

2010

The Author and the Magi: Magic in the Ancient Novel and its Implications for Readership

Ian Greenfield
University of Puget Sound

Follow this and additional works at: http://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/writing_awards

Recommended Citation

Greenfield, Ian, "The Author and the Magi: Magic in the Ancient Novel and its Implications for Readership" (2010). *Writing Excellence Award Winners*. Paper 15.
http://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/writing_awards/15

This Humanities is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research and Creative Works at Sound Ideas. It has been accepted for inclusion in Writing Excellence Award Winners by an authorized administrator of Sound Ideas. For more information, please contact soundideas@pugetsound.edu.

Ian Greenfield
Classics 304
Paper #2
May 5, 2010

The Author and the Magi:
Magic in the Ancient Novel and its Implications for Readership

What argues most strongly for the recognition of the ancient “novel” as part of the novel genre in its proper sense is its familiarity. These texts, picaresque, romantic, concise and designed to thrill, offer no generic convention unfamiliar to us from the modern novels of western Europe—the improbable escape, the enduring love, the cunning and double-crossing pirate, are all commonplaces in long prose fiction. In recent centuries an artificial distinction has been made in prose fiction between “literature,” that is, The Canon of influential novels as delineated by various critics, and “not literature”—drugstore paperbacks, erotica, science fiction (a category with internal categorical anxieties of its own), and other ne’er-do-wells of the print trade. By comparison of the aforementioned narrative commonplaces, the ancient novels are seen as similar to the latter set of modern works, a probable source of the “fastidious distaste” that Margaret Anne Doody identifies in her study of the history of the novel genre, *The True Story of the Novel* (Doody 9). But the ancient novels’ relative simplicity and flatness of character are reflective, in my opinion, of the state of psychology of the time rather than any primitivity of narrative sophistication. Doody has expressed Mikhail Bakhtin’s dismissal of the ancient novel as rudimentary with this summation: “Ancient novels have nothing important to say about the individual” (2). And yet, the “private individual” (Bakhtin 110) in the sense Bakhtin seems to mean is a figure whose genesis came in the Enlightenment and whose development in literature appeared at the same time, in such books as Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders*. It is spurious, indeed a temporal “chauvinism,” as Doody puts it, to judge the quality

and audience of ancient novels on the basis of a modern construct's absence (Doody 1). We must not develop an idea of the ancient novel's readership based on our (likely also spurious) notion of who reads the paperbacks on sale in the grocery checkout. More crucially, we must not develop an idea of the ancient novel (whoever its readers) as an unsophisticated lump of text, a tree-dwelling hominid next to the modern *homo sapiens*; the care and intertextuality evident in the construction of the texts dismisses that notion out of hand.

Among the familiar tropes of ancient narrative is the depiction of magic, witches, and wizards as lurid menaces, a depiction laced with superstition and—much in evidence in the ancient novel—the notion that “magic” is a dark, ambiguous counterpart and complement to “religion.” Fritz Graf has traced the development of this dichotomy from the “original unity—religion” to the form current in the days of the ancient novelists, and his survey of these ideas provides a background for understanding the implications of magic's use as a narrative device. The treatment of magic in the ancient novels often maintains only a tenuous connection to magic as practiced and studied as a discipline in the ancient world. Authors such as Heliodoros seem ill-informed about the practices they describe (Consuelo Ruiz-Montero 43), and their representations of magic, original or inherited, are “literary in origin” (43). In contrast to these literary depictions stands Apuleius of Madaura, educated in the folk practices of magic and keenly conscious of his depiction of them in his *Metamorphoses*. Examining the incongruities in the texts, the differences in register between Apuleius, Heliodoros and the Alexander Romance, allows us to describe some aspects of the ancient novel's audience—moreover this examination shows both some elements of ancient literary strategy and the development of a fictive witchcraft whose legacy is to be found in the pages of the vampire-hunter romances filling bookstore shelves today.

I: Ancient Sensationalism

The tales of magic that appear in the ancient novels are part of a folkloric tradition that was transmitted widely throughout the ancient world. Such traditions were the stock in trade of storytellers. Fritz Graf notes, “Ancient literature [...] does not know any anxiety of influence. Even in the rare cases in which a poet works out new motifs, the poet does so not so much in reaction to religious and cultural realities as to contribute to this discourse between poets and texts in a new and unexpected way” (Graf 176). For his word “poet” we may substitute the word “novelist” without difficulty, since the poets and the novelists were citizens of the same ancient world, living under the same “religious and cultural realities.” The novelists, in depicting magic, had no further to reach to find their models and sources than their own streetcorners, where a ferment of assumptions and rumors gave shape to superstitions. This popular-culture idea of magic was not the only conceptualization of magic available; there was also the conceptualization of magic as a discipline—indeed a science, with principles and praxis—to which an author with the right reading could access. The relationship between these conceptualizations and the use to which various authors put them bears examining; it is the road to a theory of reception.

The most vivid and explicitly supernatural scene of magic in the extant Greek novels, the witch’s necromancy in Book 6 of the *Aithiopika* of Heliodoros, contains a number of useful threads to follow. The scene has a moralistic undercurrent that is often lacking in other texts; this circumnavigation of nature’s laws is dreadful but not dreaded, punished rather than tolerated. The corpse, the son of the witch, condemns her to an unpleasant death by impalement for her “sin of compelling a dead body to stand upright [...] and extorting speech” (Heliodoros 487). In the Latin novels, the power of witches is not challenged; Apuleius’s protagonist is only freed

from his curse by the intercession of Isis, goddess of magic, herself (Apuleius 198). In the Greek *Onos*, the counterpart to Apuleius, the protagonist still must abide by the rules of the spell, eating the roses prescribed to reverse his transformation (Pseudo-Lucian 616). Heliodoros's sense of necromancy as a transgression fits nicely into a schema of magic as marginal, the realm of malicious *daimones*. It is possible to detect here the influence of a long series of depictions of witches in the tradition Daniel Ogden has dubbed the "Roman Gothic" (Ogden, *Night's Black Agents* 75). Heliodoros's witch is a counterpart to the priest Kalasiris, who as a priest possesses magical power himself; Kalasiris declares that his power comes from "legitimate sacrifices and pure prayer" while the woman's comes from "crawling upon the ground and skulking among corpses" (Heliodoros 486). Thus we have the dichotomy between religion and magic, orthopraxis and heteropraxis—the background Fritz Graf describes, and a sign of Heliodoros's observation of the currents of his culture.

As a matter of fact, we can see that Heliodoros is almost certainly pulling from folk tradition rather than any rigorous study of magic. This act of necromancy on an Egyptian battlefield is not very Egyptian; Consuelo Ruiz-Montero has made note of discrepancies in Heliodoros's account, particularly in the fact that the witch is a witch (a woman) in the first place:

Heliodorus is probably more familiar with the *Odyssey* and Herodotus than he is with the Thessalian magic of Apuleius and the Egyptian papyri, since it is not women but men who generally perform the magic in these papyri. [...] Recently, Ogden has related this scene to others in Latin poetry (such as Lucan's *Erichtho*) [...] Heliodorus appears not to be familiar with and to have no interest in Egyptian magic. (Ruiz-Montero 43)

What Ruiz-Montero detects is more than authorial invention; as per Graf's observation, Heliodoros draws upon common tradition—but it is a Latin tradition, not an Egyptian one, and even that comes through garbled: the centrality of Thessaly to popular lore of witches is vital in Apuleius and the *Onos* as well as non-novel sources such as Lucan's *Pharsalia*, but here no link is made to that land. Heliodoros's necromancy is, as Ruiz-Montero concludes, largely "literary in origin," framed in a conceptualization of witchcraft one part antique (Homer and Herodotus) and one part vague rumor of the witches of Ogden's Roman Gothic. The latter could certainly have reached Heliodoros's ears, following the conventional dating of the *Aithiopika* between the 3rd and 5th centuries A.D; the sources upon which Ogden constructs his reading of Latin witches are, besides Apuleius, the *Pharmaceutriai* of Theocritus (270s B.C.) and Lucan's *Pharsalia* (late 1st A.D.) And what Heliodoros latched onto, as illustrated by his moral framing of the necromancy scene, is the *frisson* of horror at the transgression of the witch. This same sort of horror is found in Lucan's depiction of Erictho in Book VI of the *Pharsalia*; however, to speculate upon links between the text is senseless given Ruiz-Montero's observations on the disconnectedness of Heliodoros from the "facts" of magic. It is rather more productive to consider Heliodoros as a transmitter of an image of the witch as a thrillingly dreadful marginal figure who is safely overcome, order safely restored—this old woman is in the text for the same reason as the pirates and bandits who appear in the first and fifth books of the *Aithiopika*. The sensational spices the literature and piques reader interest.

The transmission of a literary image of magic that does not correspond to the actual picture of magic as delineated in the papyri, curse tablets and other physical evidence is an ancient phenomenon even relative to Heliodoros. Five hundred years earlier Theocritus wrote his second *Idyll*, the *Pharmaceutriai* (*The Sorceresses*), in which two women, mistress and slave,

attempt a ritual of erotic magic to cause a young man to fall in love with the mistress. The ritual is described step by step in painstaking detail, in a manner worthy of the magical papyri.

However, Graf has noted a curious fact: Theocritus's ritual is wildly divergent from those found in the papyri, and lacks the symbolic care with which the latter are constructed. "Although [the sorceress] uses a thread of wool [an instrument for binding the hapless young man] this thread binds nothing, but rather adorns a vase" (Graf 178). Later she casts her fumigation components into the fire one by one, rather than all together as the papyri advise, and then she invokes rites that resemble the rhetoric of religious sacrifice rather than magic (179). And then she burns corn husks, an act that does not fit into the ritual framework Theocritus has constructed. Graf notes "comparison with the papyri shows that Theocritus's description is a skilled and highly informed game" (181); Theocritus apparently knew a thing or two about the papyri. But he doesn't admit it to his readers; it takes comparative study of his ritual and the papyri's rituals to recognize. Rather, like Heliodorus, he "constructs a mosaic, a kind of superritual capable of activating in its readers all sorts of associations connected with magic" (184). Theocritus is more interested in effect than in fact.

A similar mechanic appears in Lucan's depiction of Erictho, whom Graf describes as "a sort of superwitch" (190). Her ritual is an act of necromancy akin to the one Heliodorus describes—an act of divination by means of interrogating a reanimated corpse. Lucan, like Theocritus, relies on raising associations with his readers: Erictho's spell is a "cleverly perverted religious practice" (193). In Lucan the idea of magic as the dark mirror image of religion is used as a means of shocking the audience, of developing Erictho as a troubling crosser of boundaries—in other words, sensational perversion becomes a cue for the audience to identify her as a thing to be feared and treated as *other*.

It makes a fitting circle to close this discussion of magic's representation in ancient literature with a reading of an ancient novel that deals, like Heliodoros, with Egypt, but unlike him, presents its subject material accurately. This is the otherwise clumsy and messy *Alexander Romance*, whose manuscript history and variable quality paint a picture messy enough to be a worthy analogy to the transmission of folkloric impressions of magic. The *Alexander Romance*'s opening episode, the description of the pharaoh Nectanebo's flight from Egypt and seduction of Olympias, keeps the magic coming thick and fast in a theatrical fashion respectable to modern Hollywood film: Nectanebo uses water-bowl divination, "herbs," demon-binding, dream communication, and shapeshifting to avoid disaster and have his way with Olympias, all to great success (Pseudo-Callisthenes 655ff). Along with these he makes use of less supernatural methods: astrology and simple theatrics—the latter an interesting commentary on magi in the ancient world, for this charlatanry stands in interesting contrast to the utterly unambiguous moment when Nectanebo turns himself into a snake and then an eagle in full view of King Philip's court (660). This is the same sort of sensationalism that we have seen in other depictions of magic, but as Consuelo Ruiz-Montero observes, all these incidences of magic are spells attested in the Greek Magical Papyri, and moreover correspond closely to the descriptions in the papyri. Ruiz-Montero concludes, "It is my belief that we are dealing with a genuine connoisseur of Egyptian magic" (Ruiz-Montero 53).

It seems therefore that the true and the false in terms of magic, and even the author's expertise regarding magical knowledge, is irrelevant to the ancient novel. The sensational, the lurid, is the goal of the author and the need of the text. This resembles to a large extent the sensational in the modern novel—bodice-ripping vampires, new mainstay of the supermarket shelf, are rarely given a valence other than that of a source of self-indulgent thrills for the reader.

But we must remember that in the ancient world there was no “highbrow” novel as we would know it; the same texts that give us pirates, rape and rescue are the texts in which discussions of representation, genre, narrative theory and authority are carried out. Nowhere is this clearer than in the complex and multivalent novel, the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius, that critiques the ancient novel’s very sensationalism at the same time that it delivers the magical sensational more extensively than any other extant ancient novel.

II: Apuleius Speaking of Genre

One who seeks symbolic complexity, narrative sophistication, self-consciousness of representation, critique of genre—the *ars poetica* hallmarks of modern “literary” fiction—in other words a proof of concept of the modern “novel” palatable to those guilty of the “chauvinism” Margaret Anne Doody identifies (Doody 2), needs look no further than the *Metamorphoses*. It reveals its intelligence when considered next to the Greek *Onos*, its doppelganger in plot with the exception of the concluding chapters—the *Onos* is a simple and coarse story, while the *Metamorphoses* challenges and critiques its narrative with multiple, symbolically linked interpolations describing magic and witches at work in Thessaly. And it is with Thessaly that an examination of the *Metamorphoses* should begin.

Thessaly—we have heard from that land before in this study, of course; Erictho lives and works her arts there, and the reputation of Thessaly as a place of magic is as old as the first Thessalian witch, Medea, as Olivier Phillips asserts in his essay “The Witches’ Thessaly,” where he also notes that Thessaly was so considered the land of witches that “on occasion the Roman poets simply use ‘Thessalian’ as synonym for what they might otherwise call ‘magical’” (Phillips 382). The *Onos* has its start in Thessaly; the witch whose salve Lucius uses to transform is

Thessalian, and part of a mistress-slave pair akin to the one Theocritus depicts. Apuleius, however, ups the ante; from the moment *his* Lucius arrives, the locals are telling frightful stories: the witches Panthia and Meroe murder Meroe's former lover (whom she had enslaved, presumably, with love-spells) with a ghastly spell and then urinate on his helpless companion (Apuleius 14); the hapless Thelyphron finds his nose and ears excised in the night by witches (33ff); and magic makes a direct appearance in the animated goatskins that Lucius fights off outside his host's door (39ff)—and all this before Lucius's transformation occurs. The readers are in for a rollicking ride, Apuleius seems to promise—and we are. But on another level, he is critiquing this same practice of sensationalism.

Phillips, in his study of Thessaly in ancient literature, notes that there is a striking degree of correspondence between the Thessaly of Apuleius and—not merely of the *Onos* but especially—of Lucan. “A suggestion of a relationship appears,” he writes, “in some of the wording of the two Latin works. Apuleius begins his account of his journey with the accusative ‘Thessaliam’ [...] This recalls Lucan’s introductory accusative ‘Thessaliam’ [...] In Lucan [...] Apuleius had an available model for vocabulary and style” (Phillips 384). That is to say, Apuleius had done his homework. He was calling on literary representations of Thessaly in order to access those representations’ associative power; the figures of the Roman Gothic appear in full force, and before Lucius’s curiosity spurs him to attempt the magical transformation that renders him a donkey. Lucius admits that these stories put him “on tenterhooks with keen anticipation” (Apuleius 22); the effect is that the reader is drawn into the same state of eagerness as Lucius. Lucius himself can be read as representative of a reader—enslaved to the spell of the narrative. This sort of representational sophistication is something Doody’s targets would no doubt like to impute strictly to modern texts.

A mirror image of the *Metamorphoses* is Apuleius's *Apology*, his recording of his defense speech against accusations that he himself had used magic to coerce the widow Pudentilla to marry him. This text carries problems of presentation all its own: it was a transcription after the fact, with the attendant concern that Apuleius revised his account; at any rate, it establishes that Apuleius knew plenty about magic—enough to rebut accusations by comparing his own actions to magical praxis (Ogden, *Magic* 286). In some ways this text thumbs its nose at the reader, showing by Apuleius's familiarity with magic that he in fact was capable of what he was accused of having done. Graf resolves this difficulty by pointing out that magic tends to serve as a proxy accusation by which an individual who threatens social order can be marginalized and cast out; the problem was not that Apuleius was a magus but that he was disinheriting Pudentilla's next of kin by marrying her (Graf 187). However, the *Apology* indicates that Apuleius knew magic probably as well as the author of the Nectanebo episode, and his consciousness of rhetorical effect as evidenced in both his works makes it unlikely that he failed to consider the disparity between fact and representation in his literary antecedents. Most importantly, it seems Apuleius was acquitted—the audience to his testimony lacked his command of the information available on magic. The *Apology*, as Ogden points out, is just about designed to fall apart under pressure: “much of what is said in defense can be seen to strengthen the prosecution case” (*Magic* 253). It is a learned joke, and the fact that Apuleius felt comfortable telling it implies he knew quite well just how much the (aristocratic, it should be noted) public *did not* know.

At the end of the *Metamorphoses* Apuleius seems to make a similar joke; the 11th book of the text is a non sequitur to the previous books, which followed the structure of the *Onos* quite faithfully. The narrative resolves the crucial issue—Lucius's ass-hood—with the intervention of

Isis; here we see the dichotomy of magic and religion as it appeared in Heliodoros; Lucius meddled in dark magic, and became an ass, an animal with symbolic associations as an antagonist of Isis, who restores Lucius to proper social order. And yet the question of motivation—or even more fundamentally, causality—has no answer; the structure of the narrative collapses instead of resolving.

It should be noted that none of Apuleius's witch stories have complete resolutions; only one of his interpolations does not close with disaster for the protagonist: that of Cupid and Psyche. Psyche's curiosity leads to catastrophe and arduous penance, and only divine intervention saves her; the link to Lucius's situation is clear. Furthermore, comparing this story with the other interpolations shows a contrast worth noting: this story has closure. The narratives of witches end with scarred survivors, and the witches themselves still exist, somewhere. The interpolations in part serve to ensnare the readers because they are stories without a complete ending. There is more that could still happen; Panthia and Meroe could murder Aristomenes, or another hapless young man. Cupid and Psyche's story satisfies the hunger for closure. But Apuleius will not be pinned down so easily—his microcosm closes, but the end of Lucius's story feels like a truncated chapter, as though there is more to say.

This playing with expectations and narrative structure cannot have failed to catch the attention of Apuleius's audience—or else why bother with such a penetrating examination of narrative device *on the page* instead of in verbal critique? We can suppose a fairly sophisticated level of understanding of narrative as a set of theoretical structures for the ancient reader. As for magic, it seems that an exact understanding of the practice was never much in evidence among literary audiences—I have found no evidence that writers from Theocritus onward expected their audiences to read their versions of magic ironically; Theocritus himself seems to have relied on

quick access to his audience's superstitions. Thus, like a man in an ass's body, the credulous and critical readers were concatenated in the ancient world. The tabloid and the *New Yorker* were the same text, and what this tells us is that the ancient reader was a much more fluid creature than the modern one, whose "fastidious distaste" somehow resists the collapse of the narrative it has constructed for itself—that is, the narrative of "literary" fiction's superiority to sensational supermarket paperbacks: those paperbacks are the healthier genre in terms of audience breadth. Modern readers would do well to note that the most popular of the ancient works was the *Alexander Romance*—which was at the same time the most "popular" of the texts, the one whose text admits of the least sophistication as we understand it. The ancient reader perhaps should be considered a sort of Lucius—intelligent and credulous at once, hoping against hope that the text of the world he is trying to read will do something magical to him. Certainly we should not expect to see too much of our modern selves where there is no modernity.

Works Cited

- Apuleius. *The Golden Ass*. E. J. Kenney, trans. New York: Penguin Group, Inc., 2004
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. University of Texas Press, 1982.
- Doody, Margaret Anne. *The True Story of the Novel*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996.
- Graf, Fritz. *Magic in the Ancient World*. Franklin Philip, trans. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Heliodoros. *An Ethiopian Story*. J. R. Morgan, trans. *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*. B. P. Reardon, ed. Los Angeles: University of California, 2008. 349-588.
- Ogden, Daniel. *Night's Black Agents: Witches, Wizards and the Dead in the Ancient World*. London: Hambledon Continuum, 2008.
- Ogden, Daniel. *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Pseudo-Callisthenes. *Alexander Romance*. Ken Dowden, trans. *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*. B. P. Reardon, ed. Los Angeles: University of California, 2008. 650-735.
- Pseudo-Lucian. *The Ass*. J. P. Sullivan, trans. *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*. B. P. Reardon, ed. Los Angeles: University of California, 2008. 589-618.
- Phillips, Oliver. "The Witches' Thessaly." *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World*. Paul Mirecki and Marvin Meyer, eds. Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill, 2002. 378-385.
- Ruiz-Montero, Consuelo. "Magic in the Ancient Novel." *The Greek and Roman Novels: Parallel Readings*. Michael Paschalis, Stavros Frangoulidis, Stephen Harrison, and Maaike Zimmerman, eds. Groningen: Barkhuis & Groningen University Library, 2007. 38-56.