

Reincarnation, Re-reading, and Transcendence in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*

The ending of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* is the site of scholarly debate about the novel. Winkler (1985) pointed out that neither Apuleius nor Lucius offer any authorized interpretation of Lucius' sudden conversion and argued that the novel offers the possibility of both a "comic" and "serious" reading of its ending. Subsequent scholars take positions on either side of this debate such as Harrison (2000), who defends a comic or satirical reading of the text that sees Lucius as a fool who gets financially exploited by the cult. Conversely, Drews (2012) supports readings of the text that see Lucius' conversion as a genuine representation of one reorienting himself toward a positive divine figure while adopting a perspective that posits that both a serious and comic reading contribute to the philosophical conversation with its reader. I believe Winkler (1985) offers one key that reconciles this dual perspective when he maintains that once Isis is revealed as Lucius' divine savior, the reader is compelled to re-read the text to look for clues foreshadowing her arrival. Laird (2001) argues that the novel's last word, *obibam*, implies Lucius' death beyond its primary meaning as "going" and that it connects the ending to the prologue (*Met.* 1.1), which is written in the playful style of Roman epitaphs. I follow Laird in the claim that that the novel offers a sort of ring composition, or narrative loop, in which the epilogue draws the reader back into the prologue as a re-reader.

In this paper, I argue that the novel's notions of death and the suggestion to re-read the text as though in a loop recall the cycle of life, death, and rebirth that Plato's Socrates describes in the *Phaedo* (81a-84b). The character Lucius serves as a model for the reader to work toward his or her own transcendence through philosophical meditation. Just as Lucius is "reborn" and experiences the same fate each time a reader re-reads the novel, the reader, too, finds himself

caught in a narrative loop and must move beyond the literary pleasure of reading to philosophical meditation in order to escape the cycle of rebirth.

The *Metamorphoses* then, I argue, aims to teach its readers precisely how to accomplish this escape and in the following manner. The novel ends with Lucius turning towards the life of contemplation that leads to salvation from the cycle of birth and death, but the novel only depicts his initial steps on this path. Lucius communes with the gods in his initiation, reporting “I approached the gods below and the gods above and worshipped them face to face from close by” (*deos inferos et deos superos accessi coram et adoravi de proxumo, Met. 11.23.6*). Lucius also learns a meditation technique that allows him to further commune with Isis, promising, “I will imagine your divine appearance and most sacred godhead” (*divinos tuos vultus numenque sanctissimum ... imaginabor, Met. 11.25.6*). However, he can only completely transcend to lasting union with the gods if the reader stops re-reading the novel. The reader then has the chance to follow the example of Lucius. By turning towards the contemplative life of studying Plato and practicing meditation, the *Metamorphoses* offers the reader the opportunity to transcend both the cycle of reading and re-reading the novel, and the cycle of life, death, and rebirth.

Bibliography

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