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Review of Carl C. Schlam, *The Metamorphoses of Apuleius: On Making an Ass of Oneself*

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Carl C. Schlam, *The Metamorphoses of Apuleius: On Making an Ass of Oneself*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992. Pp. vii +176. ISBN 0-8078-2013-X.

Reviewed by Joseph Farrell, University of Pennsylvania.

Carl Schlam has for twenty-five years been one of our foremost students of Apuleius. In many papers and a previous monograph (*Cupid and Psyche: Apuleius and the Monuments*, 1976) he has explored the *Metamorphoses* in a variety of ways, always bringing out important aspects of a complex and difficult text. The book under review draws on much of Schlam's previous work and builds upon it to give us an accessible yet very full and satisfying analysis that should enhance any reader's appreciation of the novel.

The book's major virtue is that of bringing us very, very close to what is meant by the term *spoudogeloion*. Humor is a notoriously difficult thing to analyze. By its very nature, it turns the analyst into a pedant, persuading us that anyone who insists on trying to explain it, rather than merely enjoying it, has already missed the point. This is all the more true of those who adopt a ponderously learned approach in order to show that the humor contains a serious point. But others, in their anxiety to avoid this Scylla, are swallowed by the Charybdis of not crediting humor with any value beyond a rather superficial amusement. The result is that there are not many truly rewarding books on humorous texts. Schlam's book is one of the great exceptions. The text he discusses is of course extremely funny; but it is a dull reader who does not sense that the *Metamorphoses* deals with some very serious issues as well. The problem, Schlam explains, is that most critics have felt compelled to decide whether the novel is "really" a comic or a serious work. In order to circumvent this impasse, Schlam invokes certain ancient theories that help to reconcile opposing qualities, or to show the capacity of literature to embrace such qualities: the Horatian *dulce* and *utile* is mentioned in passing, while Middle Platonic interpretations of storytelling as therapy for the soul are discussed in some detail. For Schlam, situating Apuleius within this philosophical context is both an essential first step and an interpretive touchstone to which he has frequent recourse. At the same time, however, he wisely forgoes any effort to reduce the novel to a philosophical treatise.

Schlam's method is to analyze the work first in formal, then in thematic terms. His argument moves at a comfortably brisk pace through ten short chapters (along with a brief introduction and conclusion) dealing with subjects such as "The Arrangement of Material" (ch. 3) or "Curiosity, Spectacle, and Wonder" (ch. 5). This plan gives him the opportunity to discuss individual points succinctly but repeatedly and from several angles. The effect is that of an argument that unfolds gradually rather than marching the reader through mountains of material by means of algebraic proof. For instance, towards the end of ch. 1, "Meaning in the Narrative," we are introduced to Socrates, the central character of the novel's first major episode, to make a point about Apuleius' intermittent play with allegory. As Schlam rightly puts it, "Allegorical interpretation can run along several lines, which need not preempt each other and can be mutually reinforcing" (16). As an example he points to the aforementioned Socrates, who falls prey to his appetites, in contrast to his philosophical namesake. The surface narrative thus presents him as a notably aphilosophical character, while his name invites us to

map his experience against a Platonic background. Here the adventure of Socrates is regarded as a narrative that entertains, but does little to conceal its more serious meaning. In ch. 4, "Comedy, Laughter, and Entertainment," we are introduced to the various types of laughter in the novel, from the laughter that, especially in the earlier episodes, "is generally characterized as joyless and is frequently ironic, bitter, or mocking" (40) to the "joy, cheer, gaudium [that] is the most strongly marked feature of the concluding adventures" (44). In this connection, Schlam addresses again the episode of Socrates and Aristomenes, stressing that the tale, for all its slapstick and laughter, "is not at all lighthearted"; but at the same time, despite the fact that in it Socrates is first reduced to misery and ultimately dies, the episode "elicits not pathos, but a shudder at horrors and marvel at the power of magic" (41). Here we are invited to reconsider the entertainment value of the story, and to rethink its dichotomous nature as we had framed it in ch. 1. Then, in ch. 6, "Cleverness and Fortune," the same tale is discussed anew and at greater length as "a parody of Platonic discourse on immortality and a foil to the religious hope extended to Lucius" (60). The slippery nature of, this time, the allegorical nature of both the story and the novel as a whole is brought out with greater subtlety in this third treatment.

This procedure is typical of Schlam's approach. In choosing the Socrates episode for repeated discussion, he is in a sense following Apuleius' lead: by its prominent position, after all, the story assumes a programmatic character. Schlam is not a critic to base his analysis on surprising selections of material or willfully novel approaches to the text. As a result, his approach runs the risk of appearing rather matter-of-fact. In reality, as I allowed his understated argument to work its effect, I found myself more and more impressed with the appealing qualities of sanity, balance, and fundamental soundness in his account.

As for the ritual quibble required by the genre of the book review, I was a bit surprised to find that Schlam had deliberately cast his book as a pre-Winkler reading of the *Metamorphoses*. Not that Winkler's well-known interpretation of the novel must set the parameters for all future discussion; but, must we decide that, as Schlam puts it, we are when we read Apuleius dealing not with "the self-consciousness of a sophisticated poststructuralist, but that of a Middle Platonist of the second century" (2) and that "It accords ill with ancient thinking to privilege the hermeneutical above all other themes in the work" (9)? I rather suspect that in the first of these statements Schlam has erected another false dichotomy of the type he elsewhere so convincingly dismantles: are the second- and twentieth-century consciousnesses so utterly incompatible that we need to choose between them? and, should we not acknowledge that our conception of the second-century consciousness is, precisely, our conception of that consciousness, and thus rather deeply implicated in our own? With the second point I am in greater agreement: to privilege the hermeneutical above all other themes in the novel does have its disadvantages. One strength of this reading strategy, however, is that it helps to explain the inconcinnity that most readers feel upon entering the last book for the first time. (I have actually known students, and good ones, who had such difficulty in reconciling the ending with the earlier narrative that their memories, after a few years, effectively edited book 11 out of the novel!) By the same token, Schlam's reading perhaps overlooks what seems to be a universal readerly reaction. When he notes that "Book 11 is not simply the 'Isis Book.' The form of narrative entertainment is unchanged. Comedy is never far absent, even from matters that are treated with some solemnity" (113), we can only agree. But certainly the difference between the body of the novel and its final book is one source of this humor? Perhaps the point is that this difference strikes relatively new readers with more force, and that it takes someone with Schlam's experience of Apuleius to see beyond the obvious difference to the underlying similarities.

In short, this seems certain to become a valuable contribution to Apuleian studies. It should appeal to a wide audience: one could assign it confidently to undergraduates, nor will non-classicists find unwelcome deterrents, but there is a good deal of profit for the specialist as well. The best readers understand that Apuleian humor is no honey on the cup, but that laughter and seriousness in this novel are intimately connected aspects of the same thing. With Schlam's guidance, we all now have a better chance of becoming such readers.
