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The Philosophical Satire of Apuleius' *Cupid and Psyche*: Alignment and
Contradiction in Allusions to Plato and Lucretius

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Abstract

Cupid and Psyche, the expositional myth that interrupts the narrative of Apuleius' novel *Metamorphoses*, has been regarded as Platonic allegory for how the soul falls in love. However, inconsistencies and faults in the Platonic logic of Apuleius' allusions have caused some scholars to question the strict Platonic reading. Additionally, Apuleius' allusions to philosophic beliefs are not limited to the Platonic. His extensive quotations of Lucretius and his *De Rerum Natura* have long been recognized, though they are rarely studied at great length. Looking closely at the allusions to *De Rerum Natura* in *Cupid and Psyche*, I have found a rich coexistence of philosophical alignment and contradiction to Lucretius' Epicureanism. Therefore, considering the existence of allusions that correspond to and contradict both Platonism and Epicureanism and the relationship between those allusions and the rest of the text, I shall demonstrate that the tale of *Cupid and Psyche* is not simply an exposition of Platonic philosophy but rather a philosophic farce. Apuleius draws his readers in with a multitude of references to the canon of Mediterranean literature and then subverts and satirizes those works. His fantastical story—which on the surface seems to be a lofty myth about love and heartbreak, heaven and hell, labors and celebration—becomes a well-crafted joke and a lesson in intellectual humility.

Throughout Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, and in particular during the novel's famous Cupid and Psyche episode, scholars have identified numerous references to philosophical ideas. Taking these philosophical allusions into account, some have read the novel, and the story of Cupid and Psyche in particular, in Platonic terms.¹ The Platonic readings of *Cupid and Psyche* fall into two main categories: those which understand it as an exposition of Platonist philosophy, or those who view it as a story that contains many Platonic allusions but does not aim to advance that specific belief-system. I shall argue that the myth of Cupid and Psyche is best read as what John J. Winkler calls "a philosophical comedy."² Apuleius does not put forward any particular philosophy, but rather embarks on a grand tour of ancient thought. The result is a philosophic farce, with the author jumping freely from idea to idea: he engages in dialogue with differing philosophies, but his writing is not consistent with any single one as it is in some of his other written works.

The conception of this tale as a farce is the most accurate explanation of the philosophic purpose of *Cupid and Psyche* since the author does not advance a coherent Platonic way of thought. Furthermore, Apuleius sprinkles explicit allusions to other philosophers and their beliefs into the story of Cupid and Psyche, namely, Lucretius and his version of Epicureanism as described in *De Rerum Natura*.³ These allusions are verbally aligned: the word choice is similar and conveys Lucretius' meaning. Yet, as is also the case with Platonism, Apuleius does not ultimately outline a reasoned expression of Epicureanism. Several allusions are, when examined to their conceptual conclusion, contradictory to Lucretius' philosophical logic and demonstrate a departure from the Epicurean's understanding of the nature of human interactions. In the philosophical references from *Cupid and Psyche* discussed in this paper, the cycle of alignment and contradiction takes place within each of these allusions.

The scholarship on *Cupid and Psyche* indicates that Apuleius alludes to a number of Plato's and his disciples' ideas, but this does not mean, as some have argued, that this work is primarily a Platonic text.⁴ In fact, the style of this myth and its overall content render it incongruent with and unsuitable for a strict Platonic reading. If this story were a philosophical argument, its placement in a novel would be a strange choice indeed.⁵ Given the fantastical elements of a novel, the serious undertaking of focused philosophical instruction seems out of place. This is not to say that Apuleius did not have a preference for Platonism—he wrote a number of philosophical treatises on the topic—but this story is not the same kind of work as those texts; nor is it to say that the story is not philosophic, only that

¹ My analysis will be based only on the text of the Cupid and Psyche episode and does not take into account the entire novel. However, I believe this would be a good point of future study.

² John J. Winkler, *Auctor & Actor: A Narratological Reading of Apuleius's Golden Ass*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985): 124.

³ For an analysis of decorative and intertextual Lucretian allusions in Apuleius, see Maaik Zimmerman, "Awe and Opposition: the Ambivalent Presence of Lucretius in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*" in *Authors, Authority and Interpreters in the Ancient Novel: Essays in Honor of Gareth L. Schmeling*, Byrne, Shannon N., Edmund P. Cueva, and Jean Alvares, (eds.) (Groningen: Barkhuis and Groningen University Library, 2006): 317–339.

⁴ Some examples are Joseph G. DeFilippo, "Curiositas and the Platonism of Apuleius' *Golden Ass*," *American Journal of Philology* 111.4 (1990): 471–492, E.J. Kenney (ed.), *Apuleius: Cupid and Psyche*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), M. C. O'Brien, *Apuleius' Debt to Plato in the Metamorphoses*, (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2002), Richard Fletcher, *Apuleius' Platonism: The Impression of Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014), Jeffery P. Ulrich "Platonic Reflections in Apuleius" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2016), ProQuest (AAT 10124591).

⁵ See Costas Panayotakis, "Vision and Light in Apuleius' Tale of Psyche and Her Mysterious Husband," *The Classical Quarterly* 51.2 (2001): 577. The genre seems unsuitable for "Platonist propaganda."

it is not a work of philosophy. The placement of the myth within a novel offers Apuleius the opportunity to explore a multitude of literary techniques rather than engage in strict philosophical discourse. At the same time, Apuleius creates space for an unusual kind of philosophical dialogue. Both Lucretius and Plato are quoted extensively, and their ideas are examined by Apuleius; however, many of their beliefs are intentionally contradicted and confused.

Cupid and Psyche contains several noteworthy inconsistencies with Plato's words. Reading this myth as a philosophical allegory does not satisfactorily explain Apuleius' portrayal of Cupid and Venus as Platonically dichotomous characters, as has been argued, nor does it account for the physical beauty of Cupid—ruled an impossibility by Platonism. Looking to Plato's *Symposium*, Penwill argues that Apuleius' Cupid, seen as someone to be desired, resembles the interlocutor Agathon's Eros rather than Socrates'.⁶ Agathon makes a case for Eros' youth and physical beauty, in particular at 196a and following, when he draws attention to the fact that Eros must be beautiful since he scorns "unshapeliness."⁷ Yet Socrates' refutation, as summarized by Penwill, follows a differing path of reasoning: "if Love desires the beautiful and good, then Love cannot *be* beautiful and good, since one only desires what one lacks."⁸ Yet Cupid is certainly portrayed as physically appealing by Apuleius. Penwill points to *Metamorphoses* 5.22–23 in which Cupid's beauty draws Psyche closer to him and leads her to be pierced by one of Cupid's arrows and fall madly in love with him.⁹ This passage is a clear departure from Platonic teaching. Love personified is, in *Cupid and Psyche*, a character defined by his appearance in many ways. Cupid represents an important concept in Platonism—one worth considering in this text—but he is not represented in Platonic terms.

Although Apuleius' descriptions of Cupid, and also Venus, depart from Plato's, other portrayals resonating with Apuleius' can still be found. Kenney argues that Venus and Cupid are best explained as examples of the heavenly and earthly versions of themselves as described in the *Symposium*,¹⁰ but such a view is not a complete conception of these characters. As Penwill notes, "even a rapid browse through Kenney's commentary will show [that] it contains more allusions to epic, drama, elegy and romance than to the dialogues of Plato."¹¹ Though a wide variety of literary sources can be listed for these characters in *Cupid and Psyche*, a diversity in creed is present within these genres, particularly in the philosophic allusions. Not only do Platonic allusions appear—as inconsistent as they may be—but so do allusions to Lucretius' Epicurean poem *De Rerum Natura*. In Apuleius' myth, these philosophies are displayed side-by-side and treated with similar contradiction. As the allusions are read, understood, and then contradicted, Apuleius' audience experiences a humorous and satirical interpretation of a philosophical argument. Both the Epicurean and the Platonist attempt to advance their understandings of the nature of love and human relationships, but neither is consistent.

Indeed, just as the work contains beliefs which reflect Platonic thinking and sections which contradict this philosophy, *Cupid and Psyche* makes several divergent allusions to the works of Lucretius. Cupid and Venus are described as having split personalities in Apuleius'

⁶ L. J. Penwill, "Reflections on a 'Happy Ending': The Case of Cupid and Psyche," *Ramus* 27 (1998): 168. Penwill cites *Symposium* 194e ff. for Agathon's speech and 199c ff. for Socrates' response.

⁷ Plato, *Lysias. Symposium. Gorgias*, W. R. M. Lamb (trans.), (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1925).

⁸ Penwill 1998, 168. Penwill's emphasis.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Kenney 1990, 20. Cited as part of Penwill's argument at 164. Kenney's observations, though valid, are only part of the picture of the portrayal of Venus and Cupid. The presence of Platonic inconsistency and Lucretian allusion (see pp. 3–4) require that this understanding be reexamined.

¹¹ Penwill 1998, 165. He cites examples from Ovid, Seneca, Euripides, and Vergil for Cupid alone.

myth. While it has been argued that their portrayal constitutes a Platonic understanding of these deities,¹² this understanding does not account for the Lucretian elements of Venus in Apuleius' work. Rather than describing Venus in a Platonic context, Apuleius introduces her with an allusion to one of the two kinds of Venuses present in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*. Yet in her opening speech as well as for the remainder of this story, Venus behaves more like the other Lucretian Venus. Lucretius' two Venuses personify two kinds of love: realistic love, which is a destructive force (Book 4), and idyllic love, the kind with which an aspiring Epicurean seeks to replace their reality (the proem in Book 1).¹³ *De Rerum Natura* begins with an almost fifty-line invocation to the latter, *alma Venus* (1.2), which describes the Venus who brings peace, beauty and all good things to the world. Lucretius justifies writing his poem with Venus' aid, addressing her directly: *Quae quoniam rerum naturam sola gubernas, / nec sine te quicquam dias in luminis oras / exoritur neque fit laetum neque amabile quicquam*, "since therefore you alone govern the nature of things, since without you nothing comes forth into the shining borders of light, [and] nothing joyous and lovely is made" (*De Rerum Natura* 21–23).¹⁴ As Venus begins her first speech in the opening chapters of *Cupid and Psyche*, she portrays herself in these same blissful terms: *En rerum naturae prisca parens, en elementorum origo initiales, en orbis totius alma Venus*, "behold the ancient mother of the nature of things! Behold the original source of the elements! Behold Venus, nurturer of the whole world!" (*Metamorphoses*, 30.1).¹⁵ The Lucretian parallels, as noted by many commentators,¹⁶ are unmistakable. This is the Epicurean epithet of Venus, not the Platonic. Yet before the sentence has even ended, Venus returns to reality and begins to scorn Psyche. In the ensuing narrative, Venus conducts herself more like the chilling, painful, strife-educing love which is found in Book 4 of *De Rerum Natura*.¹⁷ Furthermore, at no point does Venus behave like the *alma Venus* she claims to be. The philosophic allusion is thus inconsistent.

Another aspect of Apuleius' work which aligns with Lucretius' is his employment of *consuetudo*,¹⁸ both as a concept and character in the myth of Cupid and Psyche. As in *De Rerum Natura*, Apuleius uses the word *consuetudo* to describe the force which creates the conditions of both good and bad love.¹⁹ The complicated Lucretian understanding of the role

¹² See n.10, above

¹³ Aya Betensky, "Lucretius and Love," *The Classical World* 73.5 (1980): 297. She argues that the second type of love makes marriage sustainable according to Lucretius who thereby combines Epicurean ideals with Roman realities.

¹⁴ Latin and translation from Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, W. H. D. Rouse (trans.) and Martin Ferguson Smith (revised), (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992).

¹⁵ Latin from M. Zimmerman (ed.), *Apulei Metamorphoseon Libri XI*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012). Translations of Apuleius are my own, except where otherwise noted. Her tone, however, may be sarcastic here; see Kenney 1990, 121.

¹⁶ See Penwill 1998, 166 and Kenney 1990, 121. The latter draws attention to *rerum genitalis origo* at 5.176 in *De Rerum Natura*, but also is resistant to reading *elementorum* as an allusion to Lucretius. While I accept that this word may have additional connotations elsewhere in the Latin Corpus, its placement in between two obvious quotations from Lucretius' work necessitates that we consider the meaning of that word in *De Rerum Natura*.

¹⁷ Penwill 1998, 166–167.

¹⁸ *OLD* definitions "(1) A habitual or usual practice etc." and "(5) Familiar intercourse between persons, intimacy[...]" (b) amorous association; sexual intercourse" are the focus here. Often times, it is difficult to discern the difference in the text.

¹⁹ This is the central idea in Paula James, "Kicking the Habit: The Significance of *Consuetudo* in Interpreting the Fable of Cupid and Psyche," *Ramus* 30.2 (2001): 152–168. I follow a similar line of reasoning to hers concerning the Lucretian duality of *consuetudo* and the importance of the appearance of Epicurean thought in *Cupid and Psyche*; however, I will build on these ideas,

of *consuetudo* in sexual relationships stems from this intricate passage which concludes Book 4 of *De Rerum Natura*:

'Nec diuinitus interdum Venerisque sagittis
deteriore fit ut forma muliercula ametur;
nam facit ipsa suis interdum femina factis
morigerisque modis et munde corpore culto
ut facile insuescat te secum degere vitam.
quod superest, consuetudo concinnat amorem;
nam leviter quamuis quod crebro tunditur ictu,
uincitur in longo spatio tamen atque labascit.
nonne vides etiam guttas in saxa cadentis
umoris longo in spatio pertundere saxa?' (4.1278–1287)

"Nor is it due to a god's influence or the arrows of Venus, when, as sometimes happens, a wench of uglier shape is beloved. For a woman sometimes so manages herself by her own conduct, by obliging manners and bodily neatness and cleanliness, that she easily accustoms you to live with her. Moreover, it is habit that breeds love; for that which is frequently struck by a blow, however light, still yields in the long run and is ready to fall. Do you not see that even drops of water falling upon a stone in the long run beat a way through the stone?"²⁰

This passage highlights how repeated action, in time, leads to love according to Lucretian Epicureanism. Whether it is good love or bad in the eyes of the Epicurean,²¹ *consuetudo* is the force which creates it. In the narrative of *Cupid and Psyche*, there are several instances of *consuetudo* creating the positive effects of love. At the beginning of Book 5, after Psyche has lived in Cupid's mystical villa and the god has taken her virginity, Apuleius explains that *haec diutino tempore sic agebantur. Atque, ut est natura redditum, nouitas per adsiduam consuetudinem delectationem ei commendarat*, "these things happened thus for a long time. And so, as it is rendered in nature, the unfamiliarity had made the pleasure agreeable through constant intimacy" (*Metamorphoses* 5.4.6).²² Scholars connect this language to the process described in the passage of *De Rerum Natura* 4.1283,²³ cited above, but they do not consider this section of Apuleius' myth in the total context of that passage from Lucretius. With the exception of Lucretius' gendered language, the situation at 5.4.6 fits well into the entire final

highlighting the significance of Lucretian contradictions. Additionally, citing Kenney 1990, 201, James, 156–157 provides commentary on how Venus' handmaiden *Consuetudo* embodies the process through which Psyche is accustomed to the pains of love. Despite its strong Lucretian resonances, I shall not discuss it further since it has no strong contradictory element to it.

²⁰ See n.14, above.

²¹ Though discourse often assumes that Lucretius sees love with only disdain, this view is inaccurate. Turbulence and movement are forces which can mitigate the ill effects of love described in *De Rerum Natura* 4.1055–1057, see William Fitzgerald, "Lucretius' Cure for Love in 'De Rerum Natura,'" *The Classical World* 78.2 (1984): 77–78. Furthermore, Betensky 1980, 294 highlights the connection between the simile of Venus' dewdrops soothing the first wounds of love at 4.1059–1060 to that of water falling onto rocks cited above.

²² See n.15, above.

²³ See P. G. Walsh, *The Roman Novel: The 'Satyricon' of Petronius and the 'Metamorphoses' of Apuleius*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1970): 212 n.2 as cited in Kenney 1990, 144. James 2001, 159 makes note of this, too.

paragraph of Book 4 of *De Rerum Natura*. At this point in the story, Psyche has not yet been pricked with Cupid's arrow, thus her feelings are, in the Lucretian view, uninfluenced by divine forces (*De Rerum Natura* 4.1278). Then, through long-lasting repeated action, she comes to enjoy the pleasure brought on by her regular interactions with Cupid (4.1282–1285). Yet this Lucretian aspect of Apuleius' *Cupid and Psyche* breaks down when she scrapes herself with Cupid's arrow (*Metamorphoses* 5.23); but that is the point. Having attained the Lucretian ideal, Psyche's love is affected by the exact divine force which Lucretius dismisses at the beginning of the passage. As with Platonism, Apuleius begins by adapting an Epicurean idea into his story, only to subvert it before any consistent interpretation can be made.

The final contradictory reference to Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* in *Cupid and Psyche* concerns the last character whom Apuleius introduces in this story: Voluptas, or Pleasure. She is the culmination of this entire story and has strong Epicurean resonances. In Book 4, Lucretius argues that, in order to escape the pains of realistic love and become a true Epicurean, one must understand how one's pain ensnares oneself. Furthermore, one must attempt to gain *communis voluptas*, "common pleasure" (*De Rerum Natura* 4.1207), between oneself and one's beloved just like animals, the best models for human behavior.²⁴ In the conclusion of the myth (*Metamorphoses* 6.24.4), Cupid and Psyche attain the physical embodiment of the Epicurean goal: "a child whom we call Pleasure (*Voluptas*) was born to them both (*nascitur illis*)."²⁵ This is surprising, as their relationship since 5.23 had been inconsistent with Lucretius' prescriptions for loving well. Not only did Psyche prick herself with one of Cupid's arrows, but she also was unable to see how strongly her love had taken hold of her: *Sic ignara Psyche sponte in Amoris incidit amorem. Tunc magis magisque cupidine flagrans Cupidinis, prona in eum efflictim inhians*, "thus unknowingly, Psyche voluntarily fell in love with Love. Then she burned more and more with desire for Desire, leaning over him, wanting him" (*Metamorphoses* 5.23.3).²⁶ Although Cupid and Psyche reach the ideal outcome of a Lucretian relationship, they never fulfilled the prerequisites. In an Epicurean fallacy, Cupid and Psyche, both of whom have been pricked by "the arrows of Venus," attain idealistic love despite the fact that they have fallen into the traps of realistic love. Apuleius, in his allusions to Lucretius, as in his references to Plato, toys with and ultimately subverts the philosophies of both these authors. Indeed, his philosophy in *Cupid and Psyche* is variable and ever changing.

The myth of Cupid and Psyche has become one of the most famous myths in Greek and Latin literature. Its scenes and plot have continued to be depicted over the years as a happy and romantic celebratory tale, whether in the mannerist frescos of Italian villas, folk-stories, or Disney movies. Comparing these rosy adaptations to Apuleius' myth may be jarring, considering the picture painted by much of the current scholarship on its prominent philosophical elements. But this story is, above all, comedic: Apuleius conveys lofty ideas in a farcical way, placing them in the narration of a drunk woman.²⁷ His employment of alignment and subversion in philosophical allusions support the humorous aspects of *Cupid and Psyche*. Apuleius adopts, adapts, contradicts, and reintroduces many ideas associated with both Platonism and Epicureanism. He mixes many ideas together and meticulously confuses them, and the result is a comic example of mythography. The humorous effect does not minimize the meaning of these beliefs, but instead shines light on the complexity of this

²⁴ Cf. *De Rerum Natura* 4.1192–1207. See Betensky 1980, 293 for further analysis of this reading.

²⁵ See n. 15, above.

²⁶ See n.15, above.

²⁷ Cf. *Metamorphoses* 6.25.1. The fact that the narrator of *Cupid and Psyche* is intoxicated deserves greater study.

myth. Readers may even learn the importance of not taking themselves so seriously all the time. Indeed, Apuleius challenges us to consider the fallacies in our own beliefs—and even his own beliefs—and not to shut our eyes to other possibilities.²⁸

²⁸ My thanks to Professor Sonia Sabnis with whom I had several discussions concerning the ideas in this paper and who helped me edit the drafts.

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