

Experiencing the Divine in Apuleius' *Cupid and Psyche*

Although there has been a recent explosion in bibliography on Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* (Harrison 2015), scholars who treat the Cupid and Psyche episode (*C&P*) usually concentrate on identifying its allegorical function or its thematic parallels with the rest of the novel (Kenney 1990, 12-28) and rarely read this story for its plot and in sequence. One exception is Winkler's narratological interpretation of *C&P* as a detective story focused on the question 'Who is Psyche's husband?' (1985, 90).

While preserving Winkler's reading of *C&P* for the plot, I will adopt a different approach, inspired by the 'second generation' wave of cognitive studies (Kukkonen and Caracciolo 2014, 261), which argues that the human mind is not based on abstract representations (contra the 'first generation') but is rather embodied, that is, shaped by the body, with its senses and emotions. My paper argues that *C&P* is the story of Psyche's embodied experience of the divine, and that this text invites its readers both to simulate Psyche's experience and reflect upon it.

In part 1 of the paper, I offer a sequential reading of *C&P*, arguing that Psyche takes Apollo's ambiguous oracle (4.33) as an invitation to imagine her encounter with a destructive god (e.g. 4.35.6: 'quid detrecto uenientem, qui totius orbis exitio natus est?'). In the narration of Psyche's response to the oracle, textual features, such as internal focalization and marked emotional language (e.g. 4.35.4: 'Psychen [...] pauentem ac trepidantem et in ipso scopuli uertice deflentem') induce readers to feel similar emotional responses to the heroine's. Then, at the beginning of book 5, Psyche's experience of the divine is further narrated when she surprisingly finds herself in Cupid's palace (1.1). Expanding upon the interpretation of this passage as an ekphrasis (Murgatroyd 1997), I read chapters 1-3 of book 5 as the account of

Psyche's multisensorial experience of Cupid through his palace (see Butler and Purves 2013 for the use of 'multisensorial'). The vivid language (1.3: 'bestiis [...] occurrentibus ob os introeuntium'), the focus on both Psyche's sight and hearing (Panayotakis 2001), the mention of Psyche's wonder (2.2: 'praeter ceteram tantarum divitiarum admirationem') and the internal focalization of the scene invite readers to participate in the narrated experience. Finally, Psyche's experience of Cupid is again narrated later in book 5: the heroine is induced by the sisters' manipulative interpretation of the oracle (17.4) to imagine and believe that she is living with a divine monster (21.4), and then she has a further embodied experience of Cupid, when she encounters him in an epiphany (5.22) and becomes herself like the god by handling his weapons (5.23).

In section 2, I will focus my attention to Psyche's second imaginative experience and argue that Apuleius presents the sisters' spell on her as paradigmatic of how literature can induce experience in its readers. This metaliterary interpretation of the sisters' action relies on their deceiving rhetoric, which has epic parallels in the Vergilian Sinon (Panayotakis 1998) and in the Sirens (12.6), who are a traditional symbol of the dangerously charming influence of literature upon its recipients (Wedner 1994, 58-112). As a result, readers of *C&P* are not only invited to simulate Psyche's experience of the divine, but also to reflect upon its literary mediation. This reflection is further reinforced, if we consider that, with their rhetorical performance, the sisters manipulate the oracle, turning it into another literary text for interpretation.

In the conclusion, I will explore some implications of my experiential reading of *C&P* for the understanding of the entire *Metamorphoses*, by arguing that the sisters seem to incarnate the poetics of the Prologue, which, in Graverini's reading, promotes an 'alluring rhetoric' inspired by the literary tradition of the Sirens (2012, 25-36). If the parallels between Psyche's experience

of the divine and the poetics of the Prologue hold true, then my new experiential reading represents a first step towards a more thorough interpretation of the whole novel.

Bibliography

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