Review: Converting Lucius
Reviewed Work(s): Crisis and Conversion in Apuleius' Metamorphoses by N. Shumate
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CONVERTING LUCIUS

N. SHUMATE: *Crisis and Conversion in Apuleius'* Metamorphoses. Pp. 357. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996. $42.50. ISBN: 0-472-10599-X.

It is now almost generally agreed that Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* is a 'seriocomic' novel, although the extent of its 'seriousness' remains a matter of dispute. Recently, it is the novel's *religious* nature which has gained special attention. In her study on the *Met.*, S. focuses upon the novel's protagonist Lucius, arguing that he undergoes a religious crisis which results in his conversion to the cult of Isis. According to S., the novel reflects the basic pattern of a 'conversion tale', as it is known from famous examples like Augustine's *Confessiones* and Tolstoy's *Confession*, with which she compares Apuleius' novel in detail. The *Met.*, she argues, can be considered the prototype of the genre.

The first chapters elaborate the 'disintegration' of Lucius' understanding of life, as he moves around in a disturbingly unreliable world. Both the certainties concerning the order of the material world (Chapter 1) and the rules governing the social world (Chapter 2) become unsettled. Truth and falsehood, man and animal, life and death, reality and fiction: Lucius can no longer clearly discern between them. When all old values turn out to be false, this results in great confusion. In Books 1–10, S. argues, Lucius increasingly loses his grip on the world and finds himself 'epistemologically adrift'.

The long third chapter (pp. 137–99) compares this sorry state of the human ass to the existential crisis which usually precedes a 'conversion', as it is studied in twentieth-century religious psychology, notably the works of William James (1902), Peter Berger (1967), and Baton and Ventis (1982). S. follows James in his analysis of the account of Tolstoy. Chapters 4 and 5 further describe the basic pattern of crisis and conversion in autobiographic, poetic, and fictional narratives. Augustine's *Confessiones* form the leading example, but Dante's *Divina Commedia* and Sartre's *La nausée* also figure here—an unexpected combination indeed.

Finally (pp. 285–328), S. concentrates upon Lucius' conversion to Isis, again comparing this to the accounts given in the exemplary texts. According to S., the *Met.* is not *exactly* like the later conversion narratives, but the path of its protagonist, leading to religious belief, has much in common with them. As she rightly adds, this does not mean that the text is autobiographical. In fact, S.'s final lines suggest that Apuleius understood 'the pull exercised by the divine', but could not make the leap himself.

This book is a welcome contribution to Apuleian studies, particularly as a sequel to Jack Winkler's famous *Auctor & Actor* (1985). Winkler had presented the *Met.* as an 'aporetic' novel, with Apuleius authorizing no single approach or interpretation but

leaving this to the reader. While not contesting Winkler's postmodern considerations, S. consciously shifts attention from the dubious intentions of the *auctor* to what happens *within* the tale to its main *actor*. By starting where Winkler had ended, S. takes a happy step forward. She rightly calls attention to the religious significance of the tale and to the cognitive rather than 'moral' confusion of Lucius, and convincingly asserts the functional equivalence of a pagan conversion to a Christian one: belief in Isis can count as genuine religion.

Unhappily, S.'s approach involves some serious problems. For instance, by what right can the *Met.* be compared to texts and studies which are so different in time and genre? Ultimately, S. has to rely on something like a 'universal' pattern of conversion, valid for all ages and circumstances. Of course, she hastens to distance herself from this un-modern and, dare I say it, dangerous concept, but there is really no way to get around it.

Moreover, one cannot help wondering whether what Lucius experiences in the course of Books 1–10 is a process of crisis in the first place. There does not seem to be any *progress* in it: Lucius' confusion is great already on the very first pages of the novel, as S. herself explains, and this sense hardly deepens or gradually intensifies. The external events and motifs continuously change, more than their psychological impact.

It is also doubtful whether we may ascribe to Lucius anything like an '*unconscious* longing for the divine'. Granted he is characterized as *curiosus* and constantly looks for 'novelty', but that does not imply he is a *god*-seeker. Let us suppose that Book 11 were lost: would anyone in that case regard the *Met.* as a religious tale of conversion? Or does any reader of Petronius' *Satyrica*, with all its wanderings and confusion, assume a similar model there? It seems as if S. tacitly *starts* from Lucius' sudden conversion in Book 11 and proceeds to detect a specific pattern leading up to it, *because* this is how things are with Tolstoy and Augustine.

With such fundamental questions remaining, the study cannot be said to be fully convincing. Nonetheless, it provides some stimulating reading, if only by claiming yet another layer of meaning to the already many-sided masterpiece of Apuleius. It also contains many fresh ideas. Particularly sympathetic, for instance, is S.'s approach of the sexual scenes, which do not seem to imply strong moral condemnation. The copulation scene of the ass with a Corinthian lady at 10.21 is even seen as a climax of humanity rather than an all-time low. Such ideas will surely keep discussions on Apuleius' novel alive.

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