

CLCS4009: READING ANTIQUITY: A SURVEY OF ANCIENT LITERATURE
LECTURE 28 (WEEK 11) WORKSHOP: LOVE AND MAGIC IN THE ROMAN NOVEL:
APULEIUS' *METAMORPHOSES* (*THE GOLDEN ASS*)

WORKSHOP TASK

Read the extracts from Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* (*The Golden Ass*) set out below. It would also help if you can read the whole tale of Cupid and Psyche (4.28-6.24). Then consider the following questions (and be prepared to share your ideas and thoughts with the class):

- 1/ **Passage 1:** How is magic portrayed in this extract? How is it linked with the *curiositas* (meddlesomeness) of Lucius?
 - 2/ **Passage 2:** How is the goddess Venus portrayed? What mythical figures and cult places is she associated with?
 - 3/ **Both passages:** How is love characterised and portrayed in these stories?
-

Passage 1: Lucius, Photis, magic and love (Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 3.15-18)

Photis (the slave girl of Pamphile, the witch) speaks to Lucius (the hero / protagonist of the novel): "Now you shall learn what this house really is, now you shall learn my mistress' wonderful secret powers: through them the dead obey her, the stars change course, the gods do her bidding, the elements are her slaves. But she never resorts more eagerly to her art than when some handsome young man has caught her eye – something that often happens to her.

Just now she is dying for love of a very good-looking young Boeotian, and she is furiously bringing all the tricks and devices of her art to bear on him. Only last night I heard her with my own two ears threatening the Sun himself with foggy gloom and everlasting darkness because he had been too slow in setting and giving way to night for her to be able to practise her enchantments. She had happened to catch sight of this young man yesterday at the barber's, while she was on her way back from the baths, and she told me to glean some of his hair surreptitiously from where it had fallen on the floor from the scissors. I was collecting it as ordered when the barber caught me in the act. We are already notorious all over the city as witches, so he at once pounced on me, shouting and threatening: "You scum, will you stop stealing the young gentlemen's hair? You know it's a crime, and if you don't lay off, I'll have you up before the magistrates – I mean it." And adding action to words, he reached right into my bosom to search me and angrily pulled out the hair I'd hidden there. This upset me terribly; knowing what my mistress is like and how when she hasn't got her way in something like this she's lost her temper and beaten me black and blue, I was thinking of running away; then I remembered you [i.e. Lucius] and gave that idea up.

I was coming away disconsolate at having to go home empty-handed, when I noticed a man shearing three goatskin bags. They were hanging up, tightly tied and inflated, and the hair was lying on the ground. It was fair, just like that of the young Boeotian; so I carried some of it off and gave it to my mistress without telling her where it really came from. Then, at nightfall, before you came back from dinner, Pamphile, who was now quite beside herself, climbed up to her eyrie. This is on a wooden roof at the back of the house, open to the winds and having views in every direction, particularly towards the east. This is her secret hide-out, admirably suited to her magical practices. First she set out all the usual apparatus of her infernal laboratory: every kind of strong-smelling drug, metal plaques inscribed with mysterious characters, the remains of birds of ill omen, and a whole array of different parts of dead and buried bodies – here noses and fingers, there nails from gibbets with flesh sticking to them, elsewhere a store of blood from men who have died a violent death, and skulls snatched half eaten from the jaws of wild beasts. Next she intoned a spell over some still quivering entrails and made offerings of various fluids: spring water, cow's milk, mountain honey, and finally honey and wine mixed. Then she knotted and plaited the goat-hair together and threw it with many different perfumes on to the live coals to burn. Immediately, through the irresistible force of her magic art and the hidden power of the deities that she controls, the bodies whose hairs were crackling in the flame took on human life: they felt and heard and walked, and came here, drawn by the reek of their burning hair. It was they, instead of the young man from Boeotia, who were attacking the door in their eagerness to get in. And it was at that moment that you came on the scene drunk, and deceived by the blind darkness of night drew your sword and sprang to arms like another Ajax; but he only attacked and massacred a flock of sheep – you were much braver and slew three blown-up goatskins. You laid low your enemies without shedding a drop of blood, so I now embrace not a homicide but an utricide.”

I joked back: ‘Yes, I’m a regular Hercules. The first labour of mine compares well with his slaying of the three-bodied King Geryon, or his capture of the three-headed dog Cerberus. But if you want me to forgive you wholeheartedly for causing me so much anguish, I insist on your doing one thing for me. It is this: I want to be secretly present when next your mistress invokes the infernal gods, and especially when she makes use of her magical powers to change herself into some animal. I’m determined to know everything possible about the science of magic. And, by the way, you seem to be pretty well grounded in it. Of one thing I’m quite certain: that though I have always shied away from love affairs even with ladies of the highest rank, I’m now a complete slave to your sparkling eyes, your rosy cheeks, your shining hair, your fragrant breasts and those kisses you give me with your parted lips. It is a willing slavery too. I have no notion of leaving you and no regret that I’m so far from home, and I’d give the whole world not to forfeit the joy in store for me tonight.’

‘I should love to do as you ask, darling Lucilus,’ she said, ‘but Pamphile is a surly old beast and when she starts working on spells of this sort it’s always in a lonely spot where she can be certain of not being disturbed. All the same, I would risk anything to please you, so I’ll keep a careful watch on her movements and let you know when she gets busy again. But remember what I told you: you must promise to keep the most faithful silence about all this.’ Before we had quite finished discussing my plan, a sudden wave of longing swept over us both. We pulled off our clothes and rush naked together in Bacchic fury.

Passage 2: The Tale of Cupid and Psyche (Extract - Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 4.28ff)

Once upon a time there lived a king and queen who had three very beautiful daughters. They were so beautiful, in fact, that it was only just possible to find words of praise for the elder two, and to express the breathtaking loveliness of the youngest, the like of which had never been seen before, was beyond all power of human speech. Every day thousands of her father's subjects came to gaze at her, foreigners too, and were so dumbfounded by the sight that they paid her the homage due to the Goddess Venus alone. They pressed their right thumbs and forefingers together, reverently raised them to their lips and blew kisses towards her. The news of her matchless beauty spread through neighbouring cities and countries. Some reported: 'Immortal Venus, born from the deep blue sea and risen to Heaven from its foam, has descended on earth and is now incarnate as a mortal at whom everyone is allowed to gaze.' Others: 'No, this time the earth, nor the sea, has been impregnated by a heavenly emanation and has borne a new Goddess of Love, all the more beautiful because she is still a virgin.' The princess' fame was carried farther and farther to distant provinces and still more distant ones and people made long pilgrimages over land and sea to witness the greatest wonder of their age. As a result, nobody took the trouble to visit Venus' shrines at Cyprian Paphos or Carian Cnidos or even in the isle of Cythera where her lovely foot first touched dry land; her festivals were neglected, her rites discontinued, the cushions on which her statues had been propped at her sacred temple feasts kicked about the floor, the statues themselves were left without their usual garlands, her altars were unswept and cluttered with the foul remains of months-old burned sacrifices, her temples were allowed to fall into ruins.

When the young princess went out on her morning walks through the streets, victims were offered in her honour, sacred feasts spread for her, flowers scattered in her path, and rose garlands presented to her by an adoring crowd of suppliants who addressed her by all the titles that really belonged to the great Goddess of Love herself. This extraordinary transfer of divine honours to a mortal naturally angered the true Venus. Unable to suppress her feelings, she shook her head menacingly and said to herself: 'Really now, whoever would have thought that I'd be treated like this? I, all the world's lovely Venus whom the philosophers call 'the Universal Mother' and the original source of all five elements! So I'm expected to share my sovereignty, am I, with a mortal who goes about pretending to be myself? And to watch my bright name, which is registered in Heaven, being dragged through the dirty mud of Earth! Oh yes, and I must be content, of course, with the reflected glory of worship paid to this girl, grateful for a share in the expiatory sacrifices offered to her instead of me? It meant nothing, I suppose when the shepherd Paris, whose just and honest verdict Jupiter himself confirmed, awarded me the apple of beauty over the heads of my two goddess rivals? No, its quite absurd. I can't let this silly creature, whoever she may be, usurp my glory any longer. I'll very soon make her sick and sorry about her good looks: they are dead against the rules.'

She at once called her winged son Eros, alias Cupid, that very wicked boy, with neither manners nor respect for the decencies, who spends his time running from building to building all night long with his torch and his arrows, breaking up respectable homes. Somehow he never gets

punished for the harm he does, though he never seems to do anything good in compensation. Venus knew that he was naturally bent on mischief, but she tempted him to still worse behaviour by bringing him to the city where the princess lived – her name, by the way, was Psyche – and telling him the whole story of the new cult which had grown up around her. Groaning with indignation she said: ‘I implore you, darling, as you love your mother, to use your dear little arrows and that sweet torch of yours against this impudent girl. If you have any respect for me, you’ll give me my revenge, revenge in full. You’ll see that the princess falls desperately in love with some perfect outcast of a man – someone who has lost rank, fortune, everything, someone who goes about in terror of his life and in such complete degradation that nobody vile can be found in the whole world.’

She kissed him long and tenderly and then went to the nearby sea-shore, where she ran along the tops of the waves as they danced foaming towards her. At the touch of her rosy feet the whole sea suddenly calmed, and she had no sooner willed the powers of the deep to appear, than up they bobbed as though she had shouted their names. The Nereids were there, singing a part song; and Neptune, sometimes called Portumnus, with his blueish beard; his wife Salacia, the naughty goddess of the deep sea, with a lapful of aphrodisiac fish; and little Palaemon, their charioteer, riding on a dolphin. After these came troops of Tritons swimming about in all directions, one blowing softly on his conch-shell, another protecting Venus from sunburn with a silk parasol, a third holding a mirror for her to admire herself in, and a whole team of them, yoked two and two, harnessed to her car. When Venus goes for an ocean cruise she’s attended by quite an army of retainers.

Meanwhile Psyche got no satisfaction from all the honours paid her. Everyone stared at her, everyone praised her, but no commoner, no prince, no king even, dared to make love to her. All wondered at her beauty, but only as they might have wondered at an exquisite statue. Both her less beautiful elder sisters, whose reputation was not so great, had been courted by kings and successfully married to them, but Psyche remained single. She stayed at home feeling very miserable and rather ill, and began to hate her beauty which everyone else adored.

Her poor father feared that the gods might be angry with him for allowing his subjects to make so much of her, so he went to the ancient oracle of Apollo at Miletus and, after the usual prayers and sacrifices, asked where he was to find a husband for his daughter whom nobody wanted to marry. Apollo, though an Ionian Greek and the true founder of Miletus, chose to deliver the following oracle in Latin verse:

*On some high mountain’s craggy summit place
The virgin, decked for deadly nuptial rites,
Nor hope a son-in-law of mortal birth
But a dire mischief, viperous and fierce,
Who flies through aether and with fire and sword
Tires and debilitates all things that are,
Terrific to the powers that reign on high.
Great Jupiter himself fears this winged pest
And streams and Stygian shades his power abhor.*

The king, who until now had been a happy man, came slowly back from the oracle feeling thoroughly depressed and told his queen what an unfavourable answer he had got. They spent several miserable

days brooding over their daughter's fate and weeping all the while. But time passed, and the cruel oracle had to be obeyed.

[Note: here follows a description of Psyche's dreadful wedding procession to the mountain and the rock; her family leave her on the top of the mountain].

It was such a cool, comfortable place to lie that she began to feel rather more composed. She stopped crying and fell asleep, and when she awoke, feeling thoroughly refreshed, it was still daylight. She rose and walked calmly towards the tall trees of a nearby wood, through which a clear stream was flowing. This stream led her to the heart of the wood where she came upon a royal palace, too wonderfully built to be the work of anyone but a god; in fact, as soon as she came in at the gates she knew that some god must be in residence there.

[Note: here follows a description of the luxurious and beautiful palace which Psyche walks through].

As she stood gazing in rapt delight, a voice suddenly spoke from nowhere: 'Do these treasures astonish your Royal Highness? They are all yours. Why not go to your bedroom now, and rest your tired body. When you feel inclined for your bath, we will be there to help you – this is one of your maids speaking – and afterwards you will find your wedding banquet ready for you.'

Psyche was grateful to the unknown Providence that was taking such good care for her and did as the disembodied voice suggested. First she found her bedroom and dozed off again for awhile, then she went to the bath, where invisible hands undressed her, washed her, anointed her and dressed her again in her bridal costume. As she wandered out of the bathroom she noticed a semi-circular tablet with a comfortable chair in front of it; it was laid for a banquet, though there was nothing yet on it to eat or drink. She sat down expectantly – and at once nectarous wines and appetizing dishes appeared by magic, floating up to her of their own accord. She saw nobody at all; the waiters were mere voices, and when someone came in and sang someone else accompanied him on the lyre, she saw neither of them, nor the lyre either. Then a whole invisible choir burst into song. When this delightful banquet was over, Psyche thought it must be about time to go to bed, so she went to her bedroom again and undressed and lay awake for a long time.

Towards midnight she heard a gentle whispering near her, and began to feel lonely and scared. Anything might happen in a vast uninhabited place like this, and she had fears for her chastity. But no, it was the whisper of her unknown husband.

Now he was climbing into bed with her. Now he was taking her into his arms and making her his wife.

He left her hastily just before daybreak, and almost at once she heard the voices of her maids reassuring her that though she had lost her virginity, her chastity was safe. So she went to sleep again.

The next day she made herself at home in her palace and on the following night her invisible husband paid her another visit. The third day and night were spent in the same way until, as one

might expect, the novelty of having invisible servants wore off and she settled down to what was a very enjoyable routine; at any rate she could not feel lonely with so many voices about her.

Meanwhile the old king and queen were doing exactly what she had asked them not to do – wasting their time in unnecessary grief and tears; and the news of Psyche’s sad fate spread from country to country until both her elder sisters heard all the details. They left their palaces and hurried back in deep grief to their native city to console their parents.

On the night of their arrival Psyche’s husband, whom she still knew only by touch and hearing, warned her, ‘Lovely Psyche, darling wife, the Fates are cruel: you are in deadly danger. Guard against it vigilantly. Your elder sisters are alarmed at the report of your death. They will soon be visiting the rock from which the West Wind blew you down into this valley, to see whether they can find any trace of you there. If you happen to hear them mourning for you up there, pay no attention at all. You must not answer them, nor even look up to them; for that would cause me great unhappiness and bring utter ruin on yourself.

Psyche promised to do as her husband asked; but when the darkness had vanished, and so had he, the poor girl spent the whole day in tears, complaining over and over again that not only was she a prisoner in this wonderful place without a single human being to chat with, but her husband had now forbidden her to relieve the minds of her poor sisters, or even to look up at them without speaking. That night she went to bed without supper or bath or anything else to comfort her, and soaked her pillow with tears. Her husband came in earlier than usual, drew her to him, still weeping, and expostulated gently with her, ‘O Psyche, what did you promise me? What may I expect you to do next? You have cried all day and all evening and even now when I hold you close to me, you go on crying. Very well then, do as you like, follow your own disastrous fancies; but I warn you solemnly that when you begin to wish you had listened to me, the harm will have been done.

She pleaded earnestly with him, swearing she would die unless she were allowed to see her sisters and comfort them and have a short talk with them. In the end she forced him to consent. He even said that she might give them as much jewellery as she pleased; but he warned her with terrifying insistence that her sisters were evil-minded women and would try to make her discover what he looked like. If she listened to them, her sacrilegious curiositas would mean the end of all her present happiness and she would never lie in his arms again.

She thanked him for his kindness and was quite herself again. ‘No, no,’ she protested, ‘I’d rather die a hundred times over than lose you. I have no idea who you are, but I love you. I love you desperately. I love you as I love my own soul: I wouldn’t exchange your kisses for the kisses of the god Cupid himself. So please, please grant me one more favour! Tell your servant, the West Wind, to carry my sisters down here in the same delightful way that he carried me.’ She kissed him coaxingly, whispered love words in his ear, wound her arms and legs more closely around him and called him: ‘My honey, my own husband, soul of my soul!’ Overcome by the power of her love he was forced to yield, however reluctantly, and promised to give her what she asked. But he vanished again before daybreak.