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Apuleius' The Golden Ass in Ferrara

1. In this paper I briefly trace the reception of Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* or, as the title was current in antiquity, *Asinus Aureus* or *Metamorphoses*. I focus on the novel's particularly favorable reception at the court of Ercole I d'Este in Ferrara where it found fertile soil in the retelling of its tales primarily by the poet Matteo Maria Boiardo.

The Golden Ass was written by Apuleius around AD 125 in North African Madauros. It tells the tale of Lucius, whose *curiositas* induces his dabbling in magic, subsequently leading to his being turned into an ass while retaining his human mind. Only in the last of eleven books, after his conversion to Isis Tyche or *Fortuna videns*, is Lucius saved from his asinine appearance and restored to humanity.

The Golden Ass is a masterpiece of literary stitch work drawing on earlier literature like Apuleius' Greek contemporary Pseudo-Lucian and his novella *Lucius or the Ass*¹. Apuleius' novel also draws on the *sermo* typical of Roman verse satire, in its turn owing its distinctive flavor to the master of dialogue himself – Plato. Indeed Plato's *Phaedrus* is an integral part of the backdrop to *The Golden Ass* and Apuleius gained celebrity in his own time as a Platonic *philosophus*².

The Golden Ass presents a mixture of entertainment whereby many stock characters and situations give the impression of several comedies of Plautus being performed at once. It also offers, however, religious propaganda of a very sophisticated type. Written with a sharp sense of irony and a well-developed taste for the ridiculous, *The Golden Ass* was a quintessential product of its time; nostalgic for the classical past and enamored of display. Indeed it reflects the predominant cultural phenomenon of its age, the movement called the Second Sophistic, whose distinguishing feature was oratory for entertainment³. In language and style the novel reflects the dazzling rhetorical arts of the Sophist⁴.

The surviving and most authoritative manuscript of *The Golden Ass* was preserved at the monastery of Monte Cassino in the latter part of the eleventh century. As Haig Gaisser reports, this oldest surviving copy, which contains three works of Apuleius – *Apology*, *The Golden Ass* or *Metamorphoses* and *Florida* – is the Florence, Biblioteca Laurenziana, *ms.* 68.2, called F (Haig

¹ MARSH (1998, 37-40).

² HIJMANS JR. (1987, 408-12).

³ SANDY (1997); also ANDERSON (1993).

⁴ In addition to *The Golden Ass*, Apuleius' extant works include erotic poetry, forensic and epideictic oratory, and philosophical orations and treatises. For detailed accounts of his oeuvre, including fragmentary and lost works, see HARRISON (2000, 10-38).

Gaisser 2008, 61). Haig Gaisser affirms that F remained in Monte Cassino until the middle of the fourteenth century, when it was taken to Florence (Haig Gaisser 2008, 63).

The reason why the recuperation of *The Golden Ass* was paramount at Monte Cassino could well stem, as Francis Newton suggests, from the interest in restoring books associated with St. Augustine⁵. Indeed Augustine makes reference to *The Golden Ass* in *De Civitate Dei* 18, 18 where he propounds: «[...] yet had he his human reason still, as Apuleius had while he was an ass, as himself writes in his book of *The Golden Ass*; be it a lie or a truth that he writes»⁶. Many interpretations of *The Golden Ass* in the late middle ages were influenced by Augustine's reading of this text.

2. The fortunes of *The Golden Ass* started to change when in the 1340s Apuleius' novel came to the attention of Francesco Petrarca and, even more prominently, Giovanni Boccaccio, who owned and annotated manuscripts and used Apuleius creatively in their writing⁷. In the *Decameron* (1349-1351), Boccaccio creatively exploited and emulated Apuleius' style transforming pieces of the Latin novel and incorporating them into his own Italian prose narrative⁸. Boccaccio's use of Apuleius is most evident in the two adultery stories that he borrowed from book nine of the *Golden Ass*⁹. In the second story of book seven of the *Decameron*, Boccaccio masterfully twists Apuleius' famous "Tale of the wife's tub" to the story of Peronella who «mette un suo amante [Giannello] in un doglio» (Boccaccio 421)¹⁰. In the tenth story of book five Boccaccio adapts a second adultery tale from *The Golden Ass* entitled "Tale of the Fuller's Wife" where «without squabbles and dissension we three might come to reciprocal terms in bed [...]» (Apuleius 201). In "Tale of the Fuller's Wife", however, the wife's boy-lover is also beaten up and finally chased out of the house. In Boccaccio V 10, on the other hand, the homosexual Pietro di Vinciolo, on discovering his wife's boy-lover, decides to share the latter in bed with her, «vedelo, cognosce lo 'nganno della moglie, con la quale ultimamente rimane in concordia per la sua tristezza» (Boccaccio 373)¹¹.

With Boccaccio *The Golden Ass* reached the high point of its fortunes in the fourteenth century because it had finally come into the hands of a man whose imagination was as free ranging as Apuleius' own. Boccaccio was also one of the first known scholars to have transcribed not

⁵ NEWTON (1999, 319-21).

⁶ TASKER (1972, 192).

⁷ For Petrarca's library, see DE LA MARE (1973). For Boccaccio's see CASAMASSIMA (1982, 253-60).

⁸ BRANCA (1977) and Branca's notes in Boccaccio, *Decameron* (ed. BRANCA 1976).

⁹ SANGUINETI WHITE (1977).

¹⁰ BAJONI (1994, 217-25).

¹¹ SANGUINETI WHITE (1977, 69-154).

simply from the literary works of Apuleius but also from the latter's philosophical repertoire¹². The newly discovered philosophical works, overshadowed in the fourteenth century by their literary siblings, came to the fore in the fifteenth, fuelling the reception of all of Apuleius' works.

3. In the first half of the fifteenth century the chief beneficiary of both Boccaccio's legacy and the new interest in the philosophical works of Apuleius was Florence, now blooming as the foremost centre of humanist activity. In Florence the philosophical readers of Apuleius predominated and this was in great part due to Platonism, newly emerging in the Renaissance as a rival to the long-entrenched Aristotelianism of the Middle Ages. At least to some degree we could claim that Platonism pitted the new humanism against the old scholasticism, thrusting authors like Apuleius, the *philosophus platonicus*, to center-stage and making it possible that Apuleius be one of the first classical authors to appear in print. The first edition of Apuleius came into existence in 1469, launched as a trump card in the Platonist controversy. The editor, Giovanni Andrea Bussi (1417-1475), presented the first direct expository treatment of Apuleius' works since Augustine's comments in *De Civitate Dei*, over a thousand years earlier¹³. Bussi's edition was a monumental turning point in the reception of Apuleius and following this edition, the floodgates for the diffusion of this masterpiece were open.

It is in the hub of such literary ferment that in the 1470s the duke Ercole I d'Este, presiding over the sophisticated court of Ferrara, commissioned a translation of *The Golden Ass* from Matteo Maria Boiardo, count of Scandiano (1440 or 1441 to 1494), best known for his long epic romance, *Orlando Innamorato*¹⁴. The duke Ercole I d'Este encouraged both the literary and the visual arts, and though not a scholar himself and with limited knowledge of Latin, he enjoyed translations of exciting and entertaining tales from the classics. Boiardo translated several works for Ercole d'Este in this period, including Herodotus' *Histories* and the *Lives of Cornelius Nepos*. The same masterpiece *Orlando Innamorato* was written, if not for the court of Ercole d'Este, then certainly with its encouragement¹⁵.

Boiardo drew on Apuleius in a small project for the court, a verse description of a pack of tarot cards entitled *Tarocchi o Capitoli* (Tarot Cards or Chapters)¹⁶. His translation of Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*, however, which he entitled *Apulegio volgare*, was the most important translation

¹² At about the same time that he was finishing the *Decameron*, Boccaccio transcribed his own manuscripts of Apuleius' *Apology*, *Metamorphoses* and *Florida* (Florence, Biblioteca Laurenziana, ms. 54.32). The manuscript is described by CASAMASSIMA (1975, 152-4).

¹³ MIGLIO (1978, 13-5).

¹⁴ For more information on Ercole and his court, see GUNDERSHEIMER (1973, 173-228).

¹⁵ For courtly elements in *Orlando Innamorato*, see Matteo Maria Boiardo, *Orlando Innamorato* in ed. ROSS (1989, 14-9).

¹⁶ The work is edited and discussed by FOÀ (1993).

work carried out for the duke and the Este court. Boiardo's translation enjoyed great success at the court of Ferrara, becoming a favourite with Duke Ercole and his family. This produced considerable repercussions on both the literary and artistic reception of Apuleius, and soon inspired literary and artistic treatments of the story of Cupid and Psyche.

4. The essential study of *Apulegio volgare* has been carried out by Edoardo Fumagalli¹⁷. Boiardo completed *Apulegio volgare* by the early 1479, basing this translation, as Fumagalli demonstrated, on Giovanni Andrea Bussi's 1469 edition (Fumagalli 1988, 1-28; 31-91). The precise copy of Bussi's edition that Boiardo used has not been identified, but Fumagalli suggests that it had been corrected against a manuscript (not by Boiardo himself), and that its corrections were similar to those in the copy now in Huntington Library (Fumagalli 1988, 31-91). The duke of Este drastically limited the circulation of *Apulegio volgare*, which he claimed to consult every day¹⁸. This limited circulation is evident in the next publication of *Apulegio volgare* which did not take place before 1519, long after the deaths of both Ercole d'Este and Boiardo himself. Furthermore, Fumagalli reports that only two manuscripts are extant¹⁹. Nonetheless, in the 1490s, while Ercole and his family jealously guarded its diffusion, *Apulegio volgare* inspired at least three important literary and artistic works associated with Cupid and Psyche and the Este family.

These were a long poem entitled *Fabula Psiches et Cupidinis* by Boiardo's cousin Niccolò da Correggio (1450-1508)²⁰; a fresco cycle in Ercole d'Este's Belriguardo palace (now lost)²¹; and a comedy by Galeotto del Carretto entitled *Noze de Psiche e Cupidine*²². Of these three works, Correggio's poem was perhaps the most important and the one that heavily drew on Boiardo's *Apulegio volgare*. It was dedicated to Ercole's daughter, Isabella Gonzaga, marquess of Mantua, and, according to the dedication, executed at her express request²³. The marquess had almost certainly read Boiardo's translation at her father's court and in 1512 she wrote to Ferrara requesting another copy of *Apulegio volgare*, after the Gonzaga copy went missing (Fumagalli 1988, 12-5). For Correggio, *Apulegio volgare* was not simply influential but his primary source for *Fabula Psiches et Cupidinis*, as the clear verbal echoes between the two texts attest (Fumagalli 1988, 217-345). Correggio's story of Psyche and Cupid, however, does not lend itself to allegorical

¹⁷ FUMAGALLI (1988, 217-345). There is, to my knowledge, no modern edition of the work as a whole but Fumagalli has edited Boiardo's translation of the story of Psyche. Also FUMAGALLI (2000, 73-82).

¹⁸ Ercole d'Este made the claim in a letter of 1481 to Federico Gonzaga as an excuse for sending him a copy rather than the original of Boiardo's translation. The letter is quoted by FUMAGALLI (1988, 10).

¹⁹ FUMAGALLI (1988, 161-3); FUMAGALLI (2000, 79 n. 10). For the publication history, see especially FUMAGALLI (1988, 163-84).

²⁰ For Correggio's life and works, see FARENGA (1983, 466-74).

²¹ GUNDERSHEIMER (1972).

²² Galeotto Del Carretto, *Noze de Psiche e Cupidine* in TISSONI BENVENUTI-MUSSINI SACCHI (1983, 611-725).

²³ Correggio, dedication of *Fabula Psiches et Cupidinis* in TISSONI BENVENUTI (1969, 47-96).

interpretation, rather offering entertainment for courtly readers already familiar with versions of the story.

Matteo Maria Boiardo's *Apulegio volgare* itself, on the other hand, is anything but a faithful translation of Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*. Boiardo glossed over difficult passages and did not strive to reproduce Apuleius' style. For Boiardo, who wanted to satisfy the duke's interest in intricate and exotic tales, the story was everything, albeit not all the story. Boiardo significantly omitted book eleven and thus protagonist Lucius' redemption and conversion to Isis, substituting it with the farcical conclusion of the *Onos* (Ass) of Pseudo-Lucian²⁴.

In *Apulegio volgare* Loukios, restored to human shape by his own efforts, returns to the amorous matron only to be rejected because he is no longer the beautiful ass she loved but only «una brutta scimmia senza coda», an ending with obvious obscene implications²⁵. This conclusion changes the tone of the novel, firmly keeping *Apulegio volgare* away from serious questions raised by Lucius' final transformation and conversion in Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*. But this was not Boiardo's only addition to Apuleius.

5. As Fumagalli has pointed out, in *Apulegio volgare* Boiardo often uses both phrasing and content from the above-mentioned imitations of Apuleius in Boccaccio's *Decameron* (V 10 and VII 2)²⁶. Despite Fumagalli's choice to call the process *contaminatio*, these additions by Boiardo could also be seen from a different angle. By using Boccaccio as an intertext, Boiardo incorporated the imitation into the original, giving his tales a double resonance. The incorporation of Boccaccio, like the substitution of the ending, not only made *Apulegio volgare* something more intricate than a mere translation, but it also suited the interests of Ercole and his court. Boiardo could be sure that the duke and his entourage would recognize and savour his echoes of Boccaccio and smile at his sardonic and racy ending. Boiardo's artistry did not stop here. If he used Boccaccio's imitations of Apuleius as an intertext in *Apulegio volgare*, he also used both Apuleius and *Apulegio volgare* as intertexts in *Orlando Innamorato*²⁷.

The most intriguing example is yet another adultery tale Boiardo translates from the ninth book of *The Golden Ass*, one that, significantly, is not used in the *Decameron*. Apuleius uses it as an embedded story entitled "Tale of the Jealous Husband" in book nine, Boiardo as a novella in

²⁴ For Pseudo-Lucian, he seems to have relied on the Italian translation of Niccolo' Leoniceno, who was also at Ercole's court in the 1470s. See ACOCELLA (2001, 17-75).

²⁵ In Boiardo, *Apulegio volgare*, quoted from Acocella (2001, 66). The phrase «senza coda» is an obscene addition to Pseudo-Lucian in both Leoniceno and Boiardo.

²⁶ FUMAGALLI (1988, 137-44).

²⁷ See FUMAGALLI (1988, 150-6); for verbal echoes in *Orlando Innamorato* from Boiardo's translation of the story of Psyche, see pp. 217-345. The first two books of *Orlando Innamorato* were published in 1482-1483; the third was unfinished at Boiardo's death. See BRUSCAGLI (1995, 675f.).

Orlando Innamorato (II 26, 20-52). The plot is the same in both. A lover gains access to a married woman by bribing the slave set to guard her. While he is enjoying her favours, the husband comes home unexpectedly. The lover escapes, but in his haste he leaves behind an article of clothing («in his confusion he forgot to slip on his shoes» 196 in Apuleius; a cloak: «a pie' del letto un manto» II 26, 41 in Boiardo). The husband discovers the clothing, sees that he has been betrayed, and angrily binds the treacherous slave and drags him off («gyved and marched off to the Forum» 197 in Apuleius; to the gallows, «sopra alle forche il debbano impiccare» II 26, 43 in Boiardo). The lover sees them, realizes what has happened, and at once devises a clever ruse. He furiously throws himself at the slave and begins to berate him for stealing his clothing on the previous day («You're the man that stole my shoes yesterday from the Baths» 197 in Apuleius; «Ove e' il mio manto, di' falso strepone, /quale me involasti iersera a l'osteria?» II 26, 47 in Boiardo). The husband is clearly taken in.

But the plot is all that Boiardo has taken from Apuleius. The two tales differ in tone, characterization, and emphasis, but above all in their narrator and position in the larger work.

In Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* the story is narrated to the miller's wife by her elderly procuress in order to arouse in her appetite for a new lover. All the details in this story within a story in *The Golden Ass* point towards the already adulterous miller's wife suggesting that, «every kind of vice had flowed into her heart as if that were a general cesspool of devilry» (Apuleius 193). But the young man the old bawd presents is nothing like the lover in her tale. When the miller comes home unexpectedly, the lover hides ignominiously under a grain trough. He is trembling with fear on being discovered and is finally thrown out after being both sexually and physically humiliated: «he chased him out of the house; and thus did that most gallant of adulterers scamper away in tears [...] bearing a snowy bottom sadly the worse for wear» (Apuleius 202).

Apuleius' story is one of deceit and venality; the "Miller's tale" in which the "Tale of the Jealous Husband" is embedded is equally squalid and ends not only in the mistreatment of the lover but also the murder of the miller by witchcraft. Boiardo takes the embedded story out of this sordid context and brings it into the romantic world of *Orlando Innamorato*. The tale becomes one of true love which culminates in marriage and conversion to Christianity. The frame story is that of lovers Fiordelisa and Brandimarte and the story of the quick-witted lover is related by Doristella, a damsel rescued from an enchanted castle. With his choice of narrator Boiardo turned Apuleius' story inside out. The narrator is no longer unreliable, as in Apuleius, but one of the main actors with whom the reader sympathizes. In Apuleius the wife was the least charming of characters while Boiardo makes her central and lets us empathize with her by seeing everything from her perspective: «ed io tra me dicea: "Tu cerchi invano, / che' pur le corne a mio piacer ti pianto"» (II 26, 41). In Boiardo, the

wife's unfaithfulness and deceit, exemplified in the intertext from *Apulegio volgare* where she feigns sleeping and snoring when the husband Usbego enters the bedroom, «mostrandomi adormita e sonocchiosa» (II 26, 40)²⁸, are justified because Usbego is not a believer in love, «quello amor che lui stimava vano» (II 26, 49). Doristella finally marries her lover Teodoro, who is, as his name suggests, a gift from God, and converts everyone in their Islamic Armenian homeland to Christianity. In *Orlando Innamorato* Boiardo has radically transformed the adultery tale in *The Golden Ass*. Boiardo's story, however, does not lose touch with its Apuleian source. In both *Apulegio volgare* and the intertexts in *Orlando Innamorato* Boiardo does not slavishly imitate but he engages in a dialectical emulation of Apuleius, on the one hand advertising, on the other hand exploiting the variegated spectrum that spans the affective landscapes portrayed.

By the end of the fifteenth century *The Golden Ass* enjoyed a remarkable reception at the court of Ferrara. Within a little over twenty years, from around 1479 to 1500, the novel was translated, imitated, illustrated, versified and dramatized²⁹. Boiardo had inaugurated the process with *Apulegio volgare*; the latter made Apuleius available to a generation of Italian poets and artists.

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²⁸ The sleeping and the snoring are absent from Apuleius, who says nothing about the wife's actions after the husband's return, but both details appear in Boiardo's *Apulegio volgare*. See FUMAGALLI (1988, 150-5).

²⁹ See CHERCHI (2003, 185-284).

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