

The Rhetoric of Storytelling in *The Golden Ass*

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In the mid-second century AD a well-educated, Latin-speaking North African named Lucius Apuleius composed an extended prose narrative that explores some of the foundational themes of the western intellectual tradition: the place of the human in the world, the nature of social order, the quest for spiritual identity—the very nature of *being* itself, as well as of the divine. Much to the delight as well as the instruction of posterity, Apuleius raised these profound concerns by telling a rambunctious story about an ass.

In the resulting work, *The Golden Ass*, Apuleius explores his themes in such a way as to raise another basic question within the western literary tradition: “What are stories, and what are they good for?” The narrative tells of a curious journeyman, also named Lucius, who is unwillingly transformed into an ass and then led on a kind of odyssey throughout the Greco-Roman world. As a beast, he is given a perspective on the human order from without, while his consciousness remains paradoxically within. With his human agency denied him, his time as an ass allows—or rather forces—him to hear a series of stories, of which *The Golden Ass* is largely composed. The resulting tale-within-a-tale structure allows Apuleius to call attention to the problem of discovering meaning within stories and to the importance of interpreting that meaning. Lucius’s physical transformations also call attention to the role that stories play in the transformation of the soul. Lucius’s initial transformation into an ass results from an inability or refusal to find meaning in the stories he encounters; as an ass, he hears various tales that progressively help him to construct an informed image of the world; finally apprehending the cumulative meaning of the tales he has heard, he flees a debased society and seeks isolation, where divine grace intervenes (in the form of the goddess Isis) to provide a final interpretation for the meaning of his own journey and to restore to him his humanity.

The narrative’s religious conclusion has attracted much critical attention, provoking at least one critic to dismiss the work as mere “religious propaganda.”¹ While *The Golden Ass* achieves too much artistically to be compartmentalized thus, its religious element cannot be ignored when considering the whole of the work. Critics since Augustine have noted the autobiographical aspect of the narrative; and the marked sincerity of the “religious fervor” in book 11 and its compatibility with Apuleius’s Platonism

1 Wlosok, “Unity of Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses*,” 142.

have been sufficiently defended.² But book 11 continues to be a source of contention among critics, mostly because the other books lack overt religious content. However, the tales, their placement in the narrative, and their fictive consequences take part in a larger rhetorical strategy to create an image of the world that awakens the “asinified” hero to the need for transcendence. Through various encounters with tales, Lucius, a curious yet undirected experience-junkie, is led on a spiritual journey from moral thoughtlessness to spiritual awareness. Hence *The Golden Ass* is in part a commentary on the spiritual aspect of fiction and the importance of learning to read the connection between fiction and life, as the final outcome of Lucius’s experiences demonstrates the utility of understanding tales as highly practical vehicles of meaning.

Before beginning his story, Apuleius addresses his readers:

In this Milesian tale, reader, I shall string together a medley of stories, and titillate your agreeable ears with a merrily whispered narrative... It tells how the forms and fortunes of men were converted into alien natures, and then back again by the twist of fate into their first selves.³

As helpful as this prefatory guide might seem, it proves almost completely untrue. Concerning the primary action, the transformation/retransformation motif proves only partially true of the protagonist Lucius and entirely untrue of the characters he meets along his journey. Although Lucius is eventually restored to his human form after having been transformed into an ass, he is an entirely different soul on account of the time he spends as a beast. As for the other characters (and subcharacters—those introduced in the tales told by characters), their fortunes are never restored. Quite the contrary, as the narrative progresses it becomes clear that, for Apuleius, Fortune is indifferent (if not hostile) to the human desire for a happy ending. Also, many critics have noted that *The Golden Ass* treats profound ethical and religious questions, only occasionally sharing the frivolous tone and content of the Milesian tale.⁴ In fact, with *The Golden Ass* Apuleius strategically “strings together” tales that seem frivolous to create a larger and more meaningful narrative, which suggests a transformation of yet another type—namely, a transformation of the genre he claims to be writing in, the Milesian tale.

The first tales strung together in books 1 and 2 not only provide Apuleius an opportunity to display his gift for storytelling but also place in the foreground some of his narrative’s elemental themes, such as the transformation motif and the power of magic. These tales also characterize Lucius as an intriguing yet fundamentally flawed protagonist whose vices will

2 The most recent reliable analysis is that of Heller, “Apuleius, Platonic Dualism, and Eleven,” 322.

3 *The Golden Ass* (GA), 1.31 (book 1, page 31), hereafter cited in text; Jack Lindsay’s translation is used for all citations.

4 See Wlosok, “Unity of Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses*,” for a contrary opinion. My reading of the prologue compliments those of Tatum, “Tales in Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses*,” and Smith, Jr, “Narrative Voice in Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses*.”

be on display for the entertainment and instruction of readers. We do not yet know what to expect from Lucius in the way of discretion and discernment; however, it becomes clear as the narrative develops that Apuleius has placed these particular stories here as admonitions of the perils besetting the individual who embarks on the symbolic journey toward a meaningful life without restraint and circumspection.

As the story begins, the first-person narrator Lucius is on his way to Thessaly when he meets two other travelers on the road. Overhearing one of them accuse the other of telling deceptive stories about the powers of witchcraft, Lucius attempts to correct the skeptical man's perspective on such stories:

By Hercules, you are ignorant that man's debased intelligence calls all those matters lies which are either seldom seen or heard, or which exist on heights beyond the narrow cast of reason. And yet if you probe these matters closely, you will find them not only understandable and clear, but even easily beheld. (1.34)

Encouraged by his new acquaintance's openness to the polysemous nature of experience, the storytelling traveler, Aristomenes, begins his tale over again for Lucius. He tells how he came across an old friend named Socrates in hiding from a possessive and powerful witch named Meroe; he invited his dejected friend to stay in his room at the inn for the night; however, the witch appeared in the middle of the night and took her vengeance by replacing her ex-lover Socrates' heart with a cursed sponge. Socrates appeared to be in perfect health following the enchanted surgery until he stopped for water the next day, when he fell over dead. Aristomenes concludes by telling how he buried his friend and exiled himself from the region.

Aristomenes' travel companion dismisses the tale as a hoax, but Lucius responds with enthusiastic openness to the story, affirming it as potentially true and praising it because it has entertained the travelers, making a "rough and interminable journey [pass] without effort or tedium" (1.45). He parts ways with his traveling companions and soon arrives in Hypata, which is, incidentally, the same place described in Aristomenes' story. Though he was obviously engrossed by the story, he shows no signs of responding to the admonition it suggests. He makes no reference to the obvious similarities between his own situation and that of Socrates: both men are traveling alone on ambiguous business; both have been travel companions of Aristomenes; finally, both have incidental erotic relationships with practitioners of magic while in Thessaly (though Lucius's lover Fotis is only an amateur witch of sorts). For the purposes of the narrative at this point, though, it is significant that Lucius interprets the story of Meroe and Socrates (if he interprets it at all) as little more than an affirmation of his vaguely optimistic, relativistic world view, and not as a foreshadowing of danger.

Ironically, instead of provoking fear or at least caution, Aristomenes' tale only intensifies Lucius's naive desire "to know everything in the world" (1.33). His zeal for knowledge itself is not worthy of reproach, but his failure to understand the story's primary theme—the danger of encountering

magic—reveals a disparity between his desire to know and his capacity to learn. The morning after his arrival in Hypata, less than a day after hearing the dark tale of Meroe's magic destroying Socrates, he admits to feeling "agog with desire and zeal" to experience the "Art of Magic" himself (2.50). He has not forgotten the tale; he even takes delight in standing "in the very city which had set the scene for the story of [his] worthy fellow-traveler Aristomenes" (2.50). That Lucius recalls the story leads us to wonder if he is capable of thinking critically about the role that magic played in it, especially considering his acceptance of the tale's potential veracity. Lucius's imagination takes over for a moment as he passes through Hypata, seeing "the stones... [as] petrified men, the birds [as]... enchanted men with plumes, the trees surrounding the Pomerium [as] men magically spiring into leaves, and the waters of the fountain [as] flowing human bodies" (2.50). This enraptured wandering could be read as further characterization of Lucius as remarkably curious (and it certainly does achieve this), but most significant here is how Apuleius depicts him as oblivious to the danger of magic previously related through story. To make this judgment is not to chastise Lucius morally, but to point out that Apuleius places Lucius in a situation that warns him about seeking transcendence through magic before he chooses to proceed with his curiosity. More importantly, reading the first tale and then observing Lucius's ignorance of its theme makes us aware of two fundamental aspects of the rest of the work: the tales will preview thematic elements of the Lucius narrative; and Lucius is essentially flawed in that he desires transcendence but fails to reflect critically on the means of reaching such a higher state of being. In time, he will learn that the sublunary realm is inescapably subject to the forces of magic and fortune, and this will eventually prompt him to flee its moral degradation to a place where transcendence and ultimate meaning will afterwards appear to him. In order to gain this knowledge, however, Lucius must first be brought to a situation in which his own condition of servitude is revealed by a literal if overstated representation of his character.

Apuleius shows Lucius refusing to find meaning in two other significant places before his "asinification,"⁵ both occurring in book 2 at his aunt's dinner party. The first is not a tale exactly, but the sculpted image of the myth of Diana and Actaeon. Lucius's encounter with this statue fits neatly into the theme of warnings ignored, as it commemorates "the punishment of curiosity by metamorphosis."⁶ But, like he did with the tale of Aristomenes, Lucius merely takes delight in the perception of the statue rather than contemplating the meaning of the story that it evokes. Moving from the sculpture to the dining room, Lucius hears another witch story at the dinner party. Here again, the power of magic takes the thematic forefront. Telephron, another guest at the party, tells the elaborate story of how witches clipped off his ears and nose while he was guarding a corpse. If Aristomenes' tale initiates a series of tales heard by Lucius previewing the overarching narrative, Telephron's story (the final tale before Lucius's transformation)

5 A term first used by Tatum, after Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* ("pumpkinification").

6 Tatum, "Tales in Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*," 168.

confirms his neglect of tales as a form of knowledge deserving critical attention. Whereas Aristomenes' tale represents an indirect encounter with the supernatural, coming to Lucius at second hand, Telephron claims to have been personally violated by magic, the consequences of which are visible and thus verifiable. But the party's response of laughter confuses Lucius, who again fails to discern any kind of meaning in the tale or any connection between it and the story told by Aristomenes (not to mention, of course, any personal implications). Apuleius leaves such interpretation for readers, while Lucius remains oblivious and naively hopeful that he may "stumble upon some theme that will abundantly do honor" to the god of laughter (2.69, emphasis mine). As a blindly enthusiastic protagonist whose only hope is to "stumble upon" awareness, Lucius is incapable of interpreting the signs or directions transmitted through these timely narratives. Thus we should hardly be surprised when his experiment with magic turns against him and he stumbles into a most unflattering transformation.

Having used Lucius's disregard of these admonitory tales to display the consequences of foolishness and inattention to the realities conveyed through story, Apuleius takes up a new rhetorical purpose. The following subsets of tales and the way Apuleius weaves them into the fabric of his narrative provide a variegated image of what Steven Heller calls "the world of change"⁷ as a dangerous, unjust, and unpredictable place. Lucius will henceforth unwillingly happen upon stories (and the events that come to make up his own story), since, while an ass, his free will is reined in, and he is subjected to hearing things he might not otherwise hear. The subsequent set of stories reveals the darker side of the human will, and through them Apuleius crafts an image of a world in which the most basic social relationships have disintegrated, leaving people at every turn subject to betrayal, adultery, murder, or severe misfortune (and oftentimes various combinations of these). In short, Apuleius's primary theme shifts from changes in *forma* to changes in *fortuna*.

Apuleius cleverly constructs his image of the broken world with a view from the bottom, namely from the perspective of criminals. The stories told by the robber in book 4 anticipate the succession of woeful tales in the second half of the narrative. They also provide some dark comic relief, since all the tales share a decidedly negative outcome, ironically providing a positive moral effect. When the robbers have gathered in their hideout cave after a successful raid of a wedding, one of them tells the stories of three great thieves who have died in the line of "duty." Each story contains elements of farce-tragedy and unexpected reversals of fortune: one tells of the "heroic" suicide of a thief-captain following the loss of his prize possession, his right hand; another tells of a thief being outwitted and killed by an old woman; the final story tells of an especially bold thief disguised in a bear costume who is violently dismembered (4.93–101), a particularly interesting story since it repeats the man/beast transformation motif, but with a fittingly brutal ending. This storytelling scene takes on the quality of a ritual, as the thieves pour libations after the stories have been told.

7 "Apuleius, Platonic Dualism, and Eleven," 338.

James Tatum's overview and analysis of the robber's tales and their role in Apuleius's image of the world proves helpful:

Like the characters in most other tales, their escapades end in complete futility and death. To this extent, they are very much part of Lucius's uncertain and cruel world. But they are hysterically overdrawn. The hymn to their *virtus*, their immortality, bravery, loyalty, and their *disciplina* of robbery... loses all its solemnity and gains much in silliness, by its repetition... To hear three times of varied adventures, with but one dismal conclusion, only confirms our opinion of the robbers' ineptitude and gullibility.⁸

In short, such tales of seemingly tragic peripety prove laughable coming from the mouths of criminals. But when similar misfortunes beset ordinary members of society—as they will, and with shocking frequency, in later books—laughter will be transformed to dismayed silence. Thus, while the robber's tales might appear to be merely a dark comic interlude or stray devices only “loosely inserted into the main plot,”⁹ Apuleius uses them for a dual purpose: first, to begin forming an image of a morally inverted world (from the bottom up, as it were) wherein the virtues of bravery, courage, and loyalty are praised only by criminals; second, to foreshadow the theme of *peripeteia* that dominates the rest of the narrative landscape up to book 11.

The Cupid and Psyche story grants a lengthy fictive reprieve from the robber's cave. Occurring just before the midpoint of *The Golden Ass*, this story is by far the narrative's longest and most developed. It is told by the old woman who acts as caretaker to the robbers, and she is central to understanding its rhetorical purpose. The story is about the mortal Psyche and her marriage to Cupid. The girl arranges to see her husband's face, which he had forbidden her to do; but when she sees Cupid by candlelight and accidentally wakes him by burning him with the candle's wax, she is estranged from him and incurs the jealous wrath of his mother, Venus. Attempting to reconcile herself with him, she eventually seeks out Venus, who places a series of seemingly impossible tasks before her. Psyche, though, aided by the forces of nature, is eventually reunited with Cupid and made a goddess herself. Apuleius's version is the first comprehensive literary account of the myth, though sources point to oral tradition for its origin. Its conclusion might suggest that Apuleius holds Fortune to be compatible with the human desire for a happy ending, but an analysis of how the story fits into the overall narrative reveals something quite different. In fact Apuleius uses this story for the rhetorical purpose of discrediting traditional myths and their false-dream-like pretensions through the dismissal of the myth's repository, the old woman.

As many scholars have indicated, the old woman's tale stands apart from all the other narrative acts in *The Golden Ass*. The tale creates a notably organic whole, and Apuleius devotes nearly two whole books to relating the myth in its apparent entirety. Other scholars have contributed

8 “Tales in Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*,” 174.

9 Wlosok, “Unity of Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*,” 142–43.

thorough and insightful commentary on the artful way that Apuleius uses oral myth and its themes to form a dialogue with his own literary creation, mainly by way of emphasizing Psyche as a *figura* of Lucius. Fewer critics focus on the cruel fate of the storyteller: although her tale takes up nearly one-fifth of Apuleius's book, the old woman makes no contribution to the action of the narrative. Likewise, her tale will prove to be an ultimately empty fable, which Apuleius signals through her abrupt demise.

Acting out of what appears to be genuine compassion for Charite, a girl held prisoner by the robbers, the old woman relates her tale in order to "take [her] mind off [her] troubles with some pretty fablings and old-wives' tales" (4.104). Before beginning her tale, however, she gives a strange preface, attempting to calm the girl after she awakes from a bad dream:

Don't get the wind up because of the *meaningless* skurry of a dream. For besides that the images of a daydream are said to be mere phantasy, you often find that the visions of the nights go by *contraries* in what they express. (4.104, emphasis mine)

Ironically, her principles for interpreting dreams can be applied to the lengthy story she then relates to Charite. After a roller-coaster of sublimity and devastation, the old woman's tale concludes with the happiest of possible endings: Psyche is not only reunited with her husband, she is also accepted into the eternally feasting company of the gods on Olympus. The parallel theme of a girl separated from her spouse leads us to expect the old woman's optimistic tale to be a refiguration of Charite's eventual reunion with her beloved. After all, Psyche's redemption was ultimately earned by perseverance through many trials (with a bit of divine grace). Our optimism only intensifies with the glorious arrival of Tlepolemus, her betrothed, disguised as the bombastic robber-king Haemus, to rescue her. The various levels of framing and anticipation prepare us for a brilliant and joyous climax, and Apuleius goes so far as to create this joyous moment by telling of their escape. However, this triumphant turn of fortune proves only temporary, as we soon hear the horrible account of the deaths of Charite and her husband by the plotting of Tlepolemus's treacherous friend Thrassylus. A long-time suitor jealous for the love of Charite, Thrassylus feigns deep friendship with Tlepolemus, only to murder him later during a hunt. Charite learns of this betrayal when the spirit of her husband appears to her in a dream, and she takes revenge by stabbing out Thrassylus's eyes and then committing suicide. Thrassylus himself commits suicide after learning of her death.

This turn of events contravenes the comic expectations aroused by the Cupid and Psyche story, suggesting that Apuleius directs our imagination to the world of such traditional myth in order to discredit it. Also, the old woman who tells the story subsequently commits suicide, but Apuleius makes very little of her departure from the world of his narrative. Lucius, as narrator, seems pitiless telling how the robbers—whom she alone cared for—"cut her down, and at once dragged her by her own rope to the cliff-edge, over which they tossed her. Then... they wolfishly attacked the dinner which the

hapless old woman had prepared for them—so that she still served them, dead as she was” (6.146). The old woman who narrated a major part of the book is never spoken of again. What is Apuleius evoking with this abrupt dismissal? Is he figuratively disowning the world of traditional myth? Is he symbolizing the demise of the oral tradition and the values intrinsic and essential to it? This is one case where the final book provides insight, for when one compares the two episodes, Apuleius’s ultimate rhetorical purpose of contrasting the majestic power of Isis and Osiris with the “trivial” fictive world of the Olympians¹⁰ becomes increasingly clear. Apuleius discredits the standards conveyed through traditional myths of the Olympian gods by employing this myth, only so abruptly to dismiss its source, and by subtly crafting an unconscious self-contradiction in the storyteller through her brief discourse on the nature of false dreams.

The account of Charite and Tlepolemus is the first of many stories of reversal that season the second half of the asinine Lucius’s journey to redemption. Having endured the worst of all “crashed” weddings and the prospect of separation after the girl’s abduction, why do they not live “happily ever after,” especially considering (among Apuleius’s finest devices) Tlepolemus’s bold deception of the robbers and his subsequent rescue of his bride? At the narrative level, their later misfortune advances the plot by occasioning Lucius’s Odyssean wanderings that make up the rest of the book. Further, at the rhetorical level, this turn will also justify, at least in part, Lucius’s eventual abandonment of *eros* and female companionship for the mysteries of Isis at the narrative’s conclusion. Put differently, the story of Tlepolemus and Charite demonstrates that there is no “happily ever after” in marriage, a point that seems all the more cruel in the wake of the eudaimonic conclusion of the Cupid and Psyche myth.

Their story also initiates for Apuleius’s narrative a series of tales that display the degeneration of human society and the fundamental relationships that constitute it. Apuleius not only casts a shadow on male companionship with the betrayal of Tlepolemus by Thrassylus, but also broaches the theme of illicit relationships, which will become the pivotal *praxis* for nearly every tale to come. By killing off the young couple who had already overcome profound obstacles to be together, Apuleius takes a bold step toward shattering his readers’ notions of the outcomes of human relationships. All “bets” of narrative expectation are off, and we are to prepare—as Tlepolemus failed to do—for violations of the most intimate bonds among people.

Having undermined his audience’s presuppositions about traditional myth with the Cupid and Psyche story, considered in light of the fate of Tlepolemus and Charite, Apuleius employs tales in the second half of *The Golden Ass* to create an image of the world as spiritually fractured and socially disordered. While the robber’s tales provided a preview into the underworld of human vice, the tales that occur in books 8–10 communicate an even more intimate image of a disturbed and irremediable society. The common themes of these tales are the breakdown of basic civil and familial

10 Relihan, Introduction to *The Golden Ass*, xxv.

relationships and the ubiquity of injustice in society. Tatum calls them “Tales of Revenge and Adultery,” but these stories could also be called “Tales on the Death of *Charite*.”

Granted, this perspective on the function of the tales tends toward a moralistic reading of the narrative. However, this awareness of moral depravity makes the revelation in book 11 all the more dramatic as a final transformation. Elaborating on this contrast, Heller indicates that Apuleius’s consecutive peripety tales “represent the world of becoming, where *caeca Fortuna* holds sway. The eleventh book, containing the highest god and his consort Isis stands... beyond the world.”¹¹ Tatum also comments on the image of depravity conveyed in these final tales and their cumulative rhetorical effect: “The more vulgar and sensual... the tales, the more ‘moral’, ultimately, they may prove to be.”¹² Thus, by exposing Lucius, and his readers, to the various moral degradations of “the world of becoming” via stories, the narrative’s conclusion with the spiritual absolute is all the more welcome and meaningful.

The brief but horrendous Tale of the Bailiff¹³ begins this sequence with an illicit relationship that instigates a shocking suicide and infanticide—not to mention a thoroughly inhumane and decidedly unjust form of revenge on the man who provoked these deaths. With this tale Apuleius directs our attention to the potentially devastating consequences of adultery, to be sure. However, the punishment devised by the adulterer’s master provokes thought on the nature of retaliation in the place of justice. The wife could have ceased her rampage after burning his account books, but she makes their innocent child a victim of her rage also; and the master defiles his authority by condemning the adulterous slave to a cruel death by the “tiny multitudinous nips” of ants (8.178), a particularly torturous way to punish infidelity. So, what began as a tale of male-initiated adultery (a prevalent theme for the Greco-Roman literati) becomes a glimpse into the chasm of injustice and the inhumane abuse of power in the master-slave relationship, a dynamic that grows increasingly familiar to Lucius as he is passed into the possession of others.

The Tale of the Jealous Husband provides what Tatum calls an “echolalic responson” of the themes in the Tale of the Bailiff.¹⁴ Infidelity in marriage again takes center stage, and the master/slave dynamic also recurs. The situation here is somewhat reversed, however, as the reputedly-loyal-turned-greedy slave ultimately gets the better of his master, and readers are delighted to find a tale where at least no one is brutally murdered or commits suicide. This story is not free of immorality, though, as the slave betrays his master’s trust for lucre. Further, when one considers the context of the tale’s transmission—the elderly friend of the Baker’s wife relates the

11 “Apuleius, Platonic Dualism, and Eleven,” 328.

12 “Tales in Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses*,” 162.

13 GA, 8.178. Lindsay’s subtitles for the stories are used henceforth.

14 GA, 9.194–97; Tatum, “Tales in Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses*,” 190: “echolalic responson” is Tatum’s term for describing the various ways in which Apuleius’s tales resemble or “echo” each other via theme, motif, or character type.

story to her in order to encourage her to betray her husband's trust—we see quite clearly an image of a world wherein obligations of *pietas* and *fides* have been repudiated; and Apuleius's portrayal of an older woman counseling a younger to impiety shows the perverted nature of relationships in this dysfunctional society. Moreover, the dynamic of tale-telling in this situation illuminates by contrast Apuleius's own rhetorical aim: the older woman uses a tale of infidelity to tempt the younger into vice, whereas Apuleius uses his characters and their circumstances to illustrate social decay—showing his readers how the world *really* is—in order to justify his protagonist's rejection of its immorality and a desire for something beyond its debasement.

The Tale of the Wife's Tub and the Tale of the Fuller's Wife further develop the image of a world in which standards of trust have disintegrated (9.199–200, 9.187–89 respectively). Female-initiated adultery is the theme of these tales. These are not, of course, the first literary accounts of faithless wives, but the sheer number and frequency of these tales (also considering the account of the Baker's wife's infidelity) makes the author's point clear: marriage is no place to look for faithfulness. Unlike other points in the narrative in which Apuleius provides some internal hint of how to interpret a tale, he remains silent throughout this succession of adultery tales. Thus we can all laugh at the often ridiculous incidents within them, as these are actual Milesian tales—in all their raunchiness and bawdy humor. However, conscientious readers will also note the dwindling of trust among the people of Lucius's world as one of Apuleius's primary themes, employed throughout the narrative to provoke contemplation of the disorder of a decadent society.

The Tale of the Wicked Stepmother is among the most troublesome yet thought-provoking tales in *The Golden Ass* (10.212–20). A beautiful but cruel stepmother lusts after her stepson but turns to hating him after he rejects her advances. With the help of a slave, she plans to have him killed with poison, but her natural son mistakenly drinks what later turns out to be a sleeping potion. She accuses the innocent stepson of poisoning her natural son, but a virtuous doctor speaks up at his trial and proves her own guilt. Her treachery exposed, she is sentenced to exile and her slave consort is crucified. According to Lucius as narrator, this tale is particularly tragic, a plausible interpretation considering the story's emphasis on the near annihilation of a family. The virtuous doctor and his sleeping herb are a welcome contrivance upon which the conclusion hinges, but the true gravity of the story lies in what is put at risk. The stepmother's depravity casts a shadow over a just and thus otherwise satisfying conclusion; and although disaster is averted, that does not atone for the stepmother's own tragic fall, which makes her willing to murder to fulfill her lusts. This story, in which Lucius sees the tragic element, helps to prompt him to reject and flee the world that the story represents.

Taken with the previous tale of feminine rage and its disastrous effects, The Tale of the Jealous Wife instills in Lucius both a fervent desire to escape the world of social decay and an urgency for retransformation (10.226–29). Having served as something of a circus animal for a time with

his final owner, he learns that he is to put on a new kind of show—a sexual spectacle—with a condemned woman. Her story of brutality and senseless violence punctuates the subset of tales about the death of *caritas*: she brutally murdered her innocent sister-in-law out of jealous suspicions; she then proceeded to murder her husband (for the same supposed infidelity), her daughter (over rights of inheritance), the doctor who gave her the poison to kill her husband, and the wife of the doctor. Her five murders earned her the penalty of being thrown to the beasts, but not before being “joined publicly in wedlock” with the asinine Lucius (10.230). Lucius awaits the show with “severest mental anguish” and even attempts suicide; incapable of killing himself, his only hope becomes the possibility of escape and the prospect that, with the coming of spring, “the countryside would be embroidered with gem-like buds; the meadows would be invested with a brightening flush; the roses would break forth from their thorny retreats... and by means of the roses [he] should become Lucius once more” (10.230). His coupling with the murderer will implicate Lucius in the ubiquitous moral degradation of the common world (not to mention that it will all be viewed as some form of entertainment) and, because he is better able now to interpret such events, this impending debasement of his assinine body symbolically reveals to him his own character. This revelation motivates him to escape his state of moral and physical enslavement, though a higher spiritual consciousness of his motive will come from another source.

As Lucius awaits his segment of the show with the condemned woman, he watches a pantomimed production of the Judgment of Paris. This pantomime (a transformed, incarnated narrative) is Lucius’s final encounter with a mimetic representation before his escape from the world of servitude. Between the dread of coupling with the condemned woman and this display of the Olympian world’s corruption, Lucius at last resolves to flee from the degenerate society of which he has gained comprehensive knowledge through stories. The transfiguration of the Olympian world here is profound, for Apuleius reemploys it to show that Lucius has finally come to recognize stories as vessels of meaning. Lucius pauses to meditate on the pantomime’s deeper commentary on the nature of injustice, rhetorically asking his readers:

Why do you wonder after this if those dregs of humanity, those forensic cattle, those gowned judges, the vultures, the judges now sell their decisions for cash? Even at the world’s infancy a bribe could corrupt judgment in a question agitated between gods and men; and a young fellow (a rustic and a shepherd) appointed judge by the counsels of great Jove sold the first judicial decision for the lucre of lust, thereby entailing damnation on mankind. (10.232)

This moment of analysis evidences Lucius’s ability to interpret the tale so as to discover the underlying meaning within the spectacle; and further, he is able to see the pantomime as a relevant analogy to his own journey and his various experiences with injustice. With the pantomime, Apuleius not only displays Lucius’s ability to elicit meaning from an encounter with

a story but also reinforces his critique of the belief system inherent in traditional myth. And taken in this light, the pantomime represents both an indictment of the present age and a critique of false religion. Lucius sees the tale's meaning, but, more importantly, he allows that meaning to inform his own course. Criticism and personal reflection become one at this moment in Lucius's story, and, following the long stream of peripety stories, this confluence of understanding provokes the narrative's final turn, though in this instance from worse to better. Lucius's subsequent escape from servitude concludes with his ultimate salvation, when the source of all meaning appears to him by epiphany. Lucius has rested and washed himself on a secluded beach when the resplendent goddess Isis appears to him and tells him how to regain his human form. He does as she bids him, approaching a procession of her priests the following day and eating from the roses they carry; upon retransformation, Lucius joins the priesthood of Isis and later takes up the call from the consort of Isis, the high-god Osiris, to go to Rome and become a lawyer—a fitting conclusion to a narrative that largely concerns itself with human injustice.

In *The Golden Ass*, Apuleius offers a meditation on what stories are and what they can do. As an approach to knowledge wholly different from the explicative, stories do not just distract or entertain, or even simply convey information; rather, they possess their own forms that demand recognition and contemplation. While the tales that Lucius hears (and sees) fulfill various rhetorical purposes in the book, their overarching effect is to give shape to, and ultimately transform, his journey from experiential thoughtlessness to spiritual awareness. His narrative, disguised as the ramblings of a "philosophizing ass" (10.233), shows that the distinct kind of knowledge expressed in stories can direct one's attention outside the self to the eternally true and just. Thus, while the peculiar tendency to seek among fictions for insights into the mystery of being may appear misguided, for Apuleius and other masters in the western tradition, the story is where the journey to truth begins.

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