The Portrayal of Women in *The Golden Ass*

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Women with mythological and supernatural abilities are not an uncommon sight in Greek and Roman literature. Whether they are witches or goddesses, good or evil, these women often play a role in advancing the plot for the male protagonist. The women in *The Golden Ass* by Lucius Apuleius, however, break away from their traditional roles in classical literature. Apuleius depicts nearly every woman and female figure as powerful and often puts them in positions where they are more powerful than the male characters. This essay will examine the role of women throughout the story and shed light on what would cause Apuleius to write such characters.

The first instance of women with supernatural powers is during the story that Aristomenes tells the narrator during the very first book as they journey through Thessaly. Aristomenes speaks frequently of a powerful witch named Meroe who he hears about through his friend Socrates and later meets himself. Not only is she the first witch in the story, but she is the very first female character to be introduced and she is already extremely powerful. Socrates describes her to Aristomenes as a witch who has “divine powers to lower the sky, and halt the globe, make fountains stone, and melt the mountains, raise the ghosts and summon the gods, extinguish the stars and illuminate Tartarus itself”.¹ Aristomenes does not initially believe that that much power is possible, so Socrates goes on to tell him about an instance in which Meroe used her powers. He tells Aristomenes of how Meroe transformed multiple men into animals, sealed every person in a village inside their houses for days without letting them out, and transported one man’s house thousands of miles away to the edge of an isolated town on a mountain solely by using her magic.² Aristomenes responds with: “‘What you relate is marvellous, dear Socrates,’ I said, ‘and wild. In short you’ve roused no little anxiety, even fear, in me too. I’m struck with no mere pebble here, but a

¹ Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* I.vi-x
² Ibid.
spear, lest with the aid of those same magic forces that old woman might have heard our conversation”’.

His response is interesting, as the reader would not expect a man to openly say that he is afraid of a woman, never mind a story about a woman he has never heard of before. Apuleius does not stop there, however, and continues to show the reader what Meroe is capable of. Later that night, Aristomenes believes he has a nightmare in which Meroe and her sister Panthia break into the room at the inn in which Aristomenes and Socrates are sleeping. The witches kill Socrates while Aristomenes is hiding from them beneath the small overturned couch on which he had been sleeping, and before they leave they find the terrified Aristomenes and “[remove his] bed, spread their feet, [squat] over [his] face, and [discharge] their bladders till [he is] drenched with a stream of the foulest urine”.

This scene brings up even more interesting notes. The first lies in the stereotypes of gender roles: typically, a man would not be hiding under his bed from a pair of women. The reader would expect the man to be brave and to fight them off, as hiding is seen as weak and men are not supposed to be “weak”. In this scene, gender roles are completely reversed and it is the women who have absolute power over the situation. This leads to the second interesting note: being urinated on is extremely degrading. In doing this, the two witches show the reader that Aristomenes is beneath them in value as a person. Male characters are never seen as being inferior to female characters and are never degraded to that extent, especially not by women.

Meroe isn’t the only powerful witch in the story, however, and it isn’t long before more witches are introduced. This time the narrator himself in the presence of the witches, but he isn’t scared from Aristomenes’ experience in the least. When he is visiting friends in

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3 Ibid.
4 Apuleius, Metamorphoses I.xi-xvii
Hypata, his aunt Byrrhena gives him a warning about his host’s wife, Pamphile, and uses a very extreme description of her powers: “They call her the first among witches, mistress of every kind of fatal charm, who by breathing on twigs and pebbles and such like can drown all the light of the starlit globe in the depths of Tartarus and plunge the whole world into primal Chaos”.

This description implies that Pamphile if just as powerful, if not stronger, than Meroe, though she is never seen using any extreme magic like Meroe uses. The only time Pamphile is seen using magic is when the narrator and his lover Photis, who is also Pamphile’s servant, secretly watch her transform herself into an owl. Even Photis knows some magic, and it is her who sets the story in motion by transforming Lucius into an ass.

Apuleius’ portrayal of women extends much further than just mortals, however, and his powerful depictions of women continue to be seen when he delves into Greek mythology. The first instance of this is at his aunt Byrrhena’s house, where he sees, “an absolutely excellent work, carved in the likeness of Diana running towards you as you entered, awing you with her divine majesty, her tunic sculpted by the wind”.

In comparison, Actaeon is mentioned almost as an afterthought at the end of the paragraph: “Actaeon was represented too… leaning towards the goddess, waiting with eager gaze for her to step into the pool, at the very moment of his transformation into a stag”. Despite being a famous figure in mythology, he is left until the very end of the description of the sculpture and gets less of a description than the background scenery and the dogs at Diana’s feet. The majority of his description is centered around Diana as well, as if he is there to complement her rather than as another focus of the piece. Leaving Actaeon’s description until the very end, as well as the

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5 Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* II.iv-v
6 Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* II.xix-xxiii
7 Ibid.
8 Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* II.iv-v
9 Ibid.
use of the word “too”, imply that Actaeon is not really important to Apuleius and it is Diana that he favours.

Apuleius also shows his favour for women in mythology itself. In books five and six, he takes a break from his personal story to recount the tale of Cupid and Psyche for the readers. With the exception of Cupid, almost every single relevant character in the story is a woman. Most of Psyche’s character is based off of how beautiful she is, as she as described as being “so delightful, so dazzling, no human speech in its poverty could celebrate [her], or even rise to adequate description… as if she were truly the goddess Venus”. This implies that she is a person Apuleius likes, as people associate beauty with positive qualities and are more likely to like beautiful characters. The description of the goddess Venus circles back to her powers, as she as described as “the primal mother of all that is, the source of the elements…” When Venus learns of Cupid’s relationship with Psyche, she receives help from two goddesses - Ceres and Juno - rather than any of the gods. Even when Psyche goes to the underworld for Venus’ final task, the god Pluto is only mentioned a handful of times; in fact, it is Proserpine who Psyche goes to see. Nearly the entire story is centered around women and goddesses, and Cupid hardly plays any important roles in the story. With the exception of making himself fall in love with Psyche, it is Venus who sets the important events of the story in motion.

The one factor that explains Apuleius’ love for women in powerful positions is his involvement with the Cult of Isis. In the story’s final book, Apuleius reveals that the story of *The Golden Ass* was about the Cult of Isis the entire time. Members of the religion believe that Isis is the only true goddess and that women are the more powerful and divine sex, and
once Apuleius’ involvement with the religion is revealed, it becomes clear that he described women as being so powerful for a reason. He refers to Isis frequently as the “Great Goddess” and writes that she is “all gods and goddesses in a single form”.14 At the end of the book, Apuleius is initiated into the cult and says he “shaved [his] head completely, and not hiding [his] baldness covertly, but displaying it proudly wherever [he] passed, [he] performed with joy the duties of that venerable priesthood”.15 Being a proud member of the religion means that he holds Isis, and therefore all women, higher than he does men and the other gods, and this explains why he would have described women as being the most powerful right from the beginning of his story.

Supernatural powers are a common aspect of both Greek and Roman mythology. Many female characters take on supernatural abilities in the form of goddesses, witches, and mythological beings, yet their powers are often never given justice. Lucius Apuleius, however, puts a twist on typical gender roles. His female characters are all powerful beyond measure in their own ways and are often the ones overpowering the male characters. Be it due to his involvement with the Cult of Isis or not, The Golden Ass shows that women can be just as powerful as men when given the chance, and it makes for a refreshing twist on the gender roles of classical literature.

14 Apuleius, Metamorphoses XI.v-vi
15 Apuleius, Metamorphoses XI.xxviii-xxx