

Fantastic Women in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*

Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* is filled with fantastic and monstrous women. This paper focuses on women with supernatural powers: the witches of Books 1-3; Photis, the enslaved woman who transforms Lucius into an ass; the mortal-turned-goddess Psyche; and the Egyptian goddess Isis, who restores Lucius to human form. While these women share supernatural associations, they are characterized quite differently as monstrous (witches), divine (Isis), or somewhere in between (Photis, Psyche). I argue that what divides monstrous from divine women in the *Metamorphoses* is not the nature of their powers, but how they use them: for their own empowerment, depicted as harming men and overturning the natural order, or for the benefit of men, often associated with a restoration of the natural order.

Depictions of women in Greek and Latin literature often serve to construct and define elite masculinity (Zeitlin 1985; Greene 1998; Haynes 2003; Dutsch 2008). Where the masculine is the default, women are envisioned as Other: not only in the *Metamorphoses* (Shelton 2005; Gardner 2015) but throughout Greek and Roman literature, women are both out of control and dangerously controlling, devious and deceptive, but with a special link with the divine. In addition, as Gail Cooper (1980) has argued of the *Metamorphoses*, there existed in the Platonic tradition, with which Apuleius associated himself closely, an idealized fusion of masculine and feminine. This clash between cultural/literary and philosophical/religious views of the feminine helps explain the *Metamorphoses*' often contradictory images of women, especially supernatural women, as monstrous or divine.

I begin with the witches of Books 1-3, examining how their powers are characterized as monstrous because they overturn the natural order (1.3, 1.8) and represent a particular threat to

men (1.9, 2.5). I then examine two women who fluctuate between the monstrous and divine: Photis and Psyche. Photis, as a witch's assistant, harms Lucius by accidentally transforming him into an ass, but she is also associated with the divine and with Isis: her magical revelation to Lucius (3.15), for example, is framed in the same language as his religious initiation into the cult of Isis (11.23). As a key step in Lucius' journey towards Isis, Photis may be viewed as a Platonic intermediary (Carver 2013). Psyche, likewise, moves from monstrous to divine: after attempting to kill her husband Cupid, she completes supernatural tasks to win him back and eventually becomes a goddess. This transition is presaged by her metaphorical transformation from feminine to masculine, *sexum audacia mutavit* (5.22), corresponding with the novel's frequent depiction of virtuous women as masculine (Plotina: 7.6; Charite 8.14). Finally, Isis as supreme feminine power (11.5) restores the natural order and Lucius to humanity, but eventually yields to the masculine, serving as another Platonic intermediary on Lucius' path to *the* supreme divinity: the god Osiris. While the *Metamorphoses* depicts several supernatural women in detail, it ultimately upholds Roman concepts of powerful women as monstrous...unless that power is used for the benefit of or superseded by men and masculine power.

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