

Apuleius' Roman Olympus: Literary Tradition and Philosophical Critique
in the Cupid and Psyche Narrative

The debate over anthropomorphic depictions of the divine was an enduring feature of ancient discourse on the nature of the gods. The predominant religious traditions in Greece envisioned the Olympians as anthropomorphic beings, a conception attested by both art and poetry from the archaic period onward. With the development of philosophy, there arose a new, metaphysical conception of divinity, and thinkers like Xenophanes and Plato reacted against the anthropomorphized deities of poetry and popular religion; in time, Roman thinkers, including Varro, Seneca, and the elder Pliny, contributed to this critique as well. By the time of the Second Sophistic both anthropomorphism and its opposition existed in counterpoint, and were so familiar in learned discourse that writers could call upon both traditions to humorous effect. In this paper I argue that Apuleius of Madaurus, the second-century A.D. philosopher and rhetorician, is also engaging in this philosophical critique in his novel *Metamorphoses*, through specifically literary means.

In the inset story of Cupid and Psyche (*Met.* 4.28-6.24) Apuleius employs the literary trope of likening the gods to political magistrates. Into the mythological world of this story, he inserts certain, distinct elements that blend realities of the Roman social and political milieu with the mythological world of the story, applying to his Olympians recognizably Roman political procedures, laws, and even currency. The result is a comic juxtaposition between the pedestrian discourse of everyday life and the lofty register associated with the gods.

This satirical trope is well attested in ancient literature prior to the composition of the *Metamorphoses*, and originally grew out of the “council of the gods” scenes of Homeric epic; in the hands of later Greek and Roman authors it became fertile ground for a mock-epic burlesque

of traditional notions of the nature of the gods. Tracing the development of this device and assessing its role in the larger frame of the *Metamorphoses*, I argue that Apuleius is drawing upon this Greco-Roman literary trope to interject his own critique of anthropomorphism, performing a *reductio ad absurdum* on this old-fashioned conception of the Olympian gods. Such a critique would not be unexpected from an avowed Platonic philosopher composing a novel that deals with questions of religion and the divine—two issues central to the *Metamorphoses*' final book, which some have also read as a satirical critique of cult religion.

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