

Apuleius and the Power of Writing

During the second century of our era, a cultural craze for the written word swept the Roman Empire. Aulus Gellius captured the zeitgeist of his time with his repeated trips to libraries, book shops, and book stalls (cf. Sandy 2001). Bibliomaniacs like Gellius were so common that Lucian parodied them in his essay *The Ignorant Book Collector* (cf. Prestige 1986). At this very moment appeared the only ancient Latin novel to have survived in full: Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*. Scholars have long struggled to understand the meaning of the earliest fully extant Latin novel (e.g., Feldbrugge 1938, Kirichenko 2007, and Riess 2008). This paper argues that, whatever its various apparently contradictory themes may be, much of the novel's meaning—and its *raison d'être*—lies in the significance for a second-century author of writing itself, which is evident in references to writing both in *The Golden Ass* and Apuleius' other works.

Apuleius does not beat around the bush as to why he writes: his works guarantee him glory. From philosophical treatises to zoological works to medical and scientific texts to poetry, history, and novels, books defined his career (cf. Harrison 2000). In his recorded *Florida* speeches, Apuleius boasts about the variety of his works (9 and 20) and the acclaim they have won him (18). These books can also preserve the memory—and glory—of a third party, as a sort of *quid pro quo*. In exchange for a statue in his honor, Apuleius promised the Carthaginians eternal glory through his writing: “Once you've dedicated my statue, I will more fully sing your praises in another book, and I will see to it that this book travels throughout all the provinces, and from there all the world over, at every epoch, recording praises of your kindness for

everyone, everywhere, for time immemorial” (16, translation mine). For Apuleius, writing benefits both him and his dedicatee, spreading the fame of both.

In *The Golden Ass*, Apuleius repeats many of these conceptions about writing. Right from the prologue, books are described as eternally (*aeternum*) storing important information (1.1). Indeed, they are even more fertile, more important (*libris felicioribus*) than the cities whence they arose (*ibid.*). “That cities have achieved fame through the books they produce or stimulate seems ... unusual,” notes S.J. Harrison (1990). Therefore, from its very opening, *The Golden Ass* stands out with its self-laudatory stance. The rest of the novel expands upon the theme of writing, exploring the glory of starring in a tale. The main character Lucius relates a prediction by a seer: his fame would flourish, including in books (2.12). Later in the story, a captive of robbers motivates Lucius to help her flee; among other things, she dangles before him the prospect of *docti* immortalizing their escape (6.29). Just like Apuleius with the Carthaginians, she promises to cover Lucius in glory—through writing.

The Golden Ass reflects the ambient bibliomania of the second century. While scholars will never agree on the novel’s meaning for the reader (cf. Schlam 1992 and Ulrich 2017), the comments on writing found in *The Golden Ass* and *Florida* hint at the author’s intent. By incorporating contradictory messages into his work, Apuleius turns his text into a memorable tour de force for the reader, one destined to bring him special praise, even today.

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