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# Bryn Mawr Classical Review

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**Keith Bradley, *Apuleius and Antonine Rome: Historical Essays*.  
*Phoenix supplementary volumes, 50*. Toronto: University of  
Toronto Press, 2012. Pp. xvi, 397. ISBN 9781442644205. \$75.00.**

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## [Preview](#)

Books on Apuleius commonly focus on the *Metamorphoses* and mostly deal with literary and philological issues. The ancient historian Keith Bradley has now collected a volume of twelve essays on Apuleius that is different on both accounts: the author's main interest is clearly and primarily historical, and Apuleius' rhetorical works, notably the *Apology* and the *Florida*, are given hardly less attention than the novel.

Bradley's main assumption is that Apuleius' works, like all literary works, may be considered as historical documents that can be used to study the world of their time, in this case the age of the Roman emperors Antonius Pius and Marcus Aurelius. Accordingly, various historical aspects are highlighted on the basis of Apuleius' texts, such as magic, slave trade, *Romanitas*, religion, adultery, and most prominently: family relationships and social structures. Bradley's well written and carefully produced book is a pleasure to read. It is, of course, compulsory reading for specialists of Apuleius, but it will also be profitable to general readers with an interest in the history of the Roman Empire.

The essays in this volume are ranged in their order of first composition. The first eight have been published in journals during the period 1997-2008, the last four are the result of new research. As there is no other, thematical order, I will simply review the essays in order.

The opening piece, 'Law, Magic, and Culture in Apuleius' *Apology*' (originally published in 1997) gives an overview of Apuleius' early text as a document that yields valuable information about Roman law, magic, and the general cultural context. In a postscript Bradley explicitly rejects the view that the *Apology* may be no more than a rhetorical showpiece typical of the Second Sophistic 'composed chiefly for purposes of self-aggrandizement, intellectual display, and amusement' (p.20), a suggestion advanced amongst others by the reviewer of this book in a paper from 2008. Bradley notes that the idea of the *Apology* as, essentially, a piece of fiction, cannot be disproved, but that to him it seems

'inherently implausible' (p.20). However, he does not further discuss this matter.

The second paper deals with the famous 11th book of the obviously fictional *Metamorphoses*, and asks whether or not it is a case of personal, religious conversion. In the end, the term appears to be difficult to use for Lucius' encounter with the goddess. In the ancient, polytheistic culture, there was little room for 'religious conversion' in the modern sense.

Four consecutive essays concentrate on family matters and social relations. First, the *Apology* is studied for the rather complex social and cultural aspects of family life in Roman Africa, in which a tension may be seen between Roman and local influences. The conflict in the family of Apuleius and Pudentilla is even called 'a clash of cultures' (p.57). Next comes a piece on slavery, a theme on which Bradley has published extensively. On the basis of the story of Lucius turned into an ass, Bradley elaborates on the theme of 'animalizing the slave'. It may be remarked that there is little evidence in the novel that the ass Lucius is considered a slave rather than, literally, an animal. The few references to 'servility' presented by Bradley (p.67-68) are not really convincing. For instance, Lucius' 'servile pleasures' (*serviles voluptates*) are mentioned in 11.15, that is, well after his retransformation into a man.

The third 'family piece' deals with households in the *Metamorphoses*. Again, on the assumption that the novel in some way represents everyday reality, the text is scrutinized for various types of family life. A convenient list of 25 different households in the novel concludes the article. Curiously, the household of the band of robbers (entering the story in 3.28, and being the setting of the famous 'Amor and Psyche' tale as told by the robbers' female housekeeper), is missing here, although the robbers are mentioned in the course of the paper. In fourth place there is a piece on Christian martyrs willing to sacrifice their family ties in favour of their religious convictions, a theme rather loosely connected to Apuleius' texts.

The seventh paper deals with the city of Carthage and so focuses on Apuleius' speech fragments in the *Florida*, some of which were delivered in Carthage or even address a Carthaginian audience. Taken together and taken at face value, the *Florida* fragments seem to produce something like a panorama of Carthaginian life. The paper includes a nice description of the town of Madauros, Apuleius' place of birth. The eighth piece deals with the minor accusation in the *Apology* that Apuleius was a *philosophum formosum et... disertissimum*. Here, the issue of 'effeminacy' and its rhetorical effects are clearly central.

The four new papers also deal with rather diverse themes. First comes a study of the Sub-Saharan slave trade. The topic was apparently triggered by Apuleius' sarcastic remark that until recently he did not know whether his opponent Aemilianus was 'black or white' (*libenter te nuper usque albus an ater esses ignoravi* (Apol.16.9). It may however be doubted whether the expression raises any racial issue at all; it occurs in other authors, as Bradley duly notes, and so seems to be metaphorical rather than literal. Skin colour is, of course, a hot issue

in our own time, but in Apuleius' texts there is hardly any special interest in it. Perhaps not surprisingly, Bradley has to resort to other forms of evidence, such as mosaics and vases.

A paper entitled 'Apuleius and Jesus' seems exciting beforehand. I found it slightly disappointing as it does not compare Apuleius with Jesus, or show Apuleius' knowledge of Jesus. Instead, it concentrates on the issue of child divination, on the basis of the Thallus episode in the *Apology* (*Apol.* 42-47). For this, similar miracle tales about the infant Jesus are adduced, as they are recorded in the apocryphal *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. In passing, Bradley also briefly surveys possible connections between Apuleius and Christianity, but without offering new insights.

The eleventh paper returns to Book 11 of the novel, and so to Isis. It develops the idea that book 11, which seems to end on a happy and optimistic note, is in fact concluded in a truly negative and pessimistic manner: Lucius appears to be completely enslaved to Isis and Osiris, and after his initiations he has lost his 'cognitive independence' (p.211- 212). Fortunately, Bradley does not offer this rather sombre view as the only possible interpretation of the ending (p.228), and he is wisely cautious, as elsewhere in the book, about Apuleius' intent.

The final paper deals with adultery, which readers of the novel will easily recognize as a central motif in much of the *Metamorphoses*, notably books 9 and 10. Again, Bradley stresses that it is impossible to know to what end Apuleius inserted his various adultery tales, but that he certainly 'captured the complexity of attitudes to sexual comportment in the high imperial age' (p.256). His conclusion that interest in adultery converges in both fiction and non fiction in the Antonine era can perhaps be extended: it will not be easy to find a period in which non-licit sexual relationships are considered a minor issue.

The volume is concluded with a short appendix on biographical details; a supplement of fourteen images (black and white); an impressive body of annotations (mostly grouped in a relatively small number of large notes replacing numerous small ones), amounting to 65 pages; a full bibliography of 36 pages; and an index of names and themes.

Bradley's study offers a broad panorama of essays on Apuleius, which effectively puts these works in their historical context. It offers interesting case studies on a number of themes that are, on the whole, relevant to readers of Apuleius, as well as to scholars interested in the Antonine age.

That said, some of the book's basic assumptions are open to criticism. It is fair enough to state that any text can be seen as a historical document and that its stories 'must bear some relationship to the world in which they were written.' (p.231) But what exactly is 'some' relationship? I often had the impression that Bradley was so eager to find good historical material, that he almost overlooks the methodical difficulty that Apuleius' texts have a special, literary nature and

are, in whole or part, fiction.

It is likely that the strange and often gloomy storyline of the *Metamorphoses* has led to various special touches in its setting. The world of the novel is not the real world of Roman Africa, as any reader will quickly observe, but a curious mixture of literary and cultural, Greek and Roman, along with a great number of details that look realistic but may actually be no less coloured. On the other hand, Apuleius' speeches are obviously meant to convey a highly positive image of the speaker. This in turn must have influenced his representation of any historical elements (to mention just a few things: the speaker is likely to highlight all that seems welcome, while avoiding anything that may seem negative, exaggerating minor issues and relativating major ones.) Admittedly, literary texts do relate to their historical context in 'some' way, but it should perhaps be discussed more at length how exactly they may be used, and at what points caution seems due.

Secondly, Bradley's broad historical interest leads him to explore themes in Apuleius that others leave unexplored. That is perfectly all right, but it may run the risk of going too far away from Apuleius and even Apuleius' age. Sometimes, the Latin texts seem merely the starting points of Bradley's research, leading him in various directions. For instance, the paper on slave trade mostly deals with the period of 700-900 (p.169-177).

On some occasions, one would have liked to see the author at least return to Apuleius. In the paper on Christian martyrs, for instance, it would have been possible to pose important new questions about the *Apology* on the basis of the historical approach. If Christian martyrs often act in provocation, as is rightly shown, could the same not be said about the speaker of the *Apology*? Risking everything, even one's life, for 'a good cause': is that not Apuleius' fundamental pose as well? Could the *Apology* perhaps be seen as a parody of martyr acts? The list of relevant questions could be extended, but Bradley does not even start to discuss such matters. Surely, more can be done here.

In a note Bradley admits that his views 'run against the grain of much contemporary Apuleian criticism' (p.293 n.7). That is probably true, and Bradley is all the more to be praised for publishing the book in this form and in this period. Scholarship flourishes through debate. One would, however, have liked to see Bradley really entering the debate on methodical issues.

As it is, *Apuleius and Antonine Rome*, is a valuable and highly readable contribution to Apuleian scholarship, proudly reasserting the right of historians to use literary texts from antiquity to learn more about the past. Every reader will find much that is of immediate interest. And by all means it delivers food for further thought.

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