Lucius in Wonderland: (Greek?) Landscapes and Travel in Apuleius’ *Golden Ass*

Apuleius’ *Golden Ass* is unique among the extant ancient novels for its setting in contemporary mainland Greece. Like most of the novels, it uses travel to advance the plot, but Apuleius places the action almost entirely in a single region. Within Roman Thessaly, however, he depicts the same dangers that other novelists spread across foreign continents: witches, bandits, and murderous adulteresses. Though drawing on the Greek ass story, partly preserved in the Pseudo-Lucianic *Onos*, Apuleius exaggerates the violent and supernatural dangers of travel. The order imposed by the provincial governor (who in reality was not far away) in inaccessible in the *Golden Ass*, while in the *Onos*, the governor’s troops are instrumental in Charite’s rescue from the robbers (*Onos* 26). Apuleius’ dangerous Greek countryside is more akin to the landscapes of the Greek novels set on the edges of the known world - in Egypt, Africa, and the Near East - than it is to what we know of contemporary reality.

The *pax Romana* and the expansion of the Roman Empire to its furthest extent by the beginning of the second century CE ushered in a new era of safe travel, thanks to more stable borders and imperial policing (Casson 1974, 122). Although Apuleius reveals the same interest in travel and realistic topographical description as other writers of the second century, his portrayal of the contemporary Roman Greek countryside is anything but realistic. In Romm’s words, Apuleius’ Thessaly is “a generalised semi-rural landscape on the fringes of the Hellenic world, far from the more civilised urban centres of central Greece and the Near East” (Romm 2008, 110-111). When Lucius becomes an ass and is driven out of Hypata by the robbers, he steps off the map into an indeterminate fictional landscape, signaled by Apuleius’ description of their path “through trackless mountains,” *per avia montium* (3.28). From this moment, Lucius does not pass through a single named or recognizable place until Book 10, when he begins his journey to Corinth and back to reality and humanity (10.18).

I argue that the setting of the *Golden Ass* in a fictionalized landscape within Roman Greece reflects both literary models as well as contemporary sociocultural realities. Recent scholarship on travel in the *Golden Ass* has focused more often on the literary than the sociohistorical (e.g., Harrison 2002, Zimmerman 2002, Gravierini 2002). At most, attention has been drawn to the idea of travel as commonplace in the world of the novel (Millar 1999). Most recently, Romm has claimed that travel in Apuleius is not geographic but “socio-economic,” charting a vertical path “up and down the ladder of social status” rather than a horizontal path across the map (Romm 2008, 111). Although the fluidity of social status is a major theme, travel, and particularly the novel’s setting of that travel in Roman Greece, explores more sociocultural concerns than just class. Many have argued that the function of travel in the Greek novels is to introduce their Greek characters to non-Greeks in order to “explicitly contrast ethnicities and cultural behaviours” (Stephens 2008, 57). In Apuleius’ Latin novel, by contrast, Lucius does not have to leave Greece to encounter different ethnicities, cultures, and characters: within a small, backwater region of Roman Greece he meets Egyptian and Chaldean prophets, Syrian priests, Egyptian gods, and a varied host of other Greek and Roman characters. My argument is that Apuleius’ setting draws on this theme of exotic travel in the Greek novels while, more importantly, reflecting the multicultural and “globalized” world of second century CE Rome, when travel not only took those at the center of the Empire outwards, but also brought the periphery inwards.

Works Cited

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