Sophia’s Got Soul: Gnostic Wisdom Tales and Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*

No aspect of Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* has received more scholarly attention than its lengthy centerpiece, the “Cupid and Psyche” tale. Much of the scholarship has been devoted to unlocking the meaning of the tale with regard to the larger whole of the novel and to the religious and philosophical use of (what seem to be) obvious allegorical figures (Kenney 1990, Walsh 1970). Standard interpretations have tended to hold that Psyche’s wanderings, sufferings, and ultimate rescue generally mirror those of Lucius and foreshadow his own Isiac salvation (Schlam 1992). Others have noted that the story has been borrowed, in part, from Plato’s skeletal version of the “Love and Soul” allegory in the *Phaedrus* (DeFillipo in Harrison1999) and also owes much to preexisting folktale motifs (Perry 1967, Winkler 1985).

Still, many questions have yet to be answered: since there is no obvious precedent to Apuleius version which accounts for its many details, can we conclude that it (more or less) originated with Apuleius? The motif of Cupid and Psyche in love is well-attested in ancient art, but why is it that the Apuleian tale does not seem to reflect such depictions? Is there a lost tradition that Apuleius drew upon for his version? In this paper I argue that these questions (and several others) can begin to be answered by holding up the “Cupid and Psyche” tale against a number of Gnostic tales which were roughly contemporary with Apuleius himself.

A glance at several 2nd century Gnostic myths as found in the *Nag Hammadi* corpus reveals striking parallels with the Apuleian tale. The Gnostic tales tell, often in a very “novelistic” style, of Sophia or Soul who falls from heaven because of her “sin”, loses her divine consort, undergoes a period of wandering, is ultimately rescued by her consort, is restored to heaven and (in some versions) even gives birth to divine children. In this paper I suggest that Apuleius may have been drawing from such sources or circulating myths in crafting his own tale. The religious and philosophical worldview of the *Nag Hammadi* texts meshes remarkably with the mystical, Platonist presentation of the Isiac cult in Book XI of the *Metamorphoses* as well as the syncretistic blend of mythology, allegory and philosophy which threads its way through much of Apuleius’ philosophical writings.

Thus, I conclude that viewing the tale through this particular lens and given Apuleius’ own religious and philosophical leanings we can confidently speak much more concretely about the likely origins of the “Cupid and Psyche” tale and in so doing remove lingering doubts about the overall unity and deliberate structure of the novel.

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