

The Impact of Social Class on Narration in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*

In Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, there are many inset stories told both by the protagonist Lucius and by other characters outside the main plot. The characters' "reasons" for narrating these tales, and Apuleius' own reasons for including the stories, seem almost as varied as the stories themselves. Among these inset stories, though, four seemed to be tied to each other in regards to the circumstances of their narration. Specifically, there are four stories which are each told by a social "inferior" to a person or group of higher social standing: the Tale of Aristomenes (Book 1), the Tale of Thelyphron (Book 2), the Tale of Cupid and Psyche (Books 4-6), and the tale of adultery told by the old procuress to the miller's wife (Book 9). In this paper, I intend to show that the narrators of these tales are, for various reasons, portrayed as constructing their narratives in such a way as to please their higher-class audience, even going so far as to make themselves uncomfortable. By exploring this impact of social class on narration, I hope to shed light on one aspect of the greater issue of how Apuleius portrays and conceptualizes the act of narration within his novel.

My paper will discuss both how and why the narrators tailor their stories to their audience. The discussion of how will deal with the appropriateness of the general themes of all the tales and some specific diction of both the Tale of Aristomenes and the Tale of Cupid and Psyche. The narrators of both these stories go beyond picking a general theme which would please their target audience and instead explicitly tailor the stories to that audience through verbal echoes of statements previously made by the audience. For instance, the role of cheese in the Tale of Aristomenes seems to recall Lucius' account to Aristomenes of how he himself almost choked to death on a cheesy porridge. Similarly, when describing Psyche's sisters, the old woman picks up on martial imagery used by Charite, the kidnapped girl to whom the story is

told, to describe the bandits who abducted her. As to the why question, I intend to show that the narrators' conscious efforts to please their audiences, even sometimes to their own detriment, are ultimately tied to the difference in social classes between narrator and audience. Theylphron, for example, recounts his story, despite his embarrassment, because he plays the role of comedic parasite who must sing for his supper.

Finally, I will argue that Apuleius is making a larger statement about the act of narration by highlighting in these stories the motivating force of social class and its effect on narration. Specifically, these tales seem to suggest that, because of a desire to please, the veracity of the narrative is perhaps more in doubt when the narrator and audience are of differing social classes than when they are of the same class.

Select Bibliography

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