with Isis, in the aftermath of his unwitting and unconscious rejection of the principles that led to his involvement with Photis, is presented as the opposite to the *chance* reunion of the separated couple in the romance novels, in which the lovers, who in most cases have yet to consummate their relationship, are rewarded for enduring their various ordeals. One striking exception is to be found in Achilles Tatius, where Kleitophon makes love to Melite (5.27), but this is not viewed as an obstacle to his marriage to his beloved Leukippe at the novel's end (8.19). In the ideal novels, then, consummation is the reward for enduring tribulations while remaining faithful and celibate, whereas in the *Metamorphoses*, an end to sexual activity is the price to be paid for 'union'.

This veering away from the norm of the ideal novels continues to be seen in the handling of the official union of the couple through religious bonds. After his retransformation, Lucius' union takes the form of initiation into Isis' priesthood, which may metaphorically be interpreted as sacred marriage (11.22–24), in stark opposition to his earlier secret relationship with Photis, which led to his metamorphosis into an animal (3.24) and his ensuing mis-

¹³ The darkness of the night does not deceive the ass-Lucius, as happened earlier in Lucius' encounter with the wineskins animated by Pamphile's magic at Hypata (2.32), but leads him to the discovery of light and the truth. This figurative light mirrors the radiance of the full moon as it rises from the sea and shines everywhere in the darkness of the night. This radiance of the full moon also contrasts with the light of the torch, which is blown out by a sudden gust of the wind, forcing Lucius and his slave to walk in the darkness before they come into contact with the wineskins.

¹⁴ By contrast, in the *Onos*, Menekles, Lucius' new owner, hears the news about his earlier successful mating with the debauched woman in the room and decides to put him in the amphitheater to copulate with the condemned woman in public (53). There the ass-Lucius happens upon the roses, eats them and regains his human form, thus winning the admiration of the crowd (54). In this way the *Onos* differs from the *Metamorphoses* – in the Latin novel, the roses seem to be associated with Isis' spring festival of *Ploiaphesia*.

adventures (3.28–10.35).¹⁵ This would be especially so since his initiation into Isis' cult has elements of the *hieros gamos*, as is clear from the presence of imagery and vocabulary that alludes to a Roman wedding ceremony: the taking of a bath with attendants, the wearing of a special clothing, the gathering of friends and witnesses, the raising of an auspicious cry, etc. (11.22–24).¹⁶ Lucius' symbolic union with Isis offers an alternative treatment of the wedding ritual of the couple, which is often celebrated after their return home, as a reward for their ordeals, as seen for instance, in Achilles Tatius (8.19) and Heliodorus (10.41).¹⁷ The obvious difference between Lucius' sacred marriage, which takes place away from home, and the celebration of the marriage ritual performed upon the couple's return home can be explained: like all victims of magic in the novel, such as Aristomenes and Thelyphron, as an Isiac, Lucius has also lost his homeland, although after his retransformation he has the chance to reunite with his relatives and household slaves (11.18):

confestim denique familiares ac vernulae quique mihi proximo nexu sanguinis cohaerebant, luctu deposito, quem de meae mortis falso nuntio susceperant, repentino laetati gaudio varie quisque munerabundi ad meum festinant ilico diurnum reducemque ab inferis conspectum

At once my friends, my household slaves, and those who were related to me by closest ties of blood dropped the mourning they had taken up at the false report of my death, and in their delight at this unexpected joy, they all brought various gifts and straightway hurried to see me restored to the daylight from the dead.

¹⁵ On the other hand, in the *Onos* the anamorphosed Lucius decides to visit the woman who has implicitly become responsible for his reformation, possibly in order to spend some time with her (56). Lucius' lover and redeemer, however, turns her back on him when she realizes that he is human in all respects, and throws him out of her house with the help of her slaves, thus forcing him to return to his life as it was before his metamorphosis. In the *Onos* then, the reader gets the impression that the reformed Lucius is still the same person and remains vulnerable to the same vices that led to his metamorphosis into an ass, unlike the Latin novel, where the reformed Lucius is a completely new person. This difference helps to characterize the narrative of the *Onos* as no more than entertainment, in contrast to the *Metamorphoses*, where Apuleius has created a paradigmatic narrative emphasising a man's fall from vice and redemption through Isis' grace.

¹⁶ For the theme of Lucius' relationship to Isis as marriage, see Lateiner 2000, 326; Frangoulidis 2001, 171; and most recently McNamara 2003, 108 and 122.

¹⁷ It may also be compared with the pattern of the older novels of Chariton and Xenophon, where the married couple can enjoy the rest of their lives, with the bond between them being all the stronger after the ordeals they have undergone.

Furthermore, Lucius pays a short visit home after his departure on the occasion of a business trip to Hypata (11.26): *tandem digredior et recta patrium larem revisurus meum post aliquam multum temporis contendo*, 'I finally departed and hurried straight to visit my ancestral hearth again after a long time away'.

The deviation from the norm of the ideal novels is further seen in the conclusion to the *Metamorphoses*. Following his initiation into Isis' priesthood, Lucius receives instructions to travel to Rome (11.26), where he undergoes two further initiations (11.28 and 30), thus completing his entrance into an elaborate cult involving repeated rituals. This is to be contrasted with 'initiation' into magic, which only requires a single contact (3.24). With this completion of his entrance into the cult Lucius acquires the true knowledge, *doctrina* (11.30), he initially sought to acquire through his pursuit of Photis' magic, the major difference being that this knowledge results from his pursuit of Isis' benevolent magic in the world.¹⁸ Lucius' journey to Rome forms a thematic parallel with his earlier adventures as an ass, which involved extensive travel (3.28–10.35). Yet in contrast to the great sorrows Lucius felt during his asinine adventures, in Rome he is full of joy for his initiations and successful career as a court orator, which earns him both fame and money. Lucius is even elected to the college of 'shrine-bearing' priests (11.30: *pastophori*) and shaves his head for a second time, perhaps as an expression of the belief that external appearances have no value for him any longer. Such a belief is to be contrasted with his earlier extensive praise of Photis' hair (2.8–9).¹⁹ This development of the plot offers an alternative treatment to the standard closure of the romance novels, where the reunited couple never go away again once they return home, except on rare occasions, as in Achilles Tatius, where Kleitophon and Leukippe pay a short visit to Rhodes to attend the wedding of Kalligone and Kallisthenes, and then return to Byzantium, Leukippe's home (8.17). Moreover, Lucius' new appearance as 'shrine-bearing' priest (*pastophorus*) proudly displaying his baldness everywhere he goes, is unlike the protagonists in the ideal novels, who are portrayed as being radiantly beautiful.

¹⁸ James and O' Brien 2006, 250, reach a roughly similar conclusion to mine when they observe: 'The introduction of the Isiac cult into the novel at this point is a device used to show how Lucius has made this progression and achieved a new level in his quest for knowledge.'

¹⁹ Lucius' baldness is often interpreted as comic, and it is argued that the priests of Isis and Osiris were objects of derision. Thus, for example, Winkler 1985, 224–27; Lateiner 2001, 235. See also Harrison 2000, 245; van Mal-Maeder 1997, 105–06.

This reading of Apuleius' novel vis-à-vis the romance novels is best confirmed by the mirror tale of *Cupid and Psyche*, which closely follows the pattern of ideal romances and foreshadows the development of events and in some sense the religious end to the work (Book 11).²⁰ The old woman who takes care of the robbers tells the tale to an internal audience comprising the girl Charite, abducted by the robbers on her wedding night and held captive in their cave, and Lucius-ass (4.28–6.24). The tale recounts how the god Cupid falls in love with his mother's rival, the beautiful mortal girl Psyche, and is secretly united with her at his country estate without revealing his identity to her. After Psyche disobeys her lover and uncovers his hidden identity, Cupid leaves her. Psyche then undergoes a series of ordeals in search of the one who abandoned her. Following the successful conclusion to her adventures, she undergoes apotheosis; only then are the couple finally reunited to celebrate a divine marriage on Mt. Olympus.

There are several intratextual links between the tale and the frame narrative, both the immediate and the larger one, all of which render the former a mirror of the latter, and thus lend the frame of anti-romance a direction it would otherwise lack.

In relationship to the immediate frame, just as Psyche has fallen victim to her sisters' jealousy of her new union, Charite is abducted by the robbers on her wedding night and held captive in the robbers' cave (4.23). The connection becomes stronger when one considers that in the old woman's tale, Psyche's sisters figuratively become the robbers of her happiness, bent on destroying her relationship with the god. Charite draws the proper lesson from the story, and does not disclose the identity of her groom when he later arrives at the cave to rescue her, disguised as the robber pseudo-Haemus (7.5–13). As a result of her co-operation, she is able to escape and resume the wedding that was disrupted by her abduction. The abrupt end of the marriage of Charite and Tlepolemus with their tragic deaths, as presented in book 8.1–14, is set in opposition to the joyful marriage of Psyche and Cupid on Mt Olympus at the tale's end, and reveals that there is no happiness in the world outside the context of the marriage between a mortal and a god.

In relation to the main narrative, Psyche could be seen as a distant parallel of Lucius. Just as Psyche is directed to the rock through Apollo's oracle, allegedly so as to be wedded to a beast-husband, so Lucius arrives at the

²⁰ Smith 1998, 69–82, discusses several themes common to the tale and the frame, though his analysis is unconnected with my discussion. For the tale's affinity with the ideal novels, see Konstan 1994, 135. Konstan 1994, 137–138 further points out a thematic parallel between the tale and Achilles Tatius' novel.

house of his host Milo through a letter of recommendation from his friend Demeas, ignorant at the time that Milo's house is a den of magic.²¹ In broad terms, the affair between Lucius and Photis could be interpreted as a secret marriage, thus recalling Cupid's relationship with Psyche, which is not technically marriage as no parental consent is involved.

Points of contact between the two narratives are also to be found after the union of the respective couples. We thus see that Psyche disobeys her husband's orders, acting on false advice from her sisters, and uncovers Cupid's true identity. (5.22). Similarly, Lucius is so curious to find out the secrets of the universe through the witch Photis that he ignores sound advice he receives from various people including his aunt Byrrhena, and is thus ultimately responsible for his eventual metamorphosis into an ass and the end of his 'union' with his mistress (3.24). Furthermore, both characters are subjected to numerous trials in their quest for re-establishment of their previous situation: Psyche wishes to be reunited with her husband (5.25–6.21), while Lucius-ass seeks to escape from his asinine form (3.28–10.35). Furthermore, Psyche's reunion with her husband has become possible through her approach to Cupid by means of prayers and pious services, in accordance with Pan's advice (5.25).²² This feature foreshadows Lucius-ass, who, in his own adventures, comes into contact with Isis after abandoning the principles that led to his involvement with Photis: he first refuses to copulate in public in the amphitheater at Corinth (10.35) and then rejects magic through his appeal to Isis for help (11.2). Isis then responds to his prayer and promises to deliver him from his hardships by restoring him to his former true self the following day in her spring festival of *Ploiaphesia*, thus signaling the beginning of his new life as an Isiac. Just as Psyche has become immortal through the intervention of Jupiter, who offers her a cup of ambrosia, and then celebrates her marriage to Cupid on Mt. Olympus (6.23–24), so Lucius will be initiated into Isis' rites, and will then arrange a feast to celebrate his entrance into the Isiac rites (11.22–24), the earthly equivalent to Psyche's apotheosis and marriage on Mt Olympus. Finally, just as a child named Voluptas is born to Psyche (6.24), so Lucius as an Isiac will enjoy a special kind of joy fol-

²¹ At least one parallel between Cupid and Lucius also exists: the former disobeys his mother's orders and becomes involved with the mortal girl Psyche, while the latter disregards his aunt Byrrhena's advice to stay away from magic and engages in a sexual relationship with the socially inferior but beautiful servant girl Photis (2.6). Disobedience is thus common to Cupid, Psyche and Lucius.

²² See James 1987, 154; and Zimmerman et al. 2004, 3–9, s.v. *precibus*...

lowing his symbolic union with the goddess through religion (Book 11). This extensive list of thematic and intratextual links between Psyche and Lucius makes the one a variant of the other – the embedded tale thus offers a key to interpreting events in the larger story.

By focusing on the treatment of the standard features of the ideal novels and the *Metamorphoses*, I hope to have elucidated how Apuleius alters the dynamics of the plot-line of the romance novels by underlining Lucius' *serviles voluptates* and offering the model of marriage to a god. What determines this variation on the subject matter of ideal novels is the religious end to the work, which is absent in the romances. The validity of this reading is best confirmed by the mirror text of *Cupid and Psyche*, which is embedded in the center of the novel and follows more closely the model structure of the ideal novels, thus giving the non-romance frame a direction which it does not seem to have so far in the development of the plot. In this manner, Apuleius transforms the ideal plot of the erotic romances into a quasi-erotic one, in complete alignment with the novel's central theme of metamorphosis.

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