

S. J. HARRISON: *Framing the Ass: Literary Texture in Apuleius' Metamorphoses*
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Overview

It is always rewarding to read an accomplished classicist's scholarly exegeses on what is in many ways a teasing text. In this volume Stephen Harrison (= H.) has put together a collection of his scholarly articles that achieve a coherent commentary upon the *Metamorphoses*. His aim (Preface) is to make his contributions more widely accessible and an attentive reader will certainly gain from H.'s thorough and thoughtful interpretations of this richly allusive and culturally complex narrative. This is a book that celebrates and enlightens the intriguing narrative of Lucius the Ass, an ancient novel that continues to prompt multi-faceted and contentious interpretations in the scholarly community.

H. is convincing in his overall argument that Apuleius' text simultaneously celebrates and deflates established classical genres, particularly epic poetry, by adapting its stylistic and narrative features to the medium of popular prose fiction. For H. the novel should be taken seriously for its rich literary texture (a point I made back in 1987), but he is unwavering in his view that it sustains a comedic tone throughout, presenting the reader with a pastiche of features and figures from familiar texts in the ancient world. He does not detect a didactic, philosophical or religious purpose throughout the narrative that would make sense of the fervent conversion to Isis in the final book as an admirable life choice. Instead H. sees the hero's initiation into the Egyptian cult as part of Apuleius' humorous and satirical attitude to gullibility amongst other human failings. In short, Lucius continues to behave like an ass.

Introduction

H. begins by deftly tracing the reception of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* and its changing fortunes in the twentieth century. He connects the wider aca-

demic interest in the novel to the more intensive study of the Second Sophistic movement in the second century CE, and notes key players in defining and appraising Greek and Roman narrative in general and Apuleius in particular (most notable the Groningen Commentaries on the Novel project begun in the 1970s). As for monographs on the subject, P. G. Walsh is acknowledged as leading the way on the ancient novel, while J. J. Winkler's paradigm-shifting work of 1985, *Auctor and Actor*, prompted a resurgence of Apuleian studies with a much broader cultural and aesthetic remit. H. himself has played a significant role in sustaining scholarly interest and enthusiasm for Apuleian studies with a thirty-year record of contributions to conferences, work on commentaries, and a steady stream of publications, including a monograph.

Framing the Ass is in monograph form, subsuming H.'s articles on literary influences upon the text and the nature of the novel under the heading 'Apuleian Contexts' (Section One), and on its irreverent relationship with poets such as Homer, Virgil, and Ovid under the heading 'Novel and Epic' (Section Two). The last chapter of the book, 'Some Traces of the *Iliad* in the *Metamorphoses*', identifies interesting parallel passages but makes a rather anti-climactic finish. I might have been inclined to organise the material in the second half of the book rather differently and rethink the location of the 'Adultery Tales', which alludes to several generic influences upon the stories in Book Nine of the *Metamorphoses*, of which epic narrative is only one. Fitting together what were distinct contributions written at different times is always a challenge, of course, and in other respects the book achieves a satisfying continuity.

Apuleian Contexts

H.'s 2003 paper for the American Philological Association conference ('Constructing Apuleius: the Emergence of a Literary Artist') makes an appropriate introduction to Apuleius and the reception of his novel from antiquity to the twenty-first century. The *Metamorphoses* has never found a secure place in the literary canon, puzzling commentators and compilers of literature in classical and post-classical times because of its frivolous subject matter and its guilt by association with the racy and risqué tone of tales from Miletus (scurrilous stories serving as light relief for writers and readers alike). In the here and now of classical scholarship there is a clear consensus that Apuleius' novel is exceptional for its 'language, literary texture and

narrative technique'. H. (p. 29) concludes that, 'no longer an incoherent and marginal work in barbarous Latin, it is now viewed as an elegantly expressed, intertextually complex and narratologically intriguing central work of Roman literature'. Back in 1987 (*Unity in Diversity*) I championed the integrity of Apuleius' narrative on the grounds of literary sophistication and the internal patterning this produced. Much has been written since on how ancient and modern readers might engage with Apuleius' intra-textual and inter-textual allusiveness.

H. is surely right to call for a history of Latin prose works, which could give Apuleius' novel a firmer context instead of being too readily regarded by some (myself included) as a *sui generis* narrative. I have elsewhere (in reviews and more recently in the Blackwell *Companion to the Ancient Novel* (2014)) questioned whether the trend towards subsuming everything written in the ancient world with creative or imaginative and invented elements as 'narrative' really gets us very far in defining and appraising prose fiction past and present in its cultural trajectory. H.'s starting point for a history of Latin prose (pp. 29-30) is that the study 'should cover not only the development of prose through the use of archaic and poetic vocabulary, but also issues of genre and literary history, especially the way in which more flexible prose genres such as the novel and the miscellany tend to replace the conventional poetic genres such as the epic ...'.

So, for me, this first chapter in *Framing the Ass* sets up an invaluable model for work on Apuleius, as it addresses the challenge his novel presents in terms of context and content. The rest of 'Constructing Apuleius' skilfully weaves together strands of scholarship on the *Metamorphoses* that have focussed upon the text for its linguistic registers and cultural connections. Apuleius' dialogue with elevated literary language has been analysed from the perspective of a Bakhtinian 'bilingualism' and 'heteroglossia', and Bakhtin's concept of carnivalesque literature has also proved fruitful for commentators upon the playfulness, parody and deliberate disorientation in the Apuleian text. H. gives examples of narrative vignettes as well as of substantial inset stories, such as the fable of Cupid and Psyche, that have, since Winkler's monograph, begun to attract a range of contemporary theoretical approaches from feminist critiques to the methodological tools of reception studies, an area that has also taken some interesting new directions in recent years.

In 'The Poetics of Fiction', H. conducts a balanced discussion of views about African Latin in the text. This is largely a pejorative term that requires unpicking, and H. makes the pertinent points that it is an archaising Latin

that is detectable in the text, not something exotic and barbarous, and that a scrutiny of the style also reveals the employment of poetic and especially epic language to enrich and elevate the narrative. This features particularly in the description of passion, whether the emotions are that of pain and suffering or erotic passion and a longing for the divine; a close reading of key passages demonstrates Apuleius' engagement with a wealth of poetic traditions from early Republican literature (epic, tragedy) as well as with the vivid and colloquial language of popular entertainment.

H. argues that the novel is the ideal place to mix not just the language but also the structures and themes found in genres such as erotic elegy and New Comedy, citing the story of Cupid and Psyche as a rich text in this respect, as the codes of prose and poetry merge in the treatment of romantic subject matter. 'The Poetics of Fiction' sets up several interpretations of the text that will recur throughout H.'s contributions, namely that Apuleius is constantly demonstrating his learning and displaying the cultural capital he can draw upon for his narrative, and that he has unabashedly used the low-status Milesian tale structure for his template.

'The Speaking Book' theory for the troublesome voice of the novel's prologue is far more than a one-trick pony, but an inventive solution to a problem that inspired a volume of essays in 2001 (Kahane and Laird, eds.). H. might perhaps have expanded this chapter, written in 1990, to have a closer and more polemical dialogue with the range of interpretations featured in this *Companion to the Prologue*. H. marshals his arguments for the book itself as the answer to *quis ille* 'who's that?', which follows a promise that the text will be engaging and entertaining. H. is not persuaded by the analogy of prologue speaker with an actor who might introduce a play on the Roman stage (pp. 72-3). He points out that in dramatic conventions the identity of one of the players or perhaps the author himself would be clear to the audience present at an actual performance. On the page the first person is invisible: 'the prologue-speaker claims both to be the physical and literary constructor of the piece the reader is about to experience and to be its deliverer or narrator, and thus cannot be separated from the main body of the narrative by means of a convenient exit.'

H. perhaps undercuts his own objection to the uncertainty of the narrative voice in the prologue being explained away by the parallel with dramatic techniques. His objection is that the conventions of one genre do not map comfortably onto another. However, H. goes on to use the parallel of poetic prefaces (with their own traditions in form and content), where a volume of verses declare their length and compass, as an argument for the book

being the first-person narrator of the introductory remarks. The prologue of the *Metamorphoses* makes no such unequivocal self-reference, although it is true that Lucius the ass steps out of the narrative frame on several occasions and addresses the reader directly, so the meta-fictional strategy is clearly in play during the novel. Nevertheless, H.'s chapter remains an ingenious contribution to a persistently lively debate about Apuleius' programmatic statement as an enigmatic signpost of the story to come.

'Apuleius, Aelius Aristides and Religious Autobiography' is predicated upon but also reinforces H.'s belief that Apuleius' novel is best dated to a later stage in the author's career, as the Isiac finale parodies Aelius' *Sacred Tales* (dated around 175-176 CE), in which he gives a personal testament of his encounter with the divine. In 1977 Arthur Heiserman suggested that Book Eleven and the devotion to Isis and Osiris had a comical and parodic flavour that connected it rather than differentiated it from the rest of the work. Eight years later Winkler proposed that the text playfully allowed for face value and simultaneously sceptical responses to the hero's happy ending in the cult of Isis, depending on the personal perspective and social and theoretical baggage of the individual reader past and present. H. does not hedge his bets but makes a direct link between Apuleius' presentation of religious experience (throughout the novel as well as at the end) and Aelius' 'extraordinarily self-important and self-absorbed narrative' (p. 83). H. includes episodes peppered throughout Apuleius' novel from incompetent clairvoyants to misleading visions and corrupt priests as part of the parodic engagement with Aristides.

In 'Parallel Cults' H. briefly discusses the relationship between the lost Greek *Metamorphoses* and Apuleius' narrative, concluding that literary religious material was introduced (especially with the fable of Cupid and Psyche), and that the initiation of Lucius was an extension of 'an episode in the Greek original which presented a satirical view of a particular divine cult' (p. 98). The rest of the chapter is a survey of the narrative patterns Apuleius has re-routed from various Greek novels, those prose romances that can be reasonably safely dated to earlier than the *Metamorphoses*. The examination of sanctuaries and divine encounters as plot motors and closures gives H. the opportunity to revisit the prologue and posit that the location of the speaking voice (whether Lucius or the book itself) is at a shrine, the Isis temple at Rome. It is Isis who connects Psyche to Lucius, as the latter mimics the prayers to this goddess from the heroine of Xenophon's *Ephesiaca*, and Psyche's story has much in common with the theme of separated and supernaturally beautiful lovers in this early Greek romance. H. concludes (p. 108) that

‘Apuleius’ more comic-realistic approach to fiction ... bolsters those readings of his novel which stress that it includes religious elements for the purpose of entertainment rather than enlightenment.’

It is the ‘Narrative Subversion and Religious Satire’ in Book Eleven dealt with in chapter 7 that crystallises H.’s characterisation of the *Metamorphoses* as an ironic treatment of superstition and gullibility in matters magical and spiritual. Prose fiction gives Apuleius the flexibility and freedom to write an entertaining story and to display his erudition at every turn. For H. Apuleius exploits his knowledge of literary texts and of religious cults to produce a multi-faceted work, which engages with the social and cultural complexities of its time. Fantastic narrative and ironic commentary notwithstanding, there has also to be a measure of authenticity. H. accepts the fervent nature of Lucius’ prayer to Isis but believes that subsequent events prove the cult of Isis to be corrupt and that the hero ‘undergoes cynical manipulation’ (p. 116). In that case the reader could be allowed to live in the moment of the lyrical passages, such as the one at the opening of the final book, as long as they are not duped, like Lucius, by the expensive initiations that follow.

Since this chapter was written, O’Brien and James (2006) and Graverini (2007, 2012) have approached Apuleius’ finale as a fitting end to a hybrid narrative, as the protagonist can philosophise and sermonise with self-irony and without losing the comic or the common touch. The subtext of the debate over the sincere or satirical tone of the Isis finale is probably the issue of where the meaning of any text is constructed. It is a fact that each reader or community of readers at the point of reception may make what they will of the novel and its ending, but, in spite of the different conclusions scholars are still reaching about the way in which Apuleius has resolved Lucius’ story, they are all attempting to retrieve his intentions and motivations for his narrative choices. In this respect, for a number of writers on the *Metamorphoses*, myself included, a post-modernist Apuleius does not ring true.

Novel and Epic

The second half of the book consists of a succession of chapters on the epic flavour of Apuleius’ novel in terms of scenes, storylines, and characters who mimic heroic figures from Homer, Lucretius, and Virgil. In ‘Some Odyssean Scenes’ (chapter 8) H. strengthens parallels (noted in previous commentaries) between Meroe, Circe, and Calypso, as well as the similarity

between Odysseus and Tlepolemus; he also adds a few less obvious literary pairings, for instance Lucius and Telemachus, Photis and Nausicaa (these last two less convincing to my mind). H. acknowledges that detailed work has been done in the field since he first presented his observations at the 1989 Dartmouth conference. Ellen Finkelpearl (1990, 1999) is referenced in the subsequent chapters for her studies on the Virgilian allusions (both specific and thematic) throughout the narrative and for the descent to the Underworld as a significant *mise en scène*. In H.'s view, Apuleius expects the reader to recognise the allusions and to appreciate the literary learning they display. The end game is still entertainment, not edification (p. 126).

The approach taken in 'From Epic to Novel' is that all long fictional narratives are interrelated in their use of journeys, quests, and homecomings as organising principles or storytelling arcs. Apuleius is following the traditions of the Greek novel as well as the conventions of epic, but it is Virgil's *Aeneid* that is most pointedly imitated. H. yet again asks the question (pp. 137-8): 'is the text alluding to the *Aeneid* to lend itself epic grandeur, to show its writer's learning, to provide a lower and comic version of an epic scene or motif, or simply to reuse convenient literary material in the construction of a long fictional narrative?'

H. illustrates the complexity of Apuleius' intertextuality, but at times I found the analogies overstretched as in the idea that there is a close correspondence between Evander's story of Hercules and Cacus (an historical myth told to Aeneas in Book 8 of Virgil's epic) and Thelyphron's horror fantasy (fitting the Milesian model), declaimed at Byrrhena's banquet in Book 2 of Apuleius. H. characterises these accounts as having an anticipatory and explanatory function: 'Both stories are aetiological, though in very different ways; Thelyphron gives a comic and melodramatic explanation of why he has suffered a shameful mutilation, while Evander explains in a dignified and heroic tone the origin of a religious ceremony' (p. 143). I struggle to see a direct reference to Virgil here and have found it more fruitful to focus on the place of this story in a succession of rhetorical performances that culminate in Lucius' own narration to the assembled Hypatans (the Rissus Festival in Book 3).

Zimmerman (2008) has since scrutinised the symposium settings within the novel and sites the work itself in the realm of banquet literature. However, to add grist to his mill, H. could perhaps pursue other specifically Virgilian resonances after this 'genre scene' at Byrrhena's palatial home. On his way back to Milo's Lucius does make a stab at heroically defending his host's property. On his second and more truthful account of the incident to

Photis at *Met.* 3,19, he compares himself to Hercules in his bizarre and drunken encounter with what turned out to be inflated wine skins hammering at his host's door in the night. Using H.'s methodology, this would neatly round off the echoes from *Aeneid* Book 8 that H. argues are imitations of Virgil's narrative techniques: 'the prophetic *ekphrasis* and the anticipatory inserted tale.'

The rest of chapter 9 ('Apuleius as a Reader of Virgil') traces the interplay between the Virgilian Dido as an exemplar of passionate and tragic love and Psyche and Charite, whose trials and tribulations form a mosaic of motifs from *Aeneid* Book 4. The *katabasis* theme and its epic registers have now been fully explored by Finkelpearl, but H. highlights (p. 154) Psyche's upward mobility, her ascent to Olympus, after the intervention of Cupid and Jupiter, who sanctions her becoming immortal. Ending with miscellaneous examples, H. concludes that Apuleius exploits his epic models for purposes of literary enhancement (portrayals of extreme emotions), but he is just as capable of importing epic echoes into the text for parodic effects. Thus H. ends with an example from Book 8,26,6, when a sex slave evokes Anchises' greeting to his son Aeneas (the Underworld encounter in *Aeneid* 6.687) in order to show his heartfelt relief and joy at seeing Lucius the ass: 'Surely what we have here is a splendid transfer of a moving epic moment, the reunion in the world below of father and son, to a delightfully bawdy context, the joyous greeting of an exhausted toy-boy to a macrophallic ass who will share his duties in the 'Underworld' that is the service of the priests' (p. 156).

'Epic Structures in Cupid and Psyche' is a deft interpretation of a long insert tale that can be approached as a Greek romance, a didactic parallel to Lucius' experiences before, during and after ass-hood, a folk tale, a religious fable or a philosophical allegory. H. explores the function of the story and takes as a starting point the blurred boundaries of its beginning and end; it is straddled across Books 4 to 6. H. seems to be proposing that this structural choice draws attention to, but simultaneously distances Apuleius' mini prose epic from, the Virgilian pattern of a secondary narrative, and that the disjunction of plot segmentation is possibly borrowed from Ovid's more free-flowing epic, *Metamorphoses*. H. notes that the tale of Cupid and Psyche does not (surprisingly) receive a great deal of attention in Winkler either for its internal 'narratological play' or for its relationship to Lucius' encounters with the supernatural and the divine (p. 162, n. 11). H. believes that the fable interlaces with the episodic story of Charite, who is the target audience and who becomes a Didoesque figure when her dramatic narrative is resumed. Psyche prefigures the fate of the ass (an eavesdropper in the cave) in

undergoing trials and tribulations before salvation and a promise of immortality.

While acknowledging the presence of Platonic elements within a story of Love and the Soul, H. is inclined to link the fable to the *Symposium*, as the light-hearted aspects of this dialogue on the nature of love suit the ultimately playful nature of Apuleius' text. I rather warm to this way of resolving the resonances of philosophical discussions on Eros within the tale of Cupid and Psyche; 'Plato's elevated scenario is reduced to the low-life world of the novel'. I have previously engaged with H.'s conclusion (1998, p. 49, n. 21) by posing the theory that in Apuleius the inebriated robber housekeeper who narrates the story (a sentimental myth about the near farcical outcomes of Love falling in Love) is Diotima (the wise priestess quoted in the *Symposium*) but Diotima *delira et temulenta* (the crazy and drunken old woman) telling a story about Love in a cave.

H. continues to emphasize that the story of Cupid and Psyche draws upon epic locations as well as upon literary devices associated with the loftier genres, their figurative language and especially the technique of elaborate description (ecphrasis) that has layers of meaning and significance for the internal witness. Psyche has to embark upon heroic labours and dangerous journeys, having incurred the wrath of a goddess, and this places her in elevated company while keeping her story and its context firmly grounded in a less than lofty narrative framework. H. recognises an affinity between Aeneas and Psyche but believes that 'the grand heroic material of the *Aeneid* is subjected to sophisticated literary and narratological play in Apuleius' epideictic *imitatio*' (p. 178).

The following chapters (11 to 16) are variations upon themes that H. has firmly established as a fruitful methodology for making sense of Apuleius' novel as an ambitious prose fiction that has refashioned much of the form and content of epic narrative with its rich range of literary conventions. It is an 'epic' for and of its time, but does not mean to masquerade as a serious or didactic work. Apuleius clearly signposts the satirical flavour of the main-frame narrative and the inserted stories and, according to H., is always reminding the reader that, learned allusions notwithstanding, this creative conversion from a Greek source text telling a fantastic tale of transformations clearly categorises his novel as entertainment.

There is much to appreciate in the remainder of H.'s book. To cherry pick just a few examples, in 'Epic Extremities', which deals with the book-openings and closures as a mix of prosaic and periphrastic poetic moments of the formulaic kind, there is an interesting comparison of the bald Lucius

with the undignified and boorish Thersites in the *Iliad*. Graverini (2007, 2012, 82-90) has since given a nuanced reading of Lucius' shaven head and the positive associations of baldness. The shining pate of the hero going about his priestly duties in the prosaic and conversational concluding lines of the novel could be taken two ways: as a comical picture contrasting with the bright moon at the opening of Book 11 (a highly wrought poetic description) or as Lucius attaining an elevated state (see James and O'Brien, 2006, 250).

In 'Literary Topography' H. demonstrates that Apuleius has introduced different locations not only as a wink to his Roman readership and a reminder of his own cosmopolitan identity as narrator / author (the appearance of the imperial capital in the tale of Cupid and Psyche) but also to indicate the literary provenance of the new material he has inserted. Thelyphron comes from Miletus and tells a Milesian tale (p. 202); the elaborate fiction told by the courageous Tlepolemus to manipulate and deceive the robbers references places in the Greek romances and from Roman military history.

In 'Waves of Emotion' and 'The Literary Texture of the Adultery Tales' H. brings tragedy, comedy and other performance arts into the equation. These chapters reaffirm the impressive learning Apuleius is able to display whether his characters, in dramatic and epic soliloquy mode, utter impassioned and rhetorical speeches at moments of crisis or whether he is accessing sensationalist 'sub-literary traditions' (p. 242), for instance importing Roman mime into his text. On the same theme, Apuleius' armoury of literary topoi and typologies is neatly encapsulated in 'Divine Authority in Cupid and Psyche', in which H. interprets the birth of *Voluptas* as a realisation of the programmatic statement of the prologue; it is about the canny reader taking pleasure in the sophisticated entertainment the novel has provided.

I am not sure I am convinced by the textual pleasure theory, and not all Apuleian scholars buy into the fable of Cupid and Psyche as a parallel miniaturization or *mise en abyme* of the narrative as a whole. However, this bold solution to the meaning of the child Pleasure born to Love and Soul does underline H.'s approach to the *Metamorphoses* as a hugely enjoyable tour de force from an author of the Sophistic age and H. could have finished on that note. As it is, the final chapter, 'Apuleius and Homer,' while interesting for its identification of prominent epic features throughout the novel, is a little disjointed and makes a slightly disappointing end to this volume of stimulating essays.

In conclusion and rather than ending on a quibble, I would recommend H.'s *Framing the Ass* as admirably achieving the author's goal, namely to give

researchers, teachers and students an enjoyable experience. Many of his ideas have prompted commentators to pursue new directions and take his interpretations further.

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