

Neoplatonic Embodiment, Sexual Symbolism, and Divinity: Traversing the Lower World in Apuleian Literature

In the *Cupid and Psyche* episode of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, a Neoplatonic conception of the body vividly animates and orients protagonists' physical bodies as vehicles of transformation that traverse painful states of separation. Apuleius employs descriptions of physical polarities in ways that imply underlying spiritual qualities and these descriptions drive the narrative's themes of synthesis, reunification, and reconciliation. By looking closely at Apuleius' language describing water and moisture contrasted with dryness, heat, and fire, I examine how Apuleius uses this linguistic dichotomy to orient the human body and its physical qualities within a "metaphysical hierarchy" that places the purest form of the universal cosmic principle at one end and the individual body at the other (Remes 2008). Apuleius both establishes and reverses the meanings of opposing qualities, which reflects a Neoplatonic concern with reconciling both physical and spiritual paradoxes (Remes 2008).

While *Metamorphoses* is rife with innumerable symbolic and linguistic dichotomies (i.e. light vs. dark, wholeness vs. fragmentation) this paper focuses specifically on Apuleius' use of water metaphors and imagery to characterize a lower world that is dangerous, dark, and governed by feminine divinity. I argue that this lower world clearly corresponds to the lower half of the human body (specifically the female body) in its linguistic, philologic, and cultural associations with moisture, mystery, sexuality and fluidity and represents a metaphysical womb-like "nighttime" of spiritual learning. Apuleius' uses water and moisture to not only characterize this lower world but also the goddess of sexual love and desire Venus herself, whose express or implied power is the impetus of our protagonists' journeys of "descent". Our first introduction to Venus within the *Cupid and Psyche* episode features an elaborate description of the goddess

retreating into a pulsating sea after delivering her vengeful condemnation of Psyche. Dewy (“*roschidi*”) land, streams, and bodies of water are important features and obstacles peppering Psyche’s journey as she seeks reunification with her lover after becoming pregnant within a womb-like golden palace in the center of a grove. Apuleius employs Venus’ other symbolic associations like roses (Venus’ “rosey-feet”, Lucius eating roses), gardens, flower garlands, loose hair, white birds, magic and serpents to foreshadow her invisible influence. I argue that Apuleius’ language characterizes this lower world with womb-like (as well as phallic) symbols that echo ancient descriptions of the female body in its supposed wateriness and mystery as well as its sexual capacity. Instead of producing a child however, the goal of mingling opposites in Apuleian narrative (as in Platonic philosophy) is to produce a new, transformed being whose separated parts are reunited or synthesized and therefore embodies the highest form of truth and goodness (Remes 2008).

Apuleius may have employed certain cultural understandings of sex and gender to illustrate Neoplatonic ideals and “impersonate” his philosophy through narrative (Fletcher 2014). By analyzing descriptions from the Hippocratic corpus, I will draw comparisons between characterizations of these lower worlds with ancient medical understandings of the womb that are watery, cool in temperature, dark and fluid (King 1998). The Hippocratic corpus lends us an understanding of sex on a sliding scale of temperature and liquidity with femininity corresponding to coolness, lunar energy, flowing menstrual streams, and masculinity corresponding to heat, fire, light and solar qualities (King 1998). Apuleius employs a similar dichotomy in his narrative. While water is linked to Venus and femininity more generally with verbs of ebbing and flowing verbs used to describe non-liquid objects or people throughout the narrative- fire and heat is linked to masculinity. For example, Lucius (“light”) muses on the

philosophical qualities of an open flame that partakes of its “solar progenitor’s” perfection (Walsh 1994). The torch of Eros and the lamp light that is used to illuminate his face clearly echoes this symbolic and philologic connection between light, heat, and fire and the masculine element.

I argue that Apuleius divides the human body and so his narrative into dichotomies destined for synthesis. By showing the philologic connections between water, Venus, and the womb-like lower world of transformation contrasted with the masculine upper world associated with fire and light- I argue that Apuleius’ establishes the body within a metaphysical hierarchy that our protagonists scale by integrating opposites in order to achieve wholeness. This traversing of upper and lower worlds is not exclusively vertical but circular, giving rise to debate over Apuleius’ “idiosyncratic” interpretations of Platonic philosophy (Fletcher 2014).

Selected Bibliography:

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