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THE VIRTUE OF EROTIC CURIOSITY

Abstract. Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* presents curiosity as the protagonist's downfall, yet ultimately recodes curiosity as the single virtue through which the human soul achieves not only immortality but joy. I identify Apuleius's treatment of curiosity as falling into the categories of erotic and nonerotic. The union of Eros and the curious human soul suggests that one who is erotically curious can take pleasure in her devotion to one, precisely because she has eyes for the beauty of many.

I begin, as many other commentators on the role of *curiositas* in the *Metamorphoses* (*The Golden Ass*) of Apuleius¹ do, by noting the wealth of scholarship on this topic. Although many angles have been taken on the specific nature of curiosity in *The Golden Ass*, it is nearly always marked as the tragic downfall of the novel's narrator/protagonist, Lucius.² Most readings point to Lucius's unbridled curiosity about dark magic, idle gossip, and tales that are grotesque, profane, and pornographic as the attribute that literally makes an ass out of him. I enter this conversation, however, in defense of what I see as curiosity's divine status. Apuleius's text belongs to a Platonic tradition that tends to be critical of curiosity.³ However, *The Golden Ass*'s Platonic framing of curiosity can be understood as doing what a good piece of satire does: reiterating the traditional values of its age in a way that disorients the reader toward what is familiar and accepted. Apuleius's comic representation of curiosity as the protagonist's downfall ultimately recodes curiosity as the single virtue that wins the soul, not only immortality but perhaps more important, joy.

Some scholars of Apuleius, willing to admit a kind of productive curiosity, organize the numerous counts of curiosity in *The Golden Ass* into the categories of good/healthy, on one side, and bad/unhealthy, on the other.⁴ “Good curiosity,” as they see it, belongs to an individual who hungers for the knowledge of true and divine objects of contemplation; “bad curiosity” belongs to those who fixate on anything that might distract them from the one, true object of the soul (Truth, The Good, God). Fewer scholars make room for a third category: “okay curiosity.”⁵ “Okay curiosity” is the ability to be distracted by frivolous but harmless things that take our minds off our earthly existence when it becomes unbearable.⁶ Yet even this relatively harmless variety of curiosity is seen as threatening in its potential to distract an individual from divine things. *Curiositas* in its connection to *cura* is defined as attention or care. These readings evaluate curiosity based on the quality of the object of care rather than the quality of care itself.

The Golden Ass is best known for its myth of the marriage between Psyche—defined by her curiosity—and Cupid. Cupid’s Greek name refers us to Plato’s characterization of Eros, the demigod born of resourcefulness and lack, and *eros* as a transformative process. Following Diotima’s metaphor of the ladder, this transformation begins when an individual encounters her own lack by encountering what she is not in the body of another.⁷ One’s desire for this other grows into the desire for many others, leading her to the form of Love (Beauty, Truth, The Good) itself. Eros leads us from one to many to One. The transformation may be judged by the quality of the objects of desire, as an individual shifts her attention to “higher” objects of contemplation. However, the agent of transformation may also be understood as the repeated encounter with a perpetual lack that sustains erotic desire by preventing its fulfilment.

I also read *The Golden Ass* as an exploration of two kinds of curiosity. However, instead of categorizing curiosity as good or bad, according to the object of the subject’s attention, I analyze

the quality of curiosity's care through the categories of erotic and nonerotic. Eros is a process through which the curious soul undergoes transformation. However Eros is also a partner in this transformation. When Eros and the curious soul come together, the transformation is mutual. The following exploration seeks to grasp both curiosity and eros in union.

While we may speak of nonerotic curiosity, we may also speak noncurious eros. Both forces are impotent without the other. Without the drive and discretion of eros, curiosity cannot sustain itself. As we see through the character of Psyche, nonerotic curiosity quickly turns into its opposite: indifference and boredom, which collapses into despair. Nonerotic curiosity flickers in and out of existence and is only truly born when it is seized by erotic desire. However, of equal concern is erotic desire that lacks curiosity's talent for seeing beauty in many contrasting bodies, activities, customs, and ideas.

The virtue of curiosity is in its care for all sorts of objects—from the trivial, fabricated, and deviant to the noble and true. Curiosity begins with eros. However, eros comes to an end without curiosity. Eros can only reach the end of its journey by transcending curiosity, whose promiscuity hinders an individual's attention toward One. Noncurious eros may have the judgment to pursue an object most worthy of affection. Yet without curiosity its devotion to this one alone becomes joyless and dogmatic. Incurious eros becomes desensitized to the thrill of the new. Eros initiates a transformation, while curiosity perpetually sustains the transformation by frustrating the process of transcendence. Curiosity assures that eros never fully reaches its final destination of bringing an erotic journey to an end. As we learn through the conclusion of *The Golden Ass*, one can be erotically initiated into the mysteries of divine things and still lack joy. The union of eros and curiosity in *The Golden Ass* reveals that one who is erotically curious takes joyous pleasure (*voluptas*) in her devotion to one, precisely because she has eyes and ears for the beauty of many.

I

Apuleius's position on curiosity in *The Golden Ass* lends itself to debate especially because the novel's narrator/protagonist, Lucius, holds contrasting views at different points in the narrative. Up until his religious conversion in the final, eleventh book of the novel, Lucius proudly declares himself to be one who is curious about everything [*curiosus alioquin*] (*Met*, 2.6). At the beginning of the narrative, Lucius most resembles the author, who defended his own curiosity for all things even before a court of law. Apuleius openly took up many diverse positions and participated in many kinds activities. In the *Apology*, Apuleius does not deny the charge of seducing his friend's widowed mother by means of dark magic.⁸ Instead, he defends his commitment to nothing in particular by confessing his openness to everything: as he tells his accusers that he had not only dabbled in magic but also studied zoology and forbidden religious doctrines, and practiced medicine.⁹

Readers of *The Golden Ass* are initially encouraged to become curious pleasure-seekers like the narrator (and author) who beckons the reader to follow him along a string of extraordinary tales, ranging from romantic and silly to sexually graphic and grotesque. A reader who lacks a hearty appetite for curious matters has little motivation to commit herself to an ass's episodic tales about magical transformations, adulterous scandal, and sensational goddesses and witches. *The Golden Ass* has a bit of something for every kind of reader, but is ideal for someone who takes pleasure in a little bit of everything.

The debate over the value of curiosity is brought up immediately in the prologue, in which the narrator, on his way to Thessaly, eavesdrops on two travelers. Lucius recounts, "I saw two men trudging along together a short distance ahead of me, deep in conversation. I walked a little faster,

curious to know what they were talking about, and just as I drew abreast one of them burst into a loud laugh and said to the other: ‘Stop, stop! Not another word! I can’t bear to hear any more of your absurd and monstrous lies’” (*Met*, 1.2; *GA*, p. 3). The traveler’s protest against what he takes to be his friend’s outrageous story spikes Lucius’s curiosity. He interrupts the conversation, begging the first traveler to tell his story from the beginning. Lucius promises not only to take pleasure in the tale but also to believe every word of it, no matter how ridiculous it may seem.

In *Autor and Actor: A Narratological Reading of Apuleius’s “The Golden Ass,”* John Winkler reads the debate between the protesting traveler and Lucius as caricatures of the cynic and skeptic. Extending upon Winkler’s interpretation, I have argued elsewhere that position of the protesting traveler may represent various philosophical modes of resistance employed to shut down a stranger’s strange tale.¹⁰ The cynic says “stop,” dismissing the strangeness of the new as pretentious or absurd. The stoic, in contrast, may say “stop,” dismissing the encounter as a potential waste of his time. The epicurean might say “stop” based on his speculation that the complications of the other are likely to bring more headache than pleasure.

Ironically, the skeptic, who is marked by her refusal to assent to anything absolutely, is the most likely to say “go on” to this other (at least for the sake of experimentation). Her refusal to commit to anything in particular allows her to be open to the equal consideration of everything that happens to come her way. In Winkler’s view, the debate between the two travelers who meet along the road encourages the reader to embrace the forthcoming series of stories, which will surely strike the reader as fantastical and obscene:

The cynic’s command to stop the story is the author’s way of inviting our attention to it.

The same sentence thus has two meanings, both of which we immediately understand together: in relation to the character (actor) who speaks it, it is an injunction to stop; in

relation to the author (auctor) of the novel it is an invitation to continue and a promise of excitement. Oddly enough, this is a case where “stop” is clearly understood to mean “go”—even “go with interest and attention.” The cynic’s injunction does not prevent the beginning of the story, it underlines it. (*AA*, p. 28)

Lucius’s eagerness to hear the storyteller’s tale precisely because it has been forbidden lures the reader into indulging in Apuleius’s novel even when the ideals presented in it are contrary to the traditional values of its age. Apuleius invites his readers to go precisely where his contemporaries advise their readers not to go.

Of course more cautious readers are not naturally drawn to that which is forbidden. If Lucius’s own curiosity for that which others declare off limits is not enough to entice the reader to follow suit, Apuleius offers two direct appeals for curiosity. For readers who, like the protesting traveler, are not curious about nearly everything but would rather reserve their attention for believable narratives, Lucius has an epistemological argument: Our world is curious indeed; we would be foolish to dismiss another’s account of it simply because it is contrary to our own experience. ““Stupid people,”” he tells the protesting traveler, ““always dismiss as untrue anything that happens only very seldom, or anything that their minds cannot readily grasp; yet when these things are carefully inquired after they are often found not only possible but probable”” (*Met*, 1.3; *GA*, p. 4). Curiosity, Lucius argues, is the virtue that prompts us to give weight to the standpoint of another who experiences the world quite differently than we do. His second defense of curiosity appeals to the palliative quality of engaging narratives that are most likely not true. Even if another’s account of his experience is entirely delusional, imaginative falsehoods can be good distractions for our uphill journeys (*Met*, 1.3).

The reader is taught in the prologue through Lucius's response to the protesting traveler that in the world of *The Golden Ass*, "stop" means "go." This initial instruction complicates the interpretation of Lucius's later command for the reader to restrain her curiosity toward matters alluded to at the end of the novel. The two travelers' debate about curiosity is reproduced in the overarching structure of the narrative through the contrasting positions of preconversion Lucius of the first ten books of *The Golden Ass* and postconversion Lucius of book 11. Apuleius initially encourages the reader to participate in Lucius's misadventures that result from his desire to know a little bit about a lot of things, especially that which is forbidden. Before his conversion, Lucius does not deny the reader a single intimate detail of his trials or conquests. Postconversion Lucius discourages the reader from following him any further. Following his conversion, he becomes guarded concerning his secret initiation into the priesthood of the goddess Isis, warning against the rash curiosity [*termeraria curiositas*] that would cause the reader to speculate about the details of the rites of Isis (*Met*, 11.23).

The change in the narrator's relationship toward the reader occurs with the jolting dogmatic turn that concludes the otherwise provocative novel. Many readers of *The Golden Ass* assume that the view of postconversion Lucius is Apuleius's own. James Tatum, for one, argues that *The Golden Ass* beckons the reader to follow Lucius down a path of destruction brought upon him by his unhealthy curiosity. By leading the reader astray, Apuleius allows the readers to experience a moment of redemption alongside Lucius (*AGA*, pp. 88–89). In Tatum's view, the overarching moral of the comedy is voiced by the high priest.¹¹ When Lucius, by the grace of Isis, is returned to his human form, the high priest reprimands him for his characteristic curiosity: "Neither your noble blood and rank nor your education sufficed to keep you from falling a slave to pleasure; youthful follies ran away with you. Your luckless curiosity [*curiositas inprospera*] earned you a

sinister punishment” (*Met*, 11.15; *GA*, p. 272). According to Tatum’s reading, Apuleius makes an ass out of his reader over the course of his novel in order to prepare the reader for a valuable teaching moment at the conclusion.

Does Apuleius trick us into taking pleasure in depravity in order to chastise us from a position of moral high ground? Even if we do take the high priest’s condemnation of curiosity as the moral of the story, remember that Apuleius is the one who directed our gaze to unseemly things that we probably would not have lingered over otherwise. A notable example of this is the sex scene in the stable between the Corinthian *matrona* and the ass. The sex scene is not only one of the most graphic descriptions in the novel but also a surprisingly tender one. Although Apuleius’s detailed account of bestiality may make some readers squeamish, he redeems the scene by emphasizing the mutual desire of the matron and ass. The ass is concerned with the well-being of the matron and her pleasure is underlined (*Met*, 10.20, 10:23). Unlike many of Apuleius’s female characters who are exceptionally corrupt, the matron is described as noble and respectable. The ass recognizes her and their private moment together as morally superior to the criminal with whom he is later paired for sex in a public arena. The threat of such shame terrifies him. The ass is not without his own set of moral principles.

Apuleius not only invites the reader to peer at forbidden deeds. He frames taboos in such a way that the reader can accept (on some level) what traditionally would be considered grotesque and take pleasure in such accounts without embarrassment. Pleasure here is without shame, not because the reader is necessarily shameless due to her overly active curiosity; instead, Apuleius redeems some of his most questionable characters and the deeds they commit by showing that they too are guided by a certain set of values. Even if these values may differ from the prevailing norms

of our world, the alternative value systems that govern Apuleius's world appear reasonable within their own context.

The Golden Ass functions like a Shakespearean comedy in which magic and mischief serve as an excuse for the spectator to explore her own nonnormative desires. When morning comes, everything is returned to its rightful form.¹² The dogmatic or moralistic reader may take comfort in knowing that order is restored, while the skeptic may allow her thoughts to linger over the former night's strangely realistic dreamlike entanglements. The humor of *The Golden Ass* is not in the undoing of ethical order belonging to a world temporarily possessed by chaos. The humor is instead in the fact that the actions of the characters that appear outrageous from one standpoint are not without an ethical framework of their own. One who is too quick to reduce the many curious worlds encountered in *The Golden Ass* to a single overarching moral framework risks coming across as a righteous ass, resembling the donkey who is repulsed by the deviant sexual affairs of the eunuch priests but is not opposed to mounting both mares and matrons.

II

A curious reader gives equal weight—at least for the length of a good story—to the conflicting logics of overlapping ontological and ethical positions. Curiosity allows us to laugh at the one-sidedness of each position, which turns both the absoluteness of the other and of itself into a joke. But Apuleius also illustrates the danger of an individual whose curiosity for all things makes her serious commitment to anything impossible. Relativism that judges all things to be of equal value can paralyze an agent. We see this especially in the character of Psyche in the fable told by the old woman to the distressed captive girl in the bandit's cave (*GA*, books 7–9). The crisis of

equipollence may incite paralysis and despair. However, the union of eros and curiosity converts crisis into an experience that is both transformative and joyous.

Psyche's metamorphosis is typically read as paralleling that of Lucius, with curiosity being marked as their mutual downfall. As I read it, in contrast, Psyche's flaws are not due to her uncontrollable curiosity, which Cupid later tames. She suffers instead because she initially is not curious enough about anything in particular until she is united with Cupid. I identify this flickering nature of curiosity as its nonerotic side. This curiosity sees novelty in all things because it does not dwell on any single thing long enough to become familiar with it.¹³ The curious individual remains naïve because although she is fascinated with the world around her, she never seeks to know the nature of any particular aspect of it. For this reason, the thrill of novelty constantly refreshes itself even when the curious person's environment does not change.

Psyche's curiosity falls on all things equally and thus shallowly. Psyche, who is admired by all but pursued by none, longs for someone to love her. Her desire is not for someone in particular but rather for anyone. And she is delighted when someone—who could be anyone (the beautiful, winged son of Venus; a monstrous snake)—finally does. Before she is tricked by her sisters, she takes as much interest in her husband's concealed identity as in the gemmed floors of his castle. She is content to fancy him as a hunter with a little beard on one occasion and as a middle-aged merchant on another. And yes, thanks to her rash curiosity [*termeraria curiositas*], she fails Venus's final test when she peeks into Persephone's forbidden jar (*Met*, 6.20). But she does so not out of a burning desire for the unknown but because, well, why not?

Without drive and discretion, the dark horse and white horse of the erotic soul, the curious soul quickly falls into despair when met with the trials inflicted by the goddess of love.¹⁴ The nonerotic curious individual does not fail to see solutions to challenges that oppose her. Rather,

the curious soul sees too many possibilities and is immobilized by the inability to choose one over another. Psyche tries to kill herself twice, but when the kind wind and tower come in the way of her fall, she quickly gives up on suicide, which itself proves more challenging than simply moving on. Because Psyche experiences the world primarily through curiosity, she is overwhelmed by many bodies and ideas, but lacks the motivation that comes with being possessed by something in particular. The soul's ascent is stunted at the middle rung of Diotima's ladder—the recognition of beauty in many—because she has never experienced the first step: the recognition of beauty in *this* one (*Symp*, 210A–211C).

The story of Psyche and Cupid is read by Tatum and others as a story of the human soul's fall and redemption through divine grace (*AGA*, pp. 56–62). As Tatum reads it, *curiositas* and *tolma* (pride) damn Psyche to eternal death. However, the divine demigod intercedes on her behalf to his father, the god of gods, and the human soul is undeservedly made immortal. What this reading misses, however, is the fact that the union of Cupid (or, the Greek equivalent, Eros) with the excessively curious human soul is not only a story about the metamorphosis of Psyche. When read along the lines of *The Golden Ass*'s motif of *libido mutual*,¹⁵ the character of Cupid also undergoes a dramatic transformation when possessed by mortal curiosity. The relationship between Cupid and Psyche may be asymmetrical even in the reciprocal transformation that results from their union. Yet Apuleius suggests that no pleasure can be had in divine truth or love without the curiosity that is characteristic of human life.

In contrast to Psyche's satisfaction with anybody, Cupid falls in love with Psyche in particular. In fact, before catching sight of her specific beauty, Cupid could not be deeply affected by anyone. Cupid, as his various family members confirm in the fable, dominated everyone around him, causing others misery with his mischief. His relationship with Psyche, whom he tricks into

marrying him, is initially asymmetrical. He sees her, but hides himself so that she can't ever see him. She is completely dependent on her invisible lover, who has isolated her from her family and the rest of the human world. Although Psyche looks forward to her husband's nightly visits, Apuleius does not use the word *voluptas* (pleasure, delight) to describe the couple's first nights together. Also worth noting is that, in the examples of sexual intimacy where he does use *voluptas* (as in the ass's romance with Photis and the matron), the female partner is the one who takes the initiative, and the desire is specifically underlined as mutual (*libido mutua*) (*Met*, 3.20, 10.23). If the human soul is immobilized by its own curious nature, it is further immobilized by the dominance of another's desire that stifles the possibility of joyous pleasure in the relationship.

Cupid's repeated warnings to Psyche about not giving in to her unholy curiosity (*sacrilega curiositas*) (*Met*, 5.6) are often read as Cupid's loving attempts to protect his naïve wife. Psyche's "disobedience" is likewise read as the human soul's downfall. Carl Schlam, for one, identifies Psyche's act to uncover Cupid's identity as representing an assault on the divine, an illicit revelation of divinely concealed truth (*MA*, pp. 50–51). Despite Cupid's attempt to suppress Psyche's most defining trait (her only notable characteristic other than her beauty), Psyche's curiosity persists.

Her curiosity does not ruin the couple as Cupid promised it would. It does, however, get the better of him. The curious soul is the first and only one to expose Cupid. When Psyche shines the lantern on her sleeping husband, revealing his concealed identity, the joke is on him. Psyche's deliberate choice to act on her curiosity results in two major consequences: first, Psyche, at the sight of Cupid's beauty, is erotically possessed by overwhelming desire for this individual uniquely; second, Eros (desire) is made vulnerable. Cupid realizes that because the one he loves has eyes and ears for others, she is capable of acting against his will if another proves more

appealing. In this case, Psyche's desire for knowledge overpowers Cupid's desire for concealment. Cupid is pricked by his own arrow. Desire folds on itself in a curious manner that inflicts both lovers with pain but also introduces the possibility of a deeper kind of sustained pleasure.

The injured Cupid, who suffers more from wounded pride than from the bit of hot wax that spills from Psyche's lantern, flies off to sulk in his room at his mother's house. In so doing, he fulfills his own prophecy that Psyche's curiosity would result in their separation. The human soul's "assault" on the divine, if it can be called that, is the condition for Psyche and Cupid's mutual transformation. As a result of Psyche's decision to act on her curiosity, the lovers are momentarily separated, but this erotic division initiates a metamorphosis in each. From one perspective, Psyche's character does not undergo any detectable transformation. She remains naïve and helpless and certainly does not absorb the supposed lesson of the fable: curiosity about forbidden things results in the human soul's separation from the divine. The human soul cannot shed its curiosity. However, the character of this curiosity changes when the soul, which finds value in many things, is nevertheless erotically seized by the beauty of one in particular.

At the end of the fable, Zeus chooses to give the curious human soul divine status so that Cupid can also complete his transformation, which begins when Psyche's realized autonomy makes him vulnerable. Zeus recognizes that the presence of the curious human soul will change Cupid so that he will no longer be miserable and inflict misery on others. As the little bird tells Venus, when the two lovers are separated, love is absent and the world is without pleasure, grace, and charm (*non voluptas ulla, non gratia, non lepos*) (*Met*, 5.28). Pleasure is repressed when human curiosity is dominated by the divine. The birth of pleasure occurs when eros and curiosity are united in a way that is mutually transformative.

III

Although the stories that make up *The Golden Ass* explore all varieties of worldly and supernatural pleasures and delights, Apuleius identifies the union of Cupid and Psyche as giving birth to the purest form of joy. In an exploration of Apuleius's use of the terms *curiositas* and *voluptas*, Judith K. Krabbe points out that despite the many instances of the term *voluptas* in *The Golden Ass* and its privileged position in book 6, pleasure is not mentioned in the first or final books (*AM*, pp. 348–57). This leads the reader to question the conflicting positions of the narrator at the beginning and end of *The Golden Ass*. Lucius of book 1 is eager to know a little something about everything, but is uninterested in taking anything in particular very seriously. Lucius of book 10, in his resolute devotion to what he identifies as divine truth, denies himself anything that appears frivolous in light of his commitment to Isis and Osiris. In the former, we are given an example of curiosity without erotic desire and in the latter, eros without curiosity. The two versions of Lucius serve as opposite poles, but both sides—precisely because they are one-sided—are without the sort of pleasure that is given divine status in book 6, where the two ends meet in the middle.

Apuleius's second-century *Metamorphoses* has many similarities to the framework of Augustine's fourth-century *Confessions*, as Nancy Shumate and others have explored.¹⁶ Both conversion narratives emerge out of the development of Platonism in Roman Africa. Both narrators recall the “misplaced” curiosity of their younger selves, who recklessly partake in the messy delights of a little bit of everything the world has to offer. Both narrators move from venture to venture until, after reaching a particularly low point in their journeys, they are called up to a lifelong religious vocation. At the climax of each novel, the protagonist discovers “the light” and dramatically turns from his love of the many to his love of the One. Despite these similarities, the

attitude of the narrator of Apuleius's conversion story and that of Augustine's narrative are importantly different. Augustine's conversion narrative takes the form of a confession, whereas Apuleius's narrative takes the form of a comedy. Augustine weeps over lingering remnants of his past life that do not fully die in his conversion; Apuleius's narrator laughs over his own experience of self-contradiction. What is experienced as a crisis for the dogmatist is the pleasure of the skeptic.

Returning to Winkler's skeptical framing of *The Golden Ass*, I note that Apuleius and Augustine both offer stories explicitly about the conversion of the skeptic into the dogmatist. But the overall structure of narratives may nevertheless be read skeptically. A conversion narrative—a story of two incompatible ways of being—is most often told from the perspective of one side of the turning point (nearly always the new self at the end of journey). The skeptic's story of conversion, however, is comic in the way it tells its narrative from the perspective of the splice between two ontological orientations that persist within the experience of a single subject.

The values that Augustine holds as a Christian bishop dominate the narration of the events that took place before his conversion. His postconversion self hovers over his preconversion self as he laments what he wishes he had known earlier. In this way, the narrator recalls his journey while self-consciously distancing himself from his former actions that are out of line with his current commitments. Mirroring the relationship between Cupid and Psyche, Augustine's older self attempts to suppress the curious appetite of his younger self, but is not always successful.

This failure is thematic in Augustine's early *Soliloquies*, an inner dialogue between Augustine's rational and irrational sides that discusses the tension between his preconversion and postconversion selves.¹⁷ The dialogue expresses the desire for unity told from the perspective of a fractured subject. Augustine repeatedly professes fidelity to his new object of devotion in an effort to convince himself rather than his God of his singular devotion to one: "Now I only love you, I

follow only you, I seek for only you!” (*Sol*, 1.5). Although Augustine insists that he has entirely abandoned his former way of being, his lingering desire for his first loves (his longing for a wife, for example) puncture his current convictions. In the middle of trying to convince himself of his singular devotion to one, he drifts off to sleep. His dreams about the companionship of a woman betray him (1.11.18). Augustine is split once again between his wakeful declarations and his unconscious fantasies, and his rational voice is quick to catch him in his inconsistencies. He pushes himself on the issue of his divided desire until the dogmatic side of himself—the side that yearns for fidelity, unity, truth—cracks: “Silence, I beg you, silence! Why do you cause me so much trouble; why do you so drastically challenge me? Now I weep uncontrollably!” (1.14.25–26).

In contrast to Augustine, who painfully revisits the events of his youth through the lens of his current failed commitments, Lucius delights in retelling old events as if he is experiencing the thrill of each old flame for the first time. He seems to take genuine pleasure in recalling his life before his conversion and does not spare the reader a single seductive detail of his “folly.” He admits he is grateful for his curious nature that made an ass out of him (*Met*, 9.15). While Augustine expresses gratitude for the detours of his youth because he sees them as leading him to his realization of divine truth, Lucius finds his youthful adventures valuable, or at least entertaining, for their own sake.

Although Lucius as the protagonist of *The Golden Ass* is divided between his curious persona in the introduction and his erotically devout persona of the conclusion, his nonjudgmental tone as the narrator of events experienced by “both selves” brings unity to a life split by radical division. Eros and curiosity are brought together in the narrator who takes pleasure in all of his experience, while remaining committed to a specific set of principles that deny legitimate value to his former lifestyle. *The Golden Ass* highlights the shared structure of conversion narratives and

comedy, which both attempt to grapple with conflicting objects of desire, ethical frameworks, and ontological orientations held by one individual both over a lifetime and within a single moment.

IV

The Golden Ass follows Lucius's many transformations, concluding with a conversion experience that transforms his lust for the many to devotion to One. The narrative is also about the transformation of curiosity itself, which is not overcome through conversion but intensified with an erotic charge. The highest moment of transformation might seem to come at the end of the narrative when Lucius enters the religious order of Isis. Yet the narrative may also be read from the perspective of the middle, the turning point between two personas. From this perspective eros is a transformative process that can only take place from the middle. I employ the dualistic categories of erotic and nonerotic to describe "the moment" when the curious soul itself is seized by a transformative process that is ongoing.

The perspective of the middle is already present in the beginning of the narrative. The debate in the prologue between the travelers represents two possible parallel but contradictory readings of the text. The first reading follows a *telos* that arrives at truth found only at the end of the journey, whereas the second skeptical reading treats all appearances with equal interest. The narrative is split vertically by the conversion experience in the middle of the text and horizontally by the parallel frameworks. "The moment" of the splitting of the narrative/narrator is present in every moment on multiple registers. Conversion is not a turning point but the repeated encounter with a split or crack. Eros is the perpetual crisis of being split (between one and many, or one and not one). Curiosity allows this perpetual transformation to be experienced with pleasure.

Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* suggests that erotic curiosity is the virtue through which one can approach contradiction with an attitude of generosity and grace. Even when one is unable to achieve unity, which perhaps no honest person can, one can find pleasure in many opposing beauties.

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¹ Apuleius, *The Transformations of Lucius, Otherwise Known as the Golden Ass*, trans. Robert Graves (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979); *Apuleius Metamorphoseon Libri XI*. ed. Rudolph Helm (Leipzig, 1931). hereafter abbreviated *GA* and *Met* (Latin) and cited by book and chapter.

² A notable exception to the critical reading of curiosity in *The Golden Ass* can be found in John J. Winkler, *Auctor and Actor: A Narratological Reading of Apuleius's "Golden Ass"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

³ On the role of curiosity in Platonic philosophy and its influence on Apuleius, see Joseph G. DeFilippo, "Curiositas and the Platonism of Apuleius' *Golden Ass*," *American Journal of Philology* 111, no. 4 (Winter 1990): 471–92. See also P. G. Walsh, "The Rights and Wrongs of Curiosity (Plutarch to Augustine)," *Greece and Rome* 35, no 1 (April 1988): 73–85.

⁴ See James Tatum, *Apuleius and "The Golden Ass"* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979); hereafter abbreviated *AGA*. See also Carl C. Schlam, *The Metamorphoses of Apuleius: On Making an Ass of Oneself* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 1992); hereafter abbreviated *MA*.

⁵ See, for example, Nancy Shumate, *Crisis and Conversion in Apuleius's Metamorphoses* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); hereafter abbreviated *CC*.

⁶ Apuleius presents curiosity as a distraction from crises on a number of occasions: *Met*, 1.3 (distraction for an uphill journey), 8.17 (the dog attack as a distraction), 9.12 (the ass's pleasure in gossip while working the mill), 9.15 (curious things offering solace), 10.23 (the arena performance as a distraction in times of trouble).

⁷ Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989), 210A–211C; hereafter abbreviated *Symp* and cited by Stephanus number.

⁸ Apuleius, *Apologia. Floria. De Deo Socratis*, trans. Christopher P. Jones, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

⁹ The defense evades guilt by confessing to more, running along the lines of: “Well, yes, it’s true that I slept with your wife, but I also slept with your daughter and sister.”

¹⁰ I find Winkler’s analysis of the prologue compelling and have revisited this passage in several different contexts. The first is a short essay where I first touched upon themes extended on this article: Rachel Aumiller, “*Epoché* as the Erotic Conversion of One into Two,” *Yearbook for the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies* 2 (2017): 3–13.

The second is an introduction in which I explore the urge to stop and go as a single moment of skeptical crisis: Rachel Aumiller, ed., *A Touch of Doubt: On Haptic Scepticism* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020).

¹¹ Attempts to identify the moral of a comedy strike me as funny (which is to say narratives that aim to teach a lesson are seldom very funny). As Hegel argues, ancient comedy and skepticism both emerge from a historical stage structured by social and political contradictions that make it impossible to cling to an ethical maxim as absolute. Both genres draw attention to a paradox or contradiction, disrupting the supposed unity of a single identity, position, or framework. I find the humor of the *Golden Ass* in the absurdity of contradictory positions that nevertheless coexist. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), §746, 747.

¹² Another tale of the transformation of an ass: William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹³ A similar characterization of curiosity can be found in Heidegger who, drawing on Augustine, defines curiosity as the disposition of one who is vaguely interested in all things. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 164–167; Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Garry Wills (New York: Penguin, 2006), 10.34.51; hereafter abbreviated *Conf.* cited by book, chapter, line. I DON’T SEE THIS IN THE TEXT, SO WILL DELETE [okay]

¹⁴ Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995), 245C–249D.

¹⁵ For a detailed account of the six instances of the *libido mutua* and its association with *voluptas* in *The Golden Ass* see Judith K. Krabbe, *Lusus Iste: Apuleius’s Metamorphoses*. (New York: University Press of America, 2003), pp. 352–53. hereafter abbreviated *AM*.

¹⁶ See Shumate, *CC*, especially pp. 243–249, which explores the role of curiosity in autobiographical representation.

¹⁷ These translations are my own. For a full translation see Augustine, *Soliloquies: Augustine’s Inner Dialogue*, trans. Kim Paffenroth (New York: New City Press, 2008); *Soliloquiorum libri duo*. (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2010). hereafter abbreviated *Sol.* and cited by book, chapter, and line.