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The Human Tragicomedy: The Reception of Apuleius' Golden Ass in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Century, ed. Mateusz Stróżyński (Metaforms, 26), Leiden: Brill, 2024, pp. 252, ISBN: 978-90-04-69583-2, €100.00 (hardback)

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This book promises to examine the twentieth and twenty-first century reception of Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* as a whole, although there is a particular emphasis on the inset story of *Cupid and Psyche* (CP), as three out of eight papers discuss C. S. Lewis's adaptation of the story in his novel *Till We Have Faces* (TWHF), and three more are not on reception in the classical sense at all. In the introduction, Mateusz Stróżyński explains his intention is to show cultural change as reflected in the reception of Apuleius, which becomes an exploration of our own times. After outlining broad themes within Apuleian receptions and the classical questions associated with research on the novel, he focuses on the question of the seriousness of *Metamorphoses* XI, with its portrayal of Isis as a saviour goddess, which as a result clashes in interpretative strands between frivolity, philology and philosophy. Stróżyński also sees scholarship on the novel as a kind of reception, echoing contemporary concerns and changing philosophies over the centuries and stresses that our secularized twentieth and twenty-first centuries prefer literary, non-serious readings over theological, philosophical and philological ones. This volume becomes a reaction, a showcase for this less fashionable serious reading of the text. Stróżyński's idea that scholarship is part of reception explains why some chapters centre on the interpretation of Apuleius's text, in order to create a tapestry of how the novel could (or should, seems the implication) be read in our current times. Consequently, the book is a plea for continued traditionalist classical education, too, to keep these methodologies, once so prevalent from the Middle Ages to the late twentieth century, open for modern readers of the novel.

Chapter one by Nicholas Banner on the ineffable and arcane in the *Metamorphoses* (pp. 21–55) studies Apuleius's approach to the divine as an exemplar of Middle Platonism's ineffable and unknowable god (*agnostos theos*) and makes a case for a serious reading of the novel throughout from the viewpoint of philosophy: Lucius's final initiation is interpreted as a representation of this Platonist inclination, which equates Platonist mythology with mystery cults and the god of the final initiation with the Middle Platonist god.

Jakub Handszu discusses Jungian readings of the *Metamorphoses* (pp. 56–84), looking mostly at the endeavours of Marie-Louise von Franz and Erich Neumann to identify Jungian archetypes with Apuleius's characters Psyche and Lucius.

Douglas Hedley on C. S. Lewis (pp. 85–103) offers a reception study in the stricter sense, of Lewis's philosophical approach in TWHF. He traces Orual's journey to the acceptance of the divine form through the novel and sets this into Christian perspective with Christ as the 'face of god', *imago dei*. He focuses on theological and philosophical influences on TWHF, especially the Platonist tradition and sees the novel as a representation of a pre-Christian myth of salvation.

Warren S. Smith's essay on the (lack of) humour and satire in *Metamorphoses* XI (pp. 107–18) explains the *Metamorphoses* as a genre-busting experiment which also takes inspiration from contemporary Judaeo-Christian apocalyptic literature. He argues strongly from a Christian perspective against a humorous reading of the novel and sees again Platonism, in its affinity to Christianity, as a way towards understanding the *Metamorphoses*.

Next, Stróżyński (pp. 119–39) looks at classical influences on C. S. Lewis during his education, e.g., Gilbert Murray’s studies of Greek ritual and dying gods and their resurrection in Euripides’s *Bacchae* and *Hippolytus*. He suggests that Lewis read Apuleius through this tragic-ritualistic lens of dying as sacrifice and suffering, and traces Apuleian influences in other works by Lewis, notably his narrative poem *Dymer* (published 1926).

Łukasz Berger applies theories of politeness studies to the first three books of the *Metamorphoses* (pp. 143–75) from a linguistic-philological perspective, offering close readings of the encounters between Lucius and his interlocutors (socially inferior or superior) and shows how these interactions contribute to Lucius’s characterization and anticipate his behaviour as a donkey.

Andrea Musio reviews some Italian receptions of Apuleius (pp. 176–97), including Francesco della Corte’s 1961 drama adaptation of Apuleius’s defence speech, the *Apologia*, as a vindication of intellectualism in an unsympathetic world. Others include movie adaptations, such as Sergio Spira’s 1970 *L’asino d’oro*, which intersperses events from the novel with some from the *Apologia*, clearly conflating Lucius with Apuleius. Musio sets out the historical background of this conflation and analyses the film via Gérard Genette’s discourse analysis, which he also applies to the Apuleian scenes in Federico Fellini’s *Satyricon* (1969) and Giuseppe Tornatore’s 2013 *The Best Offer* or *Deception*, which features allusions to *CP*, although with inverted gender roles.

A chapter by Stróżyński on cinema and novel receptions in the twentieth and twenty-first century (pp. 198–232) studies Anthony Doerr’s speculative fiction novel *Cloud Cuckoo Land* (2021), where the fragmentary book at its centre, though purported to be Antonius Diogenes’s *Wonders Beyond Thule*, is clearly a version of Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses*. Two films about donkeys handed from owner to owner, Robert Bresson’s *Au hazard, Balthazar* (1966) and Jerzy Skolimowski’s Oscar-nominated *EO* (2022) show suffering from an animal perspective. Olga Tocarczuk’s 2007 novel *Flights* features a short chapter in which a donkey is named Apuleius, and Stróżyński proposes further Apuleian allusions throughout the novel.

In this chapter, which could function as a *mise en abyme* of the edited volume, and his short conclusion which follows (pp. 233–36), Stróżyński laments that modern reception is no longer able to rely on any audience understanding or even recognizing the nuances of Apuleius’s story, let alone the philosophies and theologies it embodies. Tocarczuk, he argues, depicts in her novel how our understanding of the classical tradition, and of Apuleius in particular, is dying in a world that no longer understands or cares for the ancient stories and philosophies. He regrets the loss of metaphysical awareness in the modern world, where serious philosophical, philological and theological strands of contemporary Apuleian interpretation are receding as a consequence. Therefore, our narrowing understanding and simplifying reading of Apuleius’s work as a less than serious text exemplifies a mirror of modernity’s lessening grasp of ancient thought.

This book pushes against this contraction of thought and reception, and is intended to provide examples of this different approach. But surely there is space for all kinds of reading of Apuleius’s enigmatic novel in both reception and scholarship? For instance, in this volume Latin and Greek are not always translated, potentially reducing its readership. Such linguistic gatekeeping is a missed opportunity to build bridges between different strands of reception and interpretation, and an illustration of the kind of readership the editor envisages. Without doubt, a novel as enigmatic as Apuleius’s offers space for both serious and frivolous, theological and secular, readings to stand next to each other and enhance its reader’s enjoyment of its complexity.