

THE ENDING OF APULEIUS' *METAMORPHOSES*

Winkler<sup>1</sup> noted various aspects that undermine the surface seriousness of the presentation of Isis and her rites and Lucius' conversion in *Metamorphoses* 11, concluding that one is presented with both a serious and a comic interpretation of the religious activities there and left unable to decide whether Lucius is a privileged initiate or a foolish dupe. More recently, adding to and building on Winkler's findings, Harrison<sup>2</sup> has proposed a less indeterminate approach, arguing that Book 11 is certainly parodic and presents Lucius as definitely the victim of a venal cult in a satire on religious mania and youthful gullibility. Harrison's reading is more convincing. It keeps Lucius consistently credulous and lacking in proportion, and it maintains the entertaining tone of the *Metamorphoses*, as Harrison points out.<sup>3</sup> In addition, it gives this last book real bite (like the earlier books) and makes it typically clever, cynical, and ironical (with Lucius still asinine, even when he escapes the physical form of an ass, and now himself exploited not long after seeing through the exploitative priests at 8.25ff.). In my view we also see in Book 11 the most elaborate (and climactic) tease in the whole work:<sup>4</sup> although many will be swept along by and take at face-value the solemnity, religiosity, and mass of cultic detail, more alert readers will entertain doubts about the sincerity of all this, but be kept on tenterhooks, unable to tell for sure until 11.26ff., where the parody at last becomes plain, as in particular all the visions and initiations and expense reach ridiculous proportions amid an amusing succession of false endings.<sup>5</sup> Whether one sees such an extensive tease or not, and whether one supports the overall thesis of Winkler or Harrison, there are several more subversive elements which need to be pointed out as relevant to both schools of thought and further invalidating the old interpretation of Book 11 as an unproblematic account of a straightforward and trouble-free religious experience.

For a start, context is important. At the end of Book 10 Lucius as an ass witnesses a staged version of the Judgement of Paris, with actors playing the various bribing goddesses and their escorts. There is subtle point here: as a prelude to casting suspicion on the genuineness of Isis and her priests and highlighting their venality,<sup>6</sup> this lengthy description establishes fully the themes of false divinity, fake attendants for gods, and divine corruption (and Lucius actually criticizes such corruption in 10.33, prior to unthinkingly accepting the mercenary demands of the Isiac cult). There is also ominous foreshadowing. The three goddesses appear to a human and make promises to him on a *quid pro quo* basis just as Isis will appear to Lucius and promise him<sup>7</sup> release from the ass form in return for his devotion, but, of course, the acceptance of Venus' offer led (as Isis' will lead) to initial joy and then to difficulties, including deceit (the Trojan Horse) and plundering (of Troy). In fact, there is yet another cautionary tale here blithely ignored by Lucius.<sup>8</sup> Isis appears shortly after the Judgement, so that it should

<sup>1</sup> J. J. Winkler, *Auctor and Actor: A Narratological Reading of Apuleius' The Golden Ass* (Berkeley, 1985), 209–27, 245–7.

<sup>2</sup> S. J. Harrison, *Apuleius: A Latin Sophist* (Oxford, 2000), 238–52.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 248.

<sup>4</sup> On the extensive teasing and deception in the *Metamorphoses*, see e.g. W. S. Smith 'The narrative voice in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*', *TAPhA* 103 (1972), 513ff. and 'Style and character in *The Golden Ass*: suddenly an opposite appearance', *ANRW* II.34.2, 1575ff.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Harrison (n. 2), 245ff. He believes that the burlesque is clear from 11.16 onwards. Winkler (n. 1) inclines to the view that 11.26 is the watershed.

<sup>6</sup> See below and cf. also Harrison (n. 2), 240, 244ff.

<sup>7</sup> *Promissa beneficia* in 11.12; cf. *polliceor* in 10.31–2.

<sup>8</sup> Compare the unheeded warnings in connection with curiosity and witchcraft at the start of

still be in readers' thoughts, but by way of reinforcement Apuleius carefully directs them back to it: for example, at 11.3–5 there is a description of Isis' body and clothing (as there was with Juno, Minerva, and Venus at 10.30–1); Isis has touching (*destringo*) her head a crown with a symbol of the moon that gives off a white (*candidum*) light and wears a cloak with stars (*stellae*) on it, like the white (*candida*) crown touching (*stringo*) Juno's head in 10.30 and the stars (*stellae*) on the helmets of Castor and Pollux in 10.31; Isis also wears a robe of sheer (*tenuis*) linen reminiscent of Venus' garment of sheer (*tenuis*) silk; she carries emblems (a sistrum and vessel), recalling the sceptre, shield and spear carried by Juno and Minerva in 10.31; and she identifies herself as (among others) Minerva, Venus, and Juno. Thus Isis is clearly linked with the staged Judgement of Paris.

At 11.3–6 we are presented with an impressive picture of Isis and a long and solemn speech by her, listing her numerous titles and powers, promising a miraculous release for Lucius from the body of the ass, claiming that she will be holding sway in the Underworld when he dies and will favour him there too, and even offering to extend his life beyond its fated span. All that is immediately followed in 11.7 by Lucius' reaction—fear, joy, and sweat, in fact lots of sweat (*pavore et gaudio ac dein sudore nimio permixtus*). The obvious bathos is complemented by the comic picture of a heavily perspiring ass.

At 11.5–6 Lucius had been told by Isis that to secure his change back into human form the next day he must join her procession briskly and without hesitation (*incunctanter*), and he must take the restorative roses (which will be held by her priest) gently as if kissing the man's hand; Lucius had also been told there to pay close attention to her instructions and not to shrink from any of them. However, at 11.12–13 there is great stress on the slowness with which he joins the procession (*cunctabundus*, and so on), he makes no pretence of kissing the priest's hand and he devours the roses very greedily (that is, not gently). The discrepancies are unsettling, however one explains them (Isis may be just understanding, or eager to ensnare Lucius, or this may have been a false vision<sup>9</sup>). And, although he may have been nervous in approaching the procession and eager to eat the roses, if Lucius does not have the control and intelligence to follow clear and careful instructions on a matter of supreme importance to him, one cannot help but wonder how reliable he is as a reporter and interpreter of his religious experiences.

The speech by the priest with the roses at 11.15 seems to take the *Metamorphoses* off in a new direction (making it the edifying story of a soul saved), but at the same time, rather jarringly and disquietingly, it makes it clear that the restored Lucius is to be made use of immediately for propaganda purposes to drum up converts,<sup>10</sup> and it suggests that Lucius will simply exchange his earlier slavery as a human and an ass (*serviles . . . voluptates*<sup>11</sup> and *servitium*) for another form of slavery, to the goddess (*servitium deae, obsequio religionis, ministerii iugum* and *deae servire*: note the emphasis in the fourfold repetition). So in the following chapters things do not change all that much for Lucius: for instance, he still receives orders from master and mistress figures

the *Metamorphoses* and the overlooked message in the story of Cupid and Psyche (see e.g. P. G. Walsh, *The Roman Novel* [Cambridge, 1970], 177ff., 190ff.; J. Tatum, *Apuleius and the Golden Ass* [Ithaca, NY and London, 1979], 38ff.).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Harrison (n. 2), 240 and 246ff. on the dubiousness of Lucius' visions.

<sup>10</sup> *Comitare pompam deae . . . videant inreligiosi, videant et errorem suum recognoscant*, he is told.

<sup>11</sup> On which see J. G. Griffiths, *Apuleius of Madauros: The Isis-Book (Metamorphoses, Book XI)* (Leiden, 1975), 247–8.

and is passed on among them; he is moved around much as he was as an animal; he is made into a spectacle and a source of income again (cf. 10.19, 23); and he is once more utilized by priests in their manipulative worship of a goddess (cf. 8.27ff.). This new (religious) slavery does not, by way of contrast to the earlier form, bring much freedom. Amusingly the naïve Lucius completely fails to see any of this, even while narrating it all.

Harrison has noted eight references to the high price of Lucius' various initiations.<sup>12</sup> To them should be added allusions to the expenses of the cult at 11.21 (*sumptus . . . caerimoniis necessarios*), 11.22 (*quantoque sumptu deberem procurare supplicamentis*), and 11.24 (*pretiosa chlamida*), and the extensive depiction of the priests' richly decorated boat filled with precious offerings in 11.16. Even though he himself mentions the costliness so frequently, our poor innocent apparently never wakens to the fact that he is being taken in again and again.

At 11.27 Lucius dreams that an initiate announces to him a banquet of great sanctity, but rather suspiciously no such banquet is ever described in the rest of the *Metamorphoses*. Later in that chapter a priest called Asinius tells the Greek Lucius that he had recently had a vision in which he was told by Osiris that a man from (North African) Madauros (that is, Lucius) would come to him and should be initiated at once. Despite all the ink spilled on *Madauremsem* the easiest and most obvious explanation is that Asinius (whose limp makes him somewhat dubious as a priest anyway<sup>13</sup>) has simply got Lucius' birthplace wrong<sup>14</sup> (and the obtuse, hooked Lucius fails to notice even this). With this interpretation Asinius may have been misled by his dream or misremembered it or clumsily made the whole thing up.<sup>15</sup> And the name Asinius may well play on the 'stupid' sense of *asinus*<sup>16</sup> and flippantly suggest the ex-ass (but still asinine) Lucius being taken in by the asinine 'ass' Asinius.

In 11.30 the final sentence of the *Metamorphoses* sends us away with a picture of Lucius with the shaven head of an Isiac priest and a buffoon too,<sup>17</sup> and enrolled in an Egyptian priesthood in Rome which is said to be very old (*vetustissimi*) and also founded in the days of Sulla (*sub illis Syllae temporibus conditi*). The latter phrase seems a quite needless addition in terms of measuring age, but it does have disturbing connotations which attach to the cult, as Sulla had a reputation for being rapacious, venal, deceitful, and untrustworthy,<sup>18</sup> and (picking up on the theme of fakes) was said to have associated with actors and loved the theatre.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Harrison (n. 2), 245. Cf. also Winkler (n. 1), 219ff.

<sup>13</sup> See Griffiths (n. 10), 333. Again there seem to be pointed associations: the priest with the limp is reminiscent of the lame driver and ass in Venus' trap at 6.18 and the man with the stick posing as a philosopher in the charade at 11.8.

<sup>14</sup> The choice of Madauros for the slip is obviously an allusion to Apuleius' own place of birth, but the precise point behind that allusion is still disputed. On the whole complex issue see most recently Harrison (n. 2), 229ff.

<sup>15</sup> And however one explains away *Madauremsem* it still gives one pause for thought and must make for some unease.

<sup>16</sup> Lucius himself links Asinius with *asinus* (meaning 'ass' not 'dolt') in 11.27.

<sup>17</sup> See Winkler (n. 1), 225ff. There may also be comic inversion of Lucius' hair-fetish (2.8) and Isis' luxuriant hair (11.3).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. e.g. Val. Max. 9.2.1, Vell. Pat. 2.28, Florus 2.9.23, and Plut. *Sulla* 5, 6, 31, 33.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. e.g. Val. Max. 6.9.6 and Plut. *Sulla* 2 (who says that mimes and buffoons were among his companions; Lucius' shaven head may tie in with this).