

Roman Novel and Satire of the Empire: Apuleius' *Golden Ass*

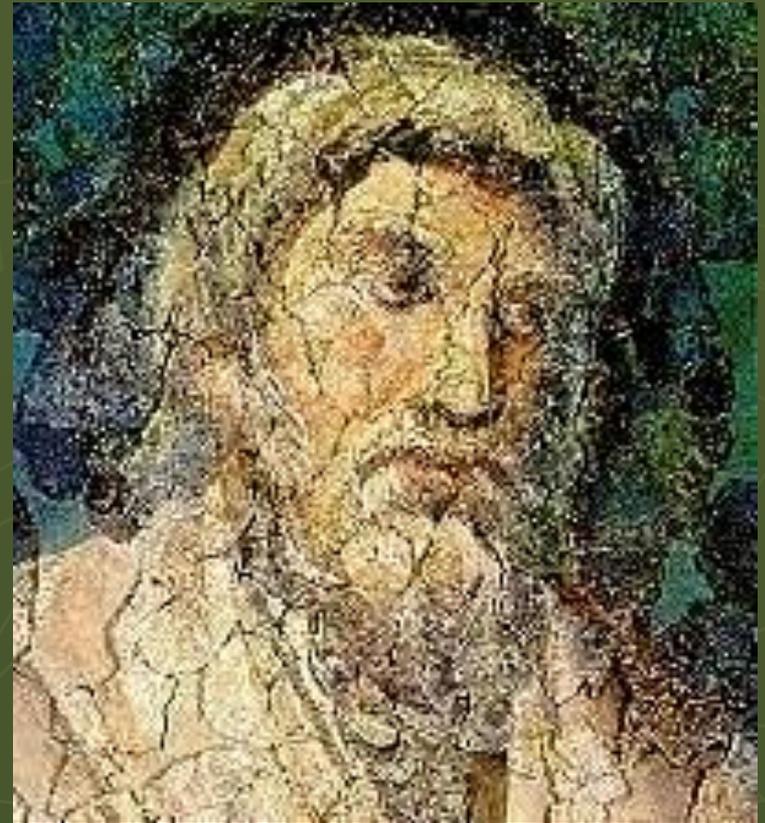
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Why is Golden Ass of Interest?

- ▶ Influential on establishing the novel as genre
- ▶ Influenced Boccaccio: Narrative Layering of *Decameron*
- ▶ Influenced development of Picaresque style
- ▶ Influenced Kafka's *Metamorphosis*
- ▶ A window into religious and social attitudes of second century Roman Empire

- ▶ Born in Madaura Africa, mid second century A.D.
- ▶ Spoke Punic, Greek, and Latin
- ▶ Educated in Carthage and like Augustine went to Rome to teach Rhetoric
- ▶ Married an older widow, Pudentilla; accused of magic by his father-in-law; dispute over inheritance
- ▶ Successfully defended himself in court

Biography of Apuleius



Religious and Philosophical Views

- ▶ Traveled to Rome, Asia Minor, and Egypt: views are Eclectic and Cosmopolitan
- ▶ Devotee of Isis cult
- ▶ Priest of Aesculapius
- ▶ Wrote "The God of Socrates," which is neo-Platonic
- ▶ Interested in Natural Science: wrote treatises on fish, trees, and agriculture



SCIENCEPHOTOLIBRARY

Apuleius' *Golden Ass* or *Metamorphoses*

- ▶ Plot Summary: Lucian goes to Thessaly; Host's wife is a witch; Turned into an Ass; Overhears many stories as an Ass and suffers much; Saved by Goddess, Isis; Initiated into cult of Isis and Osiris as a priest.
- ▶ Theme of Deception and False Appearances

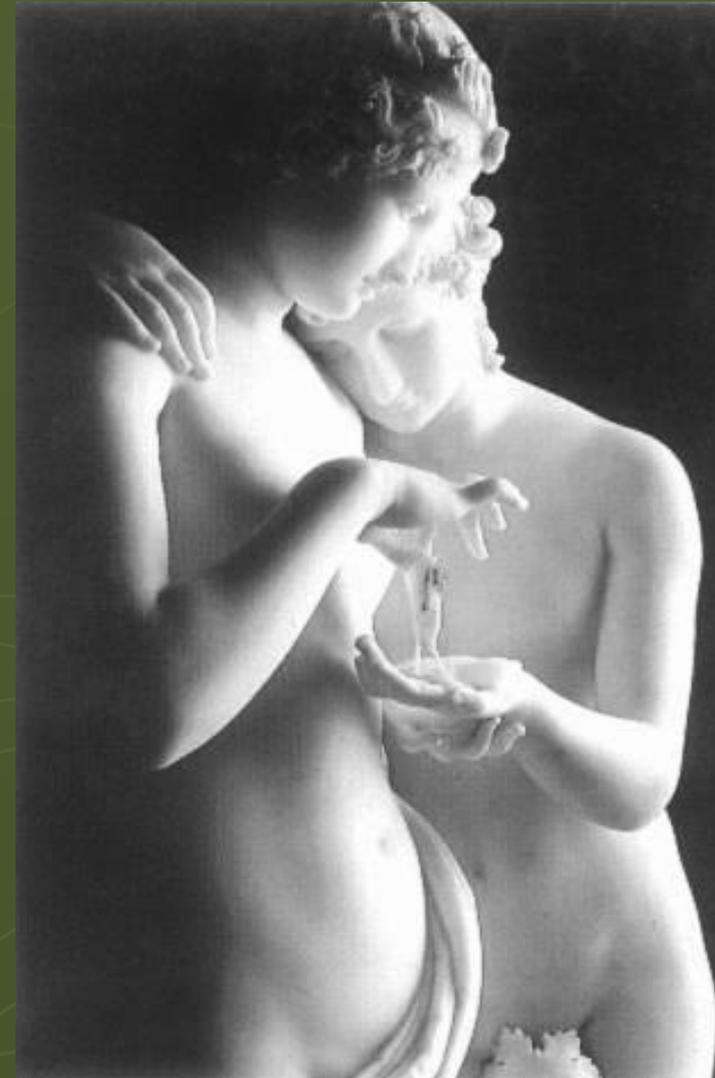
Threefold Structure

- ▶ Fatal Curiosity: Leads Lucius into Magic
- ▶ Magic an attempt to control the world that is flawed
- ▶ Curiosity with bestial world leads to transformation to Ass
- ▶ Struggles as Ass allows him to see the world truly
- ▶ Transformation back to higher nature through Isis



Cupid and Psyche

- ▶ Story told by an old woman to a prisoner of a troop of thieves
- ▶ Neo-platonic Love and Transformation; Physical Love can lead to Spiritual Love
- ▶ Threefold structure: Disobedience; Suffering and Trials; Transformation to a Goddess



Critique of Christianity

- ▶ Lucius as an Ass—associated with Christianity
- ▶ The wicked Baker woman who mistreats Lucius is a Christian: “She scorned and blasphemed the gods of heaven, and in place of true religion she professed some fantastic, blasphemous creed of a god whom she named the One and Only God.” She drinks and prostitutes herself—casting her as immoral
- ▶ Mostly, a genuine attempt to show how religion of Isis could offer meaning and moral transformation

Critique of Slavery

- ▶ Realistic depiction of exploitation of slavery in ancient world
- ▶ In episode of Bakery, Lucius as a 'beast of burden' is one with the abused slaves.
- ▶ Most writers in ancient world who mention slavery, simply view it as an accepted practice; by showing the beatings and the inhumanity with which slaves were treated, Apuleius makes a rare moral comment upon the practice.

L. Is bought by a Priest of Cybele

- ▶ “A eunuch bought me, wicked old eunuch, bald on the top and grizzled-curlly over the ears, one of the lowest of the low among the charlatans that run the Syrian Goddess into a beggar-wench, huckstering her about the highways and towns, and jingling on cymbals and castanets.”



Attis with Cybele

Lucius' Service to Cybele

- ▶ L. is made to bear the statue of the goddess in processions
- ▶ L is a cynic: "Panting out deep sighs from his heaving breast as if filled to bursting with the divine breath, he acted the part of a raving lunatic—as though the presence of gods did not raise man above himself but depressed him into disease and disorder."
- ▶ Priests are discovered in the midst of "flagrant filth" by thieves; sexual purity questioned?

Book XI: Salvation through Isis



- ▶ He prays to her to bring him peace and relief from his suffering
- ▶ She appears to him and tells him that she is Cybele, Aphrodite, Juno, Hecate, Proserperina
- ▶ He is to approach the priest carrying roses in her Boat procession and eat; he will be metamorphosed back into a man

Prayer of Thanksgiving to Isis

“Most holy and everlasting Redeemer of the human race, you cherish our lives and bestow the consoling smiles of a Mother upon our tribulations. There is no day or night, not so much as the smallest fraction of time that is not filled full with the eternity of your mercy. You protect men on land and sea. You chase the storms of life and stretch out the hand of succor to the dejected. You can untwine and hopelessly tangled threads of the Fates. You can mitigate the tempests of Fortune and check the stars in the courses of their malice...The birds that fly in the air, the beasts that roam on the hills, the serpents that hide in the earth, the monsters that swim in the ocean, tremble before your majesty.

Initiate in the Religion of Osiris

- ▶ After returning to Rome, he has a dream in which he is called to worship Osiris
- ▶ Sold his clothes to get the money needed for the ceremony
- ▶ Ten days of fasting from meat
- ▶ Third initiation into Roman Isis; "To no end are you frightened by the series of religious rites, as if something had been previously omitted. Rather you should take heart because the gods repeat the tokens of their love for you. You should exult that you will thrice achieve that which scarcely given to others. And you may rightly conjecture from the number Three that you will remain eternally blessed."

Observations on Golden Ass

- ▶ Prototype for the Picaresque novel
- ▶ Stories within stories, with morals—influential on Boccaccio
- ▶ Moral: no matter how fortune oppresses you, the mystery religions offer you hope of gaining some mastery over Misfortune
- ▶ Second Moral: too much curiosity, especially about dark things like Magic, is dangerous and evil. Don't seek power over the natural world and world of men; but freedom and peace, which is what Isis and Osiris offer.