

LUCIUS AT CORINTH

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THE MYSTICAL ISIS-BOOK, APULEIUS' contribution to the finale of the ass-story, has been the subject of considerable scholarship. The incidents which precede Lucius' return to human form, on the other hand, have received less attention. Apuleius' version, which makes up the bulk of Book 10 of the *Metamorphoses*, differs significantly from the version contained in the work ascribed to Lucian, *Lucius or the Ass*.¹ In both accounts the central topic is Lucius' intercourse, in ass-form, with a human female, actually performed with a free woman in his owner's home, and barely escaped with a criminal in the public arena. Apuleius expands on this theme with a fuller portrait of the owner of the ass and of both women, and with an account of a tableau featuring Paris performed in the theatre.

The key to Apuleius' changes to the story may be found in his substitution of Corinth for Thessalonike. This was not a trivial change; Apuleius was careful to say earlier in the novel that Lucius was a native of Corinth,² and the choice of locale involved diverting his hero from a geographically straightforward journey through Thessaly.³

This paper suggests that Apuleius chose Corinth to structure his novel (by having his hero depart from and return to Corinth)⁴ and also for the familiar history and reputation of the city, which he employed as a symbol of the secular world and contrasted with the life of the devotee of Isis presented in the final book.

On the grounds of structure alone, Corinth could have been chosen for its proximity to Cenchreae, where the finale of the *Metamorphoses* is set.⁵ Ultimately, this view assumes that the shrine of Isis at Cenchreae had some special significance, either for the cult as a whole or specifically for Apuleius. In spite of exciting finds there in recent years,⁶ there is

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¹Henceforth *Onos*, following B. E. Perry, *The Ancient Romances* (Berkeley 1967) 212. The author does not wish at this point to express his views on the correctness of the ascription to Lucian.

²1.22, 2.12; see P. Veyne, "Apulée a Cenchrées," *RevPhil* sér. 3, 39 (1965) 241-251.

³As a result of the change, Beroea (*Onos* 34) becomes an anonymous *ciuitas populosa et nobilis* (8.23). See A. Mazzarino, *La Milesia e Apuleio* (Turin 1950) 151-153, and P. G. Walsh, *The Roman Novel* (Cambridge 1970) 164, n. 5.

⁴*Onos* 55 implies that Lucius set out from Patrae.

⁵For this view, see A. Lesky, *Hermes* 76 (1941) 44-45, Mazzarino, *loc. cit.* (above, n. 3).

⁶Recent finds are summarized in *AJA* 73 (1969) 345-346.

no evidence that this Iseion held a superior position among the Isis-cults attested elsewhere in the Greek world.⁷ It is also possible that Apuleius chose Corinth because of a personal experience at Cenchreae.⁸ But a more valid explanation would not beg the question of close identification between Apuleius and his hero, and would show that the Corinthian setting is internally justified. Furthermore, to make Apuleius' choice of Corinth depend on events at Cenchreae would be to reverse normal priorities; Cenchreae was merely, as Apuleius observed (10.35), an *oppidum nobilissimae coloniae Corinthiensium*. It is more logical to assume that the transformation was placed in Cenchreae because Apuleius had selected Corinth as the setting for the preceding narrative.

Several reasons might be suggested for his choice. First, Corinth would be familiar to any Roman reader, who would therefore understand references to its history and traditions. The city of Thessalonike, on the other hand, seems not to have had any special literary associations.

Corinth's fame rested, in large part, on its lack of sexual restraints, what Landi called its "depraved and dissolute customs."⁹ The old, Greek, city enjoyed this reputation not least because of the temple prostitution associated with its cult of Aphrodite. These *hierodouloi* may have returned to Corinth with the Roman colony; but even if they did not, the institution was still recalled in the time of Apuleius, when allusions to the classical past were common in literary works.¹⁰

Even apart from learned recollections of the past, there are suggestions that "dissolute customs" continued to be associated with Corinth. I Corinthians, especially chapter 5.9, *μη συναμικγνυσθαι πόρνοις*, suggests that the Christian community there had severe sexual and moral problems, particularly in their relations with the pagan city.¹¹ A few years later, Juvenal, Martial, and possibly Epictetus, in passages that clearly refer to the present and not to tradition, satirise Corinthians for using depilatories on their legs, which was traditionally a mark of the *kinaidos*.¹²

⁷Mazzarino (152, n. 1) argues, largely *ex silentio*, that there was no Iseion at Thessalonike.

⁸This view is held by Veyne, *op. cit.* (above, n. 2) 248, and by H. E. Butler and A. S. Owen, *Apulei Apologia* (Hildesheim 1967, reprint of Oxford 1914) xi.

⁹C. Landi, *Athenaeum* 7 (1929) 15, n. 2.

¹⁰Strabo's use of present tenses in 8.6.21 may mean that the shrine was functioning at the time of his visit in 27 B.C. Aelius Aristides (47K) and [Dio Chrysostom] *Or.* 37 refer in speeches delivered in Roman Corinth to the events and honours of its past history.

¹¹For discussion of this passage of the epistle, consult the commentaries of C. K. Barrett (New York 1968) 2, 131; of Margaret E. Thrall (Cambridge 1965) 2, 10; and of J. Héring (Neuchâtel, 2nd. ed. 1959) 47-49; and C. K. Barrett, "Christianity at Corinth," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 46 (1964) 269-297.

¹²Juv. 8.113, Mart. 10.65, Epict. 3.1. *fin.* Martial's term *municipem Corinthiorum*

These traditions of immorality go a long way, as Landi suggested, toward explaining Apuleius' choice of Corinth because of the general sexual overtones of Book 10. In addition, many individual incidents occur which have specific, Corinthian, associations.

Corinth is first named when we learn that Lucius' present owner, Thiasus,¹³ as newly-elected *IIuir quinquennalis* of the colony (10.18), was in Thessaly looking for animals and gladiators for the arena. By this reference to an obligation of an official of a Roman community, this introduction of Thiasus is more fully developed in the *Metamorphoses* than in *Onos* (50), and at the same time, Apuleius' account brings the incident within the experience of a Latin-speaking reader. The author also has in mind another aspect of Roman Corinth: that within Greece, its special connections with the arena made it a symbol of cruelty and inhumanity. Gladiatorial contests first came to Greece with the colonists at Corinth. Archaeological evidence from the theatre testifies to the importance of the arena in the new community,¹⁴ and when the Athenians considered importing the institutions, they were criticized for emulating the bloodthirsty Corinthians.¹⁵

Apuleius' account of the ass-Lucius' intercourse with a woman is not substantially different from the version in the *Onos* (51), except that he makes the woman a *matrona* of the city instead of a foreigner. The effect of this is to involve the city more closely with her perversion, and hence to contribute to the aura Apuleius attempted to give to Corinth. A story of this nature cannot be readily explained by any city's traditions. Yet I have always been struck by its similarity to the tale of Lamia recounted by Philostratus (*VA* 4.25) and set in Corinth. Behind both lies the same mixture of perverse and uncontrolled sexuality and form-changing magic, and Philostratus, like Apuleius, chose to associate these qualities with Corinth.

In the next episode, which has no parallel in the *Onos*, Apuleius suggests he is thinking of the Roman community. Epictetus characterises the practice of using depilatories as typical of those who would like to be women. He then attacks his interlocutor with the words, τοιοῦτόν σε θῶμεν πολίτην Κορινθίων. This should be interpreted as meaning "a man with your perversions should be a Corinthian," rather than lamely justified with the claim, "the interlocutor must have been a Corinthian," as it is by W. A. Oldfather in the Loeb edition of Epictetus (Harvard 1928) 2. 16, n. 2. For other references to shaving the legs, see Lucian *Demonax* 50, *Merc. Cond.* 33, *Fugitivi* 33, Philostratus *VS* 1.5.536.

¹³The name is not recorded at Corinth, though it is found in an inscription from Epidaurus, *IG* 4².1.688.

¹⁴Note especially the paintings published in *ΑΓΑ* 30 (1926) 451-483. See also *Corinth (Results of Excavations conducted by the American School at Athens)* 2 (Princeton 1952) 84-98, and 140, and F. J. deWaele, *Theater en Amphitheater te oud Korinthe* (Utrecht 1928).

¹⁵Philostratus *VA* 4.22, Dio Chrysostom 31.121.

recounts the story of the woman condemned to have intercourse with the ass-Lucius. The details of the narrative require the presence and intervention of the governor of Achaea, and are facilitated by setting the incident in Corinth, the provincial capital; the governor who appears in *Onos* 54–55 does not have such an integral rôle, nor is it explained why he is in Thessalonike. But the tale in Apuleius' version is linked with Corinth by more than convenience of setting. Just as the story in 10.2–12 recalls the legend of Phaedra, and the references to Pasiphae and the Minotaur in 10.19–22 allude to another mythological model, so this story of the condemned woman's jealousy brings to mind the specifically Corinthian legend of Medea.¹⁶

This tradition of Corinth as a city of sexual perversion and murder is also reflected in the alleged encounter of Apollonius of Tyana with the Corinthian parricide Bassus. It is claimed that Bassus attempted to bribe a man to kill Apollonius, using his own wife as the bribe.¹⁷

Apuleius' narrative continues with an *ekphrasis* on a tableau of the Judgement of Paris. The picture is largely for its own sake and contributes little to the development of the story. Yet it again reminds us of Corinth's special connection with Venus,¹⁸ to whom the passage is devoted, and hence is a further expression of the city's traditions of sexuality.

The description is interrupted in chapter 33 by a violent attack on judicial corruption, using the Judgement of Paris as a paradigm. This attack, as Apuleius tells us (*ecce nunc patiemur philosophantem nobis asinum*),¹⁹ has a philosophical basis. But despite the mention of Socrates, the philosophy here is not Apuleius' own Platonism. The violent language, the attack on the gods, the themes of base wealth and corruption of society—all these mark the passage as either a Cynic diatribe or a parody thereof.²⁰

Apuleius was familiar with Cynic traditions; he recounted two examples in *Florida* 14 and 22. Probably he knew also of those traditions which placed much of Diogenes' career in Corinth, and of those which

¹⁶Medea as a type-figure of murderesses is found in Juv. 8.643.

¹⁷Philostratus *VA* 4.26; [Apollonius] *Ep.* 36–37, p. 116 Hercher. The historical plausibility of the Apollonius legend, and the authenticity of the letters ascribed to him, are irrelevant to this enquiry. What is important is that these stories are attached to Corinth, presumably because of an already existing reputation. It is also useful to remember that in late antiquity Apollonius and Apuleius were associated as the great magicians of the pagan world.

¹⁸Note the Corinthian L. Papius *Venerus*, *Corinth* 8.3 (Princeton 1966) 92.

¹⁹J. J. M. Feldbrugge, *Het Schertsende Karakter van Apuleius' Metamorphosen* (Utrecht 1938) 134, suggests that this passage should not be taken too seriously.

²⁰For an account of Cynicism, see D. R. Dudley, *A History of Cynicism from Diogenes to the Sixth Century A.D.* (Hildesheim 1967).

connected Demetrius, the famous Cynic of the first century A.D., with the city.²¹ Since this is one of the few passages of sustained satire in the *Metamorphoses*²² and takes place in Corinth, it is possible that Apuleius is using it, at least in part, as a reference to the Cynics' connections with the city.

The subject of the outburst is what the Cynics termed *aischrokerdeia*, the love of base gain, or willingness to make money by any means. It is a motif that recurs throughout the Corinthian episodes of the *Metamorphoses*, giving them a unity of theme. We are told that Lucius' owner was delighted to make a good profit by treating him as a performing animal, and that his servant was happy to encourage the Pasiphae affair with no qualms, *suo lucro contentus* (10.19). In the story of the condemned woman, a Corinthian doctor supplied poison for a price; his non-Corinthian counterpart in the earlier "Phaedra" story had prevented a murder by supplying a hypnotic instead of a lethal drug.²³ The reader was certainly meant to make the comparison and to draw certain conclusions about Corinthians.²⁴ Furthermore, the condemned woman killed the doctor to avoid paying him, and slew her own daughter to protect her inheritance. Before choosing this woman as the victim of public sodomy, the Corinthians had tried to find a volunteer, *grandi praemio*; they failed, but only Corinthians, one suspects, would have thought of trying.

The theme of man's weakness for money does occur elsewhere in the *Metamorphoses*, for example in the tale of the slave Myrmex (9.19). However, it is rarely absent from the Corinthian episodes, and as the topic of chapter 33, it closes the sections on Corinth.

Corinth's wealth was as proverbial as its immorality;²⁵ the idea that it was ill-gotten was bound to follow. In the same period as Apuleius, Alciphron (*Ep.* 3.60) expands on the arrogance (he uses the Greek word *bdelyria*) of the city's rich and its starvation-level poverty. A familiar story of the Roman colony told how the first settlers were not averse to making a fortune by grave-robbing.²⁶

²¹For Diogenes at Corinth see Diogenes Laertius 6.77; for Demetrius, Philostratus *VA* 4.25, Lucian *Adv. Indoct.* 19. The historical accuracy of these traditions is less important for our purposes than their general acceptance in Apuleius' day.

²²A. Scobie, *Aspects of the Ancient Romance and its Heritage* (*Beiträge zur Klassischen Philologie*, Heft 30) (Meisenheim am Glan 1969) 38, cites chapter 33 as an example of Apuleius' "sporadic satire." This is distinct from the moral judgements he discusses on pp. 68-70.

²³10.11. A hypnotic is also administered in Xenophon *Ephesiaca* 3.5.11.

²⁴Whether there is also a specific criticism of Corinthian medicine is not clear. Local physicians are recorded in *Corinth* 8.3.206, 300 (note especially pp. 117-118). Galen studied at Corinth (2K.217, 660).

²⁵Strabo 8.6.20 (378) discusses the significance of Corinth's traditional epithet *ἀφνειός*.

²⁶Strabo 8.6.23 (382) and Crinagoras *AP* 9.284. Crinagoras is almost vituperative in his criticism of the Corinthians.

Apuleius, it may be concluded, employed Corinth and its traditions to portray certain human qualities—cruelty, sexuality in its many and often perverse aspects, murder, and the desire for wealth—which the devotee of Isis shunned.²⁷

The city on the Isthmus became Vanity Fair, or worse; it was a symbol of the secular life which Lucius/Apuleius rejected in the final Isis-book. What might at first glance appear to be a trivial change of locale is in fact a significant part of the process by which Apuleius altered an essentially comic tale into a more serious novel, and suggests that the process is not restricted to the last book.

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²⁷The most obvious contrast is between the sexuality of Book 10 and the *tenacibus castimoniis* of 11.16; there may also be observed the contrast between the theme of gain in Book 10, and Lucius' poverty in the cause of religion in 11.28.