

Diotima and Isis

The eleventh book of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* is a moment of seriousness at the end of a comic novel, which has long made it a matter of debate. Seen through the lens of Diotima's speech in Plato's *Symposium*, however, it makes a great deal of sense. Both Book 11 and Diotima's speech contrast sharply with all that has come before them in their respective texts. They are elevated to a higher level of philosophy and spirituality. Common and sexual forms of love are cast aside in favor of love focused on the divine and universal; in Plato, the Form of Beauty, and in Apuleius the goddess Isis as a representation of broader divinity. Love of the individual is abandoned in favor of love of the universal and all-encompassing. On a more literary level, the humor that is characteristic of most of each text fades away during the discussion of serious philosophy, only to return again later. Apuleius was an ardent Platonist writing a book of bawdy tales, so the *Symposium* cannot have been far from his mind. Close examination suggests that Book 11 is in fact modeled at least in part on Diotima's speech.

In Plato's *Symposium* the transition from humorous to serious makes sense, as the reader has been expecting something impressive and different out of Socrates, whereas the reader of the *Metamorphoses* would be justified in expecting the prosaic, funny ending of the extant version of *Lucius or the Ass* on which it is based. Attempts to reconcile Book 11 with the rest of the novel often focus on trying to make them more continuous: finding ways in which the earlier books are a serious examination of irreligious behavior or the last book is still humorous throughout (Winkler 1985). However, when the *Metamorphoses* is read with the understanding that the *Symposium* is a critical part of its context, Book 11 can be taken as a logical part of the text because it follows the pattern that Plato previously established, without requiring strong continuity with the earlier tone. In the *Symposium* the different tone of Diotima's speech feels

natural because Socrates' speech is expected to be different. Apuleius does not have the built-in anticipation of something different coming later which Socrates' presence provides in the *Symposium*. With the *Symposium* taken as part of Apuleius' context, however, the existence of the serious scene in the *Symposium* can itself be the sign that a serious scene will come in the *Metamorphoses*.

It is inevitable that Book 11 be somewhat discontinuous. Apuleius is inserting stories into a preexisting matrix that he leaves largely undisturbed, and the seams are perceptible. This seam is one of the most noticeable due to the shift in the kind of *eros* that is the major theme. The *Symposium* as a whole, as I shall argue, and Diotima's speech in particular, is a major part of the context for the novel and this book, and Book 11 fits into the context of the *Symposium* far more neatly than the context of its own novel. The change in the type of *eros* at issue has precedent in Diotima's speech, as does the moment of serious philosophy in the middle of humor. Indeed, Book 11 even makes the same philosophical point as Diotima in many ways. Both are then followed by a gentle return to a more humorous tone; Plato's Alcibiades lightens the mood again at the end of the *Symposium*, and after the epiphany of Isis the *Metamorphoses* ends the novel on funnier and more ambiguous note with jabs at the cult (Winkler 1985) (Schlam 1992).

Apuleius was devoted to Platonic thought and even more so to the idea of himself as a Platonic philosopher (Fletcher 2014), and would not have been able to write a whole novel about sexual misadventure without thinking of the *Symposium*. Therefore a brief discussion of the primary philosophical point Plato makes in the *Symposium* is not only unsurprising, but even to be expected. And given the context of the *Symposium*, the existence of the novel itself then becomes a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. Plato says that the *eros* of a well-educated man should

result in the production of a great work, and his follower Apuleius obediently produces a novel, not only by means of *eros* but about it as well.

Bibliography

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