

LUCA GRAVERINI, *Literature and Identity in The Golden Ass of Apuleius*
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Overview

Benjamin Todd Lee's translation of Graverini's *Le Metamorphosi di Apuleio. Letteratura e Identità* (2007) is a clear and elegant rendering of a thought-provoking, literary and cultural commentary on Apuleius' second century CE prose narrative, *The Golden Ass (Metamorphoses)*. When dealing with the work of an accomplished and established scholar in Apuleian studies, a reviewer (or at least this reviewer) finds it productive to play the part of respondent and to engage with the ideas as creatively as possible. The book is refreshingly confident in its characterisation of our one complete Latin 'novel' and ranges over the core conundrums of the text. The power of G.'s approach lies in his ability to synthesize conflicting perspectives, to disentangle possible cultural motivators in the writing of the novel, and even, daringly, to speculate on an intended and actual readership in Apuleius' own time. There is plenty of room for agreement and disagreement in G.'s propositions, but I am in sympathy with many of the assumptions and conclusions that feature in this book.

G. concedes that the novel "did not enjoy any great prestige, at least not in the most elite and conservative literary circles" (p. xii), but he goes on to argue that "Beyond the dialectic between pleasing entertainment and philosophical engagement, we must remember that the novel is, perhaps above all, a sophisticated literary product" (p. xiii—cf. James, 1987, pp. 2-3, 246-8 on Apuleius' literary showmanship). G. flags up his intention to examine the satirical timbre of the narrative and suggests that this reinforces associations with "the transmission of a certain moral or philosophical message" (p. xiii). However, he differs from scholars who, in the light of the Isis finale, view the novel as a satire upon "religious fatuousness".

Summary

From the outset in his opening chapter, 'A Sweet Poetics', G., while not displaying the intellectually labyrinthine approach to Apuleius pioneered by John Winkler in *Auctor & Actor* (1985), does demand that we closely follow his argument and evidence for the interpretability of *The Golden Ass*. It is not an unfathomable text but there is more than one key to its nature. G. argues that throughout the novel Apuleius employs an allusive discourse, in which literary and cultural contexts accumulate. G. devotes much of his first chapter to discussing the language and meaning of the Apuleian prologue and the variety of programmatic statements from the rhetorical, poetic and philosophical discourse it invokes to prepare the reader for a wondrous and seductive style of persuasion. This experience can be both dangerous and didactic simultaneously.

G. takes his time circling around his central premise that this ancient author realises the potential of a genre low in the literary hierarchy (fantasy fiction of this type was seen as the stuff of old wives' tales) as a medium for entertainment and edification. This careful authorial strategy places the *Metamorphoses* in the sphere of *spoudaiogeloion*. In short, there is an earnest purpose in the mirth-making text.

The second chapter, 'Old Wives' Tales and Servile Pleasures', confronts firmly held scholarly views about the religious finale as a parody with the hero as a dupe destined always to be in thrall to powerful and supernaturally endowed females. Again, G. produces a plethora of examples in favour of a positive view of Lucius' shaven head, which seems to some commentators (a trend very much reinforced by Winkler's approach) to make him a bald buffoon.

The second half of the chapter expands upon the *utile* and *dulce* ('useful' and 'pleasing') promise of the prologue, and introduces a number of less familiar illustrations of this literary and philosophical agenda from across a broad literary spectrum. Focusing upon the phrase *anilis fabula* ('old wife's tale') and the concept of *serviles voluptates* ('slavish pleasures') in their cultural context, G. reminds us that fables could be tailored to a more sophisticated purpose and that this was the case even if they featured in a less than lofty genre, such as prose fiction. He notes the lexical echoes of the prologue within Lucius' description of his joyous retransformation and suggests that the narrator's double perspective upon his asinine adventures in some measure explains the change of tone in the finale.

Chapter Three demonstrates that “the novel is involved in a continuous dialogue with other literary forms” (p. 133), and integrates philosophical dialogue, historiography, epic and drama within its complex structure. This is what makes it difficult to define, as it is a very inclusive text in terms of subject matter, themes and genre shape shifting. Figures and settings resonate with Platonic literary localities and the hero abandons himself to the illusions of *loci amoeni* (‘pleasant places’) and seductive Siren songs (in a number of narrative guises). G. draws attention to epic registers or rather to the philosophical matter that is embedded in the Homeric poems in order to draw out Lucius’ role as an Odysseus manqué. The hero also has affinities with Aesop in the *Life of Aesop*, as both are subjected to slavery and combine wisdom with a willingness to wear the mask of a buffoon (“Aesop is described as a plebeian Socrates” (p. 93)). The literary figure of Socrates *per se* is brought into the equation, as G. sees a distinct dialectic between laughter and reflection or philosophical meditation embedded in representations of the famous thinker.

G.’s last chapter focuses on the cultural geography of Apuleius’ novel. G. revisits the Greek origins of the story, the hybrid character of its author as a provincial African with a ‘classical’ education, and the significance of Corinth (its destruction, reconstruction, laxity, lavishness and creative culture symbolised Rome’s relationship with Greece) and of the imperial city itself for the Latin version of Lucius’ fantastic journey. “The *Metamorphoses* takes its place at the crossroads of three diverse cultures which did not always interact peacefully with each other throughout the course of history” (p. xiv). G. believes that Apuleius ambitiously targeted a broad cultural and social demographic, creating a work that could have universal appeal and mediate between the centre and peripheries of the Roman world, in spite of the hierarchies of power and education that operated across the Empire.

Commentary

Apuleius’ text has attracted so much attention since the mid 1980s that it is something of a triumph for any scholar to find more to say about the shifting voice and imagery of the prologue or the interplay of literary genres throughout the novel. Graverini’s book (written in 2007) contributes to, but also complicates, the debates about the narrative’s cultural and literary identity. He usefully expands upon the elegiac and pastoral resonances that Apuleius introduces from the outset with persuasive parallels from Callimachus to Ovid. The dialogue Apuleius conducts with the Ovidian epic poem is still, to

my mind, in need of a comprehensive and nuanced analysis, although Krabbe (2003) has done some fascinating, if not completely convincing, parallel readings of Salmacis (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book Four) and Psyche (the fable told over Books Four to Six in Apuleius).

One could make the criticism of G. that the exegesis on the prologue and its linguistic spellbinding is a little overwrought. There is overlap in the discussions throughout G.'s book very probably because he has reconfigured past articles into long chapters with subsections and this can slightly derail the reader at times. (I occasionally felt inclined to return to his original expositions for clarification.) On the other hand, he has uncovered a number of intriguing and little analysed literary intertexts or has added interpretative value to those already noted. It is useful to follow the accumulation of the evidence in support of, for instance, the interplay of genres immediately heralded with the *at ego* opening of the novel, the function of the bees as textual cross-pollinators, and the positive signifiers of Lucius' shaven head in Chapter Two (the shining and reflective 'pate' discussed as a philosophical and daimonic marker by O'Brien, 2006).

G.'s thoughtful engagement with existing scholarship on the ass's ears in Chapter One certainly tempted me to revisit the question of sight and sound from the point of view of the narrators, the fictional audience and the readers of the texts. Perhaps Apuleian commentators have made too little of Thelyphron's loss of ears in this respect (his tale is, as G. reminds us on p. 44, a sensational story narrated by a man from Miletus; so are we supposed to keep a tight hold of our sensory organs or take precautions against the excessive mirth his suffering provokes amongst the banqueters!?) Other conundrums that G. confronts have been further scrutinised in the literature since 2007. Apart from the regular publications in the *Ancient Narrative* series and the interesting array of essays on Apuleius' novel in the second half of *Paideia at Play* (Riess, ed., 2008), Wytse Keulen produced an edifying and voluminous commentary on *Metamorphoses*, Book One in 2007.

Publications on the *Metamorphoses* since G.'s *Metamorfosi di Apuleio* continue to conjure with aspects of the novel that have prompted informed, speculative and creative debates for decades: the philosophical settings of several of the novel's internal narratives (including variations on the symposium), its satirical didacticism, the rich weave of literary allusions, its thea-tricality (borrowing material from mime, drama, and performance art in general), and the perennial question of Lucius as *actor* and *auctor* in and of the text (player and producer). G. implies that the first-person narrator is equally at home as

conjurer of words and teller of tales or as a recipient of divine favour who has learnt his lesson; in both roles he is a crowd pleaser.

G.'s analysis of the fable of Cupid and Psyche from p. 110 underlines his premise that old wives' stories are dressed deceptively as trivial tales. His observation that the myth told to Charite is the invention of an old woman within the text, so not necessarily introduced as a self-effacing judgement on the story itself, is an astute one.

This and Lucius' delighted response to a *bella fabella* "can be read as plain statements made by ingenuous (*sic*) characters in the tale *and* as forms of self-ironic winking by a skilled author that skilled readers can recognise; as such, they allude to the different kinds of reception invited by this tale" (p. 110, n. 178). The robber housekeeper can be viewed as a drunken character typical of comedy or as divinely inspired, an epic bard ready with a therapeutic, visually poetic and meaningful myth. There is also the possibility (neglected by G.) that she tells the sort of story about love that a drunken Diotima would produce (to subvert Plato's *Symposium* and Socrates' wise woman who gave a philosophical account of the emotion).

On the relationship between Lucius, his fictional Greek counterpart, and the unmasking in Book Eleven of the author himself (the surprising reference to the hero as a poor Madauran) G. makes an interesting observation (p. 52) about the "lexical analogies" of the passage at 11.14.1 with the prologue. When Lucius is restored to his human form and struggles to speak his joy and gratitude to Isis, he echoes the language of the storyteller who slid seamlessly into the protagonist of the novel at its outset. However, this Lucius "is not the old Lucius any more" (p. 53). G. notes theories about the multiplicity of identities or identity as aggregation that the *ego* in Apuleius has inspired. For G. Lucius has a fragmented as well as an over-packed identity, as (to summarise and paraphrase) the hero moves through stages of elevation and degradation, and, in the form of beauty and the beast, finds himself on a quest for knowledge prompted by curiosity and punctuated by behaviour that displays *doctrina* ('learning') and foolish spontaneity in equal measure. Winkler defined the novel as "a philosophical comedy about religious knowledge" (Winkler, 1985, p. 124); G.'s position comes closer to suggesting that by Book Eleven (when Lucius regains his human form and becomes an acolyte of Isis and Osiris) we are reading a religious comedy about philosophical knowledge.

In 'Metamorphoses of Genres' G. goes more deeply into Lucius' pre-asi-nine quest for experiences that are stranger than fiction and how he manages to miss the fact that these come complete with the shadow (or *simulacrum*) of Socrates; some are even staged as philosophical dialogues. Lucius' tendency

to buy into the illusion created by persuasive narrators, his lack of discernment, and his slavery to seductive stories distinguish him from the philosopher who is forearmed against credulity. Of course, Lucius is himself the hero in a pre-existing and fabulous tale, a negative exemplar, and his gullibility is pre-set, just as his asininity will take on an external form. This is my inference rather than something explicitly stated by G.

Sight and sound, looking and hearing are subjected to scrutiny in this chapter, as G. engages with the scholarly debate about the reader as spectator. G. is, I think, suggesting that the recipient of the text has to be an active participant in the construction not so much of its meaning as of its special effects. We have the choice of response, to be entertained without edification or to remember to 'read' as well as to listen when the narrator speaks to us (*lector intende!*), as if, like Lucius, we are living in the moment of each adventure whether directly experienced by, narrated to, or overheard by the protagonist. This discussion could now be expanded to take account of Slater's stimulating contribution to the fictional identity of the Latin Lucius in the collection of essays *Paideia at Play*. Slater also comments on the erotics of vision, particularly ancient theories of haptic vision (touching the objects of sight and being touched by their images), which Bartsch (quoted by G.) brought to the fore in 2006. This is an intriguing issue, as Lucius seems to mimic the reader by creating sights from his imagination and then allowing the *simulacra* "to seize his soul" (Slater, 2008, p. 250).

I found G.'s reasoning on the location changes from the Greek novel quite convincing. He accepts the fact that the ass's journey takes place in an indefinite geographical setting within the province of Thessaly, but argues that the shift to Corinth for Lucius' origins (delineated in detail in the Prologue) and his retransformation (rebirth) in the same place need further teasing out. While it is true that, for a Roman reader, Corinth would be better known than Thessalonica, the journey's end for the Greek Loukios, and that Corinth combined a reputation for excess and corruption with fame as the centre for the Isis cult, it was also an important part of the Prologue's geographical (and perhaps geopolitical) trajectory. True to form, Corinth is supplanted by Rome in the introduction and in the novel's finale, which takes place in the imperial city, Lucius being the bearer of the Isis and Osiris cult (somewhat incongruously) in the capital: "and so from beginning to end, Corinth, a Greek city both destroyed and re-founded by the Romans, accompanies and prefigures the narrative movement in the novel from Greece to Rome" (p. 174). This interpretation dovetails nicely with approaches (*passim*) in Kahane and Laird's *Companion to the Prologue of Apuleius' Metamorphoses*, in which several

Apuleian scholars delved into the imagery of colonisation and resistant adaptation favoured by the elusive speaker, as he lays out the genesis and nature of his text.

There are valuable discussions in this last chapter of Romanising moments in Apuleius, where parallel incidents and passages allow for direct comparisons with the *Onos* narrative. Apuleius might demonstrate a preference for Latin literary models (Fotis having an epiphanic effect upon Lucius with the Divine Encounter motif clearly evoking Virgilian not Homeric epic; see G., p. 179) or have his characters (gods included) refer to Roman legal niceties and to landmarks of the capital city. These observations are not new, but G. is acknowledging the Roman flavour of the novel to anticipate counter arguments to his own position, namely that the intended audience was not an exclusively metropolitan one. G. follows Finkelppearl in seeing a simultaneous national pride in Africa at work in Apuleius' narrative (exemplified by making the Charite character in the image of African Dido, but a pre-Virgilian Dido, who stayed faithful to her husband) and a keenness for promoting the presence and prominence of a Romanised Africa to a cosmopolitan readership.

I am very willing to buy into a consensus that Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* was produced in a form that would appeal to a large and varied constituency of readers and listeners, that it was 'sold' as a racy story in the Milesian mode, but that it could be received at a literary, intellectual and even philosophical level by those well up in the cultural hierarchy. We could then link the novel to Isis as a literary product and an aesthetic experience that would be *panta gegona pasi*, 'all things to all men'. G. reminds us that Apuleius was a mass entertainer, a performer of pieces like the *Florida* with a range of subject matter from high to low on the intellectual scale. He favoured and was favoured by *celsa Carthago*, the lofty capital city of the North African province and this, in G.'s opinion, was Apuleius' vantage point or starting place for distributing his works as widely as possible.

In conclusion, I would warmly recommend Graverini's book for its array of interesting perspectives on the nature and meaning of Apuleius' novel. I am very much in sympathy with his goal of at least partially "refuting the positions of scholars who consider the *Metamorphoses* as an aporetic text, one that leaves the reader the responsibility of determining its significance" (p. xiii), although this could perhaps have been expressed more clearly as "leaves the reader the responsibility of *creating* its significance". After all, the main thrust of G.'s literary and cultural commentary on Apuleius is that the author had a conscious and well worked-out set of goals for his work, and if the reader is to be forced into the role of detective (to use Winkler's metaphor for the riddle

set by this ‘hermeneutic’ text), then, as G. demonstrates, an eye for detail and context will go a long way to solving the literary enigma.

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