

Chapter 46

Apuleius of Madauros

c. 125 AD—??

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Platonic philosopher, popular orator, author of a risqué novel, accused sorcerer: what are we to make of Apuleius? He was born about 125 AD in Madauros (modern M'daurouch, in Algeria), a thriving, multicultural Roman colony. His family was prosperous and his father was the chief magistrate. 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. 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.

In particular, when Apuleius had completed his stay in Athens, about 156 AD 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 defending himself he displays considerable knowledge of magic. (Indeed, *Defense* is a comparatively recent title; all the manuscripts call it some variant of *On Magic*.) He argues 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 practise magic. In particular, it is not implausible that Apuleius practised theurgy: ritual techniques for union with the gods, which were popular with later Platonists and can be traced to his time. 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.

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 a jackass, and about his subsequent (often ribald) adventures and eventual salvation. The basic storyline is not original, for we have another version, but Apuleius makes two significant additions.

The first is the well-known tale of Cupid and Psyche (Love and Soul). The story begs for an allegorical interpretation, 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 her 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 her consort, the god Osiris.

The Isis book is suffused with a genuine piety, which contrasts with the wittier and more superficial tone of the earlier books (except 'Cupid and Psyche'). Nevertheless, the entire novel has been read as a Platonic allegory of the transformation of the soul and its salvation from the miseries of an unenlightened life. 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 they were assumed to be the same, and the author was often called 'Lucius Apuleius'. One apparent similarity is their excessive but superficial curiosity about magic. Apuleius also drops tantalizing hints, but 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 book and the ritual details, which have been confirmed from other sources,

have convinced most scholars that at least this part reflects Apuleius' personal experience.

References and Suggestions for Further Reading

- Apuleius. *Apuleius' Golden Ass and other Philosophical Writings*. Trans. Thomas Taylor, Vol. XIV of Thomas Taylor Series. Somerset: Prometheus Trust, 1997. Includes Taylor's 1822 translations of *The God of Socrates* and *Plato's Doctrine*.
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