

Fear and Loathing in the Imperial Provinces: The
Failure of Social Control as shown in *The Golden Ass*

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Apuleius paints a stark picture of life in the imperial provinces. To our modern eyes, one of the starkest features of that picture is the difference in behavior between men and women. Certainly, there is no shortage of depravity in either gender, but Apuleius does seem to portray them excelling at different vices and for different reasons. On the surface, it appears that the women in Apuleius' world suffer from an insatiable lust that compels them to ever greater crimes. Meanwhile, the men seem afflicted with an equally insatiable greed.

For evidence of how greedy the men are in Apuleius' world, consider the roving gang of bandits that capture Lucius. They comprise a mini-society of men wholly dedicated to the mutual fulfillment of their greed, robbing, pillaging, and ransoming. Or consider Lucius' host Milo, who is described by his neighbor as "the meanest, most miserly, dirtiest fellow you ever saw" (19) who spends his time "gloating over stacks of coin" (19) but "when, very occasionally he does go out, he dresses like a common beggar" (20). When Psyche's older sister describes the tribulations she, as a queen, must bear, she points out that her husband "locks up everything in the house with bolts and chains" (109).

In the service of the market-gardener, Lucius testifies to greater greed when describing the centurion who tried to steal him from his master (225). Lucius claims that the market-gardener was so poor that during the winter he could afford "neither straw nor blankets" (218) for himself, let alone his ass, and that they were both forced to subsist on "old tough lettuces that had run to seed" (219). Strikingly, the centurion's greed pales in comparison to that described immediately before. There, Lucius recounts the tale of a rich nobleman who, not having been satisfied with "slaughtering the sheep, driving off the oxen, and trampling the green corn" (221) of his poor neighbor, resorts to stealing what little land belonged to his

poor neighbor. When three kind brothers went with the poor farmer to petition the wealthy nobleman, they were cruelly executed (223).

Evidence that women suffer from insatiable lust is just as apparent in *The Golden Ass*. In the first tale of the book, Socrates explains to Aristomenes that he is a virtual slave to a witch named Meroë (7). Meroë has “the ability to make men fall passionately in love with her” (8) which she uses extensively. When one of her many lovers displeases her, she simply turns him into a beaver (8). Lustful women turning to witchcraft to satisfy their desires soon make another appearance. Lucius’ relative Byrrhaena sternly warns him against the intrigues of Pamphilë, Milo’s wife, saying that “she falls in love with every handsome young man she sets eyes on, and at once decides to possess him . . . she binds him to her with unbreakable fetters of lust” (28). Byrrhaena cautions Lucius that “Pamphilë is a nymphomaniac” (29) and that “whenever she meets resistance, her rage and hatred are so violent” that terrible fates befall the objects of her affection.

Lustful women are not confined to the ranks of witches though. In the service of the miller, Lucius learns that not only is his wife cheating on him (214), but his good friend the laundry-man is being cheated by his wife as well (211). Lucius soon discovers however that women’s lust is not confined to human males, but extends even to him, trapped as he is in the body of an ass. He describes a wealthy noble woman who paid to bed with him as “exuding lust from her very fingernails” (248), all the while telling him that “you are all I want in the world; I could never live without you” (248). However well this woman’s romantic intrigues worked out, the situation turned far worse in the case of the councillor’s wife. That woman fell passionately in love with her own stepson (230), and after having her incestuous advances

rejected by him (233), tried to kill him (234). When her own son accidentally ingested the poison meant for his half-brother and promptly died, “she was by no means dismayed by his dreadful death, or by the guilt of being his murderess, or by the prospect of her husband’s grief” (234). Instead, she seized the opportunity to punish the stepson who spurned her by telling his father “that her son had been poisoned by his stepbrother” (234). Having killed one of her husbands’ sons, she evidently sought to eliminate the other as well. In contrast with his portrayal of greed in men, Apuleius seems to take special pleasure in showing the disastrous consequences brought about by women’s lust.

However initially satisfying it may be, the formula of women lusting and men being greedy seems too neat to be true. One serious flaw in this theory is that for every adultress in Apuleius’ world, there is an adulterer (if not several). It takes two to tango, so it seems unlikely that women are the only ones suffering from lust in Apuleius’ world. And yet Apuleius uses a number of techniques to deflect moral responsibility away from the men in these affairs and onto the women. Recall that in many of the affairs Lucius describes, a married woman sleeps with an unmarried man, as in the cases of the miller’s wife (214), the smith’s wife, “who was famous for her sexual appetite” (196), and Aretë (205). Because these women are violating their marriage oath while the men they consort with are not, they bear more responsibility for their joint crimes. Moreover, the men sought after by these lusting women are often young or unwilling. For example, the witch Pamphilë is noted for her interest in “handsome young men” (28) while the miller’s wife chose a consort who “was only a boy” (210). Unwilling victims include Socrates (8) and the councillor’s wife’s stepson (233).

Apuleius magnifies the moral indignation surrounding the affairs of his lustful women by associating them with terrible consequences. Thus while Philesietaerus seduced Aretë (206), nothing terrible resulted, but the councillor's wife followed up her attempted adultery with murder (234) while the miller's wife hired a witch to "frighten his soul out of his body" (215). Some of the worst cases of lust are attributed to the eunuchs (189), but these characters are so hyperfeminized that it seems as if Apuleius placed them there to reflect more on the nature of women than that of men. Lucius refers to them as his "mistresses" (191) and describes them as rapists (191) when they're not swindling townsfolk (199).

While the greed and lust attributed to men and women may stand in stark contrast to one another, at their root, they both represent different responses to fear. All people in all ages fear abandonment, insecurity, and death, but in Apuleius' view, the precise expression of these archtypal fears is shaped by the constraints imposed by Roman society.

Considering men, we can see that greed comes from fear, and in the fullness of time, gives birth to more fear, as it compels the acquisition of ever more possessions that must be protected. In that sense, greed is the reification of a desperate desire for security in a hopelessly insecure world. Thus, the pursuit of wealth becomes both a means and an end in and of itself, since wealth is needed for security (a wealthy man can survive disaster, such as loss of the year's crop) but paradoxically, endangers security since it attracts thieves, villains, and anyone in need of a hand-out. This trait is obvious in Milo, who spends his days "gloating over stacks of coin" (19), no doubt desperately trying to reassure himself of his own safety. One bandit wisely comments on this apparent contradiction, saying that "people who live economically with few slaves not only keep their stuff pretty well hidden,

but defend it fiercely at the risk of their lives, even if it isn't particularly valuable" (82). He thus shows how wealth achieves a symbolic value in the mind far outstripping its actual value in the real world.

Like wealth, the carnal encounters that Apuleius' lustful women so assiduously sought achieved a symbolic value in their minds far exceeding its actual value. These carnal encounters brought with them feelings of unity and safety in the arms of another: a brief reprieve from the fear that must have haunted these women, that of being abandoned. This is true even for those of Apuleius' women who risked their marriages to prosperous and wealthy men by dallying with those who could not support them. Even when the satisfaction of their carnal lusts logically hampers their security, the conjugal act brings with it reassuring feelings that justify the risk involved.

Interwoven with the fear of insecurity lies the fear of abandonment for both sexes. Roman men, charged with the responsibility for their wives' well being, must have worried about losing them should they lose their fortunes. At the same time, Roman women must have worried about being abandoned in a world unlikely to provide for them bereft of a husband and father. Because men remained independent economic actors in Roman provincial society, they had less to fear from abandonment. They could survive bereft, provided they had ready supplies of cash, which could also help in bringing them new companions to soothe the pain of loss.

Both lust and greed stem from that most primal of all fears, the fear of death. That fear is immortalized in the ancient Roman motto of "eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die", i.e., because life is so uncertain and so insecure, we must seek out pleasure wherever we

can. Apuleius' women retreat to orgies of pleasure, heedless of the social costs their infidelity carries. In a similar vein, the greed of Apuleius' men is the necessary prerequisite for the decadence with which they fend off death and all the fear he inspires.

Apuleius portrays a world petrified by fear. And why shouldn't the people of this world fear? After all, murderous gangs of bandits rove the highways (80) and what little government authority there is proves powerless except when extorting mercilessly from the poor (225). The rich and powerful, never sated in their unending decadence appropriate whatever they wish from their poor brethren (221). When virtuous men come to the aid of the poor, they are simply annihilated (222). Even when society turns upon itself, one might hope to find refuge at the hearth. Alas, it is at the hearth where rampant adultery gives birth to violent murder (234). Lost souls might hope for salvation in religion, but the cause of religion is filled with charlatans (188) while witches abound unmolested. Even death brings no relief from this ordeal since the witches feast on the flesh of the dead (43). The ancient protections afforded to travelers have been abandoned (7, 52, 183) while even the gods forswear their traditional roles as protectors (127, 129) and behave instead like overgrown children, drunk with power but sapped of wisdom (123). Indeed, there is much to fear in this terrible world and Apuleius' men and women are right to fear as much as they do.

Seen in this light, the story of Cupid and Psyche serves to illustrate both the problem and solution of living in such a terrifying world. Themes of jealousy, rage, and insecurity run through this tale, but they can all be explained as variants of primal fear. For example, at first glance Psyche's greatest flaw seems to be her curiosity: it compels her to disobey her husband and gaze at him (117) in addition to compelling her to open Persephone's deadly

box of beauty (160). However, on closer examination, we can see that what really motivated Psyche was not curiosity but fear. In the first case, she had been thoroughly terrified by her sisters that she had been sleeping with a serpentine monster, bent on devouring her (114). Apuleius writes that “Psyche was aghast . . . she lost all control of herself, trembled, turned deathly pale” (115). She gazed at her husband not out of idle curiosity, but as a prelude to killing what she believed was a terrible monster. Later on, Psyche opened Persephone’s terrible box not out of vanity, but because she was afraid her husband would reject her. She told herself desperately, “I must do everything possible to please my beautiful lover” (140).

In this tale, Venus is so overwhelmed by her petty jealousy that she becomes fear incarnate. After all, surely the goddess of beauty has nothing to fear from a mere mortal, no matter how radiant she might be. Venus’ irrational jealousy is thus a manifestation of her own insecurity: like everyone else, she fears being abandoned and unloved, and the desertion of her temples (97) only fans the flames of her fear into blind rage. Because love (as symbolized by Cupid in the story) comes unbidden, cloaked in the darkness, Psyche cannot submit to its bliss, and so succumbs to her fear, dramatically illustrated when she tries to kill her husband (117). With service to fear, love takes flight, and Psyche becomes the slave of fear (as symbolized by Venus). Lost and forlorn, she seeks love everywhere (122), but cannot find him except by submitting again to fear (129). Sacrifice and submission performed with love in the service of fear bring redemption (142) and freedom from bondage to Venus’ slaves Anxiety and Grief.

Unraveling the symbolism, we see that love (Cupid) is the child of blind rage and bitter jealousy (Venus) as well as tender devotion (Vulcan). Thus, when Psyche drove love away

with her fear, her only hope for reclaiming love was to seek the well spring of love, primal anger and fear. As Vulcan and Venus did, Psyche was able to combine fear with unceasing devotion to produce love again.

In a sense, this book tells the story of how fundamental mechanisms of Roman social control unraveled in the provinces because of chaos and insecurity. Life had become so insecure that people lost their faith, and with it their faithfulness, which contributed to the further unraveling of provincial society. Intriguingly, *The Golden Ass* reflects the Roman understanding of the role of love in society: it springs forth from fear, and, if left unchecked, threatens to wreak havoc, tearing society apart. Consequently, love must be shackled in marriage (and other social institutions like the Adulterer's Court) so that it may be used to strengthen society, rather than undermining it (142). Of course, the social role of love just described is not unlike the role that Apuleius believed religious fervor played in society. When uncontrolled it lead to a dabbling in magic that wreaks havoc in society (witches, charlatans eunuchs) but when properly sublimated and expressed in traditional mystery cults, it serves to strengthen society and reinforce stabilizing social institutions. In that sense, the greatest value of *The Golden Ass* may be in giving us a glimpse into how provincial Roman society adapted in response to complex problems brought about by an increasing population.

References

Apuleius. *The Golden Ass*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979. Translated by Robert Graves.