

## The Curious *Curiositas* of Psyche in Apuleius' *Golden Ass*

There will always be debate over how the inset fable of *Cupid and Psyche* works as a key to interpreting the *Golden Ass* and its famously debated conclusion. On the one hand, for those who read the novel's conclusion as a serious conversion narrative, *Cupid and Psyche* becomes a way to reconcile the serious tone of Book 11 with Lucius' preceding comic misadventures; Psyche's struggle and salvation can be said to foreshadow the benevolence of Isis toward the previously misguided Lucius (eg. T. Hägg 1983). On the other hand, some argue that the whimsical spirit of the inset fable seems instead to point to a tongue-in-cheek or satirical conclusion to the novel, one in which we see Lucius hoodwinked by the avaricious priests of Isis (eg. Harrison 2006). The only consensus is that the story of Psyche must somehow parallel that of Lucius and that the link between the two characters is found in their shared *curiositas*, a fatal flaw which leads both characters into distress. This paper questions that last seemingly straightforward parallel.

Although the narrator of the *Golden Ass* attempts to link Psyche and Lucius through their *curiositas*, Apuleius works behind the scenes to subvert that link and substitute another: gullibility. It is true that Lucius consistently blames his mistakes on his *curiositas*, and the narrator of the fable repeatedly attributes Psyche's errors to the same fault. Yet Apuleius does not in fact allow Psyche to fulfill her supposed curiosity; instead, she is remarkably incurious throughout her adventures. It is only because her sisters have frightened her with their lies that Psyche takes up both a lamp and a knife (*GA* 5.22) to kill Cupid. If her motivation had been simple curiosity, there would have been no need for the knife. Similarly, as P. James (1987) has noted, although the narrator tells us that Psyche is driven by curiosity to open the box containing vapors of sleep, Apuleius has provided her with another motive. Psyche opens the box not

because she is unsure what is inside but rather because she actually believes it contains divine beauty, which she would like to use. As it turns out, the Psyche's fatal flaw is not her curiosity but rather her gullibility, and that gullibility is the flaw that she shares with Lucius, who, for instance, so memorably believes that he is on trial for murder when he has in reality only "slaughtered" wineskins (GA 2.32). When we realize how inaccurate the narrator's assertions can be in *Cupid and Psyche*, we come to a new view of the fable's significance for the main narrative: the main way in which *Cupid and Psyche* mirrors Lucius' story is the gullibility of its protagonist and the tale's experiments in unreliable narration, a central theme throughout the novel (Winkler 1982).

The paper concludes by turning back to the fable's impact on our interpretation of the conversion to Isis in Book 11. Our first impulse may have been to read *Cupid and Psyche* as the novel's narrator Lucius would like us to, as a reflection of his struggle with *curiositas* and redemption by a benevolent Isis. I argue, however, that to do so would force us to ignore key moments in the fable that seem designed to undermine the narrator's suggestion for how to interpret his connection with Psyche. The fault shared by Lucius and Psyche is not curiosity but gullibility, and this reminder that the narrator Lucius cannot even recognize the image of his own gullibility may push readers toward a satirical reading in which Lucius is duped rather than saved by the cult of Isis.

#### Bibliography

Hägg, T. (1983): *The Novel in Antiquity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Harrison, S. (2006): "Divine Authority in 'Cupid and Psyche': Apuleius *Metamorphoses* 6,23–24" in S. Byrne, E. Cueva, J. Alvares (eds.) *Authors, Authority, and Interpreters in the*

*Ancient Novel*, Groningen: Barkhuis, 172-85.

James, P. (1987): *Unity in diversity. A Study of Apuleius' Metamorphoses*. Hildesheim: Olms-Weidmann.

Winkler, J. (1985): *Auctor & Actor: A Narratological Reading of Apuleius' Golden Ass*. Berkeley: University of California Press.