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Gynocentric Apuleius: Female Agency in 'The Golden Ass'

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Gynocentric Apuleius: Female Agency in the *Golden Ass*

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of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

Through a close reading of Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, I argue that characters such as Byrrhaena, Photis, and Psyche function as positive examples of female sexual authority and autonomy and effectively challenge the phallogocentric theories commonly applied to Greek and Roman gender and sexuality, the Penetrative Model associated with Foucault, and structuralism, associated in classics with French historians Marcel Detienne, J-P Vernant, and Pierre Vidal-Naquet. While still penetrated, many of these women actively claim their agency in sex through pleasure and narrative. Additionally, in correlation with Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject, while Apuleius's female witches behave in horrific and chaotic ways that effectively emasculate their male prey, they do not fall within the same topos as other female witches. Instead, Apuleius' witches appear to wield their magic in a way that allows them to maneuver through a gender restrictive society and claim agency that may not be available to them otherwise. This empowerment of the abject is solidified in Isis' role in the novel, which functions to redeem the abject horrors of the novel and establish female supremacy in their role as Lucius' savior. Through this analysis, I seek to reevaluate what 'passivity' means in the ancient world and to challenge past readings of monstrous females through close analysis, not only of sexual dynamics but also of their function within their larger narratives.

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PART I: The Sexual Spell: An Examination of the Female Sexual Authority in Apuleius

Apuleius' *Golden Ass* may, at times, be fantastic, obscene, and ridiculous, but it also showcases some of the strongest women in Latin literature. Consistently, the female voice within the narrative is unyielding and assertive, whereas the male voice of Lucius is characterized by meekness and confusion. Among these powerful women is Photis, a servant girl of the witch Pamphile, who is most notable due to the control she exercises over Lucius and his desires through sex throughout Book 2.¹ From the start, Photis initiates the relationship and compares herself to addiction.² She warns Lucius of the control that she will soon have over him, and whereas she 'submits' herself to him as a slave, it is undeniably he who falls submissive to her authoritative nature.³ The sexual dynamic between Lucius and Photis is exemplary of Apuleius' rewriting of male-active and female-passive roles. Through consideration of the structural reality of the female cultural ideal, a close reading of female-controlled sexual encounters throughout the narrative, and a brief analysis of female characterization throughout the plot, Part I of this thesis will establish a pattern of female agency and empowerment that shapes much of the novel. This should lead us not only to reconsider sexual agency more broadly in Roman antiquity but also to reevaluate the binary nature of the 'Penetration Model,' which has been widely accepted by many scholars of sexuality in the ancient Mediterranean, as well as the assessment of "woman" as wet, illogical, and uncontrolled, found in the structuralist assessment of gender in classical antiquity.

¹ Note: Photis acts as the gateway to the initiation into magic that Lucius craves. While it is in her control to grant or deny sex, it is *also* in her control to allow Lucius to view the magic rites of Pamphile.

² "*Nam si te vel modice meus igniculus afflaverit ureris intime nec ullus extinguet ardorem tuum nisi ego:*" For if my fire grazes you, you will burn from within, not anything will extinguish your flame except I (2.7). "*Heus ut, scolastice*" ait "*dulce et amarum gustulum carpis cave ne nimia mellis dulcedinem diutinam bilis amaritudinem contrahas:*" She said "Alas, Oh Student! As you take this sweet and bitter appetizer beware lest from too much sweetness of honey over time you contract the bitterness of bile" (2.10).

³ This relationship begins to shift after Lucius has become the scapegoat in the Festival of Laughter.

In Part II, I will look to the women throughout Apuleius, who not only fall into the category of ‘dangerous’ but ‘sexually uncontrollable’ as well. In contrast to the positive accounts of female autonomy and sexual agency, the witches of the novel are negative manifestations of male fear toward the dissolution of social boundaries. According to Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject, which is anything that threatens corporeal or social identity, the witches of the *Golden Ass* woven through the story not only bring attention to the abject body—represented through Lucius’ asinine form—but also are ultimately redeemed through the actions of Isis in Book 11. If we consider the positive, healthy examples of female autonomy (such as Photis), the description and behavior of the witches, and finally the presence of Isis throughout the novel, we are left with a strong set of notable women with their own complex histories, rather than the monolithic Roman woman that is considered so present in Latin literature.

I. The Roman Woman

The Structured Female. The role and status of women in 2nd-century C.E Rome have always been a matter of debate, and this question has gained considerably more attention since the 1980s (Gutzwiller & Michelini, 1991). What we do know about women is frequently limited to male-authored and male-centered literary narratives, although legal texts, epigraphy, and material evidence have supplied much insight to these matters (Fatham, Foley, & Kampen, 1995; Hemelrijk & Woof, 2013). Unsurprisingly, this leaves us with the dilemma of attempting to reconstruct lived experience from the fragments of legal and material evidence combined with reflections of social ideology as portrayed through the gaze of the male elite. Whereas there are notable and honored women throughout Latin literature, they are often considered the weaker, less controlled, and unbounded sex, which can be traced back to the origins of Greek literature in Hesiod (Carson, 1990). In his indictment of marriage, Juvenal outlines the fall of women to

showcase how their weak self-control and licentiousness consume all (*Satura* VI). Kate Cooper, in her analysis of private and public gendered circles, is adamant about “men's struggle with one another for dominance,” and how this, unsurprisingly, was rooted in the ability to hold a claim to power that was on “behalf of his household and family line” (Cooper, 1990, p. 5). Thus, the elite male gaze, shaped by an emphasis on political status and household control, defines much of female characterization in Latin literature.

The representation of women throughout Roman literature, from the Republic to the later Empire, underscores the durability of the conservative gender ideology of elite men (Fantham et al., 1995). These gendered expectations are well illustrated in Seneca the Younger's tribute to the piety and character of his mother. He compares her to the majority of women that (inappropriately) attempt to push their way into public affairs through their sons (*Helv* XIV-XVI). Moreover, Propertius calls upon the ghost of Cornelia, who urges other women to follow her exemplary behavior, and he urges Cynthia (unsuccessfully) to reflect the virtues of *pudicitia* (chastity/purity) (4.11; 2.9.17-18). The societal expectations for the behavior of women and men alike were greatly shaped throughout Roman history by the significant concern for household reputation amongst the elite. We can see this in Pliny the Younger's *Panegyric*, in which he states that a wife contributes to the home's honor. In many ways, it is her behavior and its public perception that determines her worth to the family (Fantham et al., 1995, p. 345; *Panegyric* 83). Further, Plutarch warns in his *Life of Antony* of the political weakness that could result from the perception that a base and degenerate private life was compromising public responsibilities. This points to “the disaster to which such indulgence could lead for those foolish or weak enough to court it” (Cooper, 1990, p.11). As a result, male-written literature exemplifies a strategy of contrasting feminine weaknesses that threaten the moral fiber of the Empire while showcasing

the difference between ‘good’ women, who were crucial to the home, and ‘bad’ women, who would be the family’s destruction. Paradoxically, these written expectations of female behavior characterize how the modesty of the wife was only useful to a man if it was publicly recognized.⁴

The women honored in Roman literature are relatively few, but those who are praised tend to share the same characteristics: they are chaste, loyal, and they look to the man as dominant. We see the subordination of the woman’s sphere of action and reputation to the requirements of male honor with Livy’s Lucretia and Verginia, both of whom appear throughout literature as exemplary women. In their respective stories, the ‘chaste’ aspects of both women are heavily stressed (*muliebris certaminis laus; omnia pudore saepta animadverterat*),⁵ and they are considered to be extraordinarily beautiful (*excellentem forma*) (Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita* 1.57; 3.44). However, as the story of each woman unfolds as a rape narrative, the appropriate roles of the two women are stressed, and their lives prove to be insignificant in comparison to the defense of their slain chastity and the preservation of male reputation and honor. The fame of both women is tied to the honor they provide for their male relatives. Lucretia’s role as a wife is stressed in her modesty, and Verginia is characterized as an innocent virgin daughter. Thus, the public demonstration of their chastity is accentuated and preserved through their death. Lucretia forfeited her life so she would not bring shame to her husband, and by dying, Verginia was preserved as the chaste daughter, ideal for a profitable marriage (Joshel, 1992).

⁴ For a deeper analysis of how men sought for the public recognition of their well-oiled home, look to Kate Cooper’s *The Virgin and the Bride*. Note that while Cooper’s research primarily focuses on the Late Empire as it enters into Christianity, she draws from many early 2nd century sources in order to characterize the state of women and gender ideology in the high Empire, more than a century after Augustus’ legislation refocused the ideological purpose of marriage.

⁵ “Praise of the womanly contest; he (Appius) turned toward the enclosed chastity.”

As Pomeroy explains, the idealization of women such as Lucretia and Verginia creates a stark contrast between the ideal Roman matron and the reality of who and what actual Roman women could be (Pomeroy, 1975). Propertius, writing within the “anti-marriage” genre of elegy, nonetheless deploys comparisons to mythological exempla like Penelope as models that should restrain the behavior of Cynthia—his mistress (1.15). The Augustan legislation against adultery supported the growth of literary warnings about women and their impure tendencies (Dixon, 1988). Valerius Maximus, in his anecdote about chastity, draws upon the examples of chaste and honored women. Maximus highlights both how Lucretia’s actions brought forth the end of the Kingship and the birth of the Republic, and how Verginius preferred to sacrifice his child rather than expose his home to shame.⁶ Exploring the balance between the lives of women and the preservation of male honor, Maximus records many instances where women were violated. He emphasizes how both men (and the women themselves) were “guardians of chastity” in their suicidal and murderous actions (Val. Max. 6.1.1-4). Consistent with the pattern provided by stories such as Lucretia and Verginia, women (as represented by elite male literature) are often valued for their dutiful performance in their role as wife and mother. Cornelia, the mother to the Gracchi, reflects the ideal matron who produced multiple children in her lifetime. She then remained unmarried after the death of her first and only husband, as in many societies, motherhood often enhanced the Roman woman’s status (Dixon, 1988). This tension between ideological expectation and lived reality is explored in R. Langlands’ research into the construction of *pudicitia* in Roman literature. Here, she considers how male authors, especially

⁶ Here, we should note that this tale also condemns the abuse of power by the *decemviri* and highlights the shift in state policy once more.

in elegy and comedy, rarely characterized women as truly chaste— this highlights their fear that the female is by nature deceitful (Langlands, 2006).

Consistent with this trend, Plutarch explains how a virtuous woman must only be visible in the company of her husband, and he is insistent that marriage must be harmonious. However, this predictably results in the expectation that it is the woman's job to match her thoughts, emotions, desires, and gods to her husband's (Plut. *Conj. Praec.* 9, 11, 14). Furthermore, she may be intellectual and knowledgeable, but her intellect also comes with the threat of being unattractive and undesirable (Plut. *Conj Praec.* 48; Pomeroy, 1975).⁷ Even when praised for education, it is often attributed to and for the husband. Pliny the Younger accredits Agorius for his wife's education, and we see him rejoicing in his wife's intelligence. However, the praise in both of these instances stems from the perception that the woman's intellectual interest honors their husband and reflects their engagements with their husbands' writings (Fantham et al., 1995; *Letters* 1.16.6, 4.19.2, 4). In this form of praise, the woman nonetheless "becomes devalued, incidental, [and] the inessential as opposed to Him the essential" (Hallett, 1989, p. 60).

Langlands is adamant about this stress on female morals and behavior throughout her study on sexual morality. Representing women in Roman literature walks a kind of tightrope, as female characterization veers abruptly from the assertion that every woman is corrupt to a fairly desperate emphasis on the traditional ideal of *pudicitia* (Langlands, 2006, p. 246). Because of this, we have a narrow path to maneuver between the cultural ideal of woman and the lived realities of who and what they could be. Moreover, the notional ideal of women as chaste,

⁷ Ironically, an educated woman is only considered appealing when she is using her intellect to serve and obey her husband. If she acts outside of societally assigned roles, she is quickly slandered.

modest, and subordinate is significantly at odds with the reality of women's legal status, economic activity, and social influence in the high Empire.

As Judith Hallett notes, in Rome, there is a tension between the 'ideal' of subordination and the counter-narrative of women who take more active and 'masculine' roles. Hallett outlines the cases in which women were praised for their 'masculine' qualities, such as the elder Agrippina, who, when refusing to depart from the military camps, is characterized in Tacitus' *Annales* as embodying the traits of her father. Hallett draws on Seneca the Younger's illustrations of these virile qualities in women, ranging from Lucretia to Cloelia, who swam the Tiber river to escape her captors, arguing that the portrayal of these women shows that their involvement in male politics could be praised by male authors, but, at the same time, is conceptualized as 'other' due to their attempt to enter male spheres. As Hallett (1989) puts it, "the elite Roman male testimonials praising elite women for possessing and manifesting traits valued in men, are, therefore, inconsistent with other statements by the same authors wherein women are criticized for similar attributes and conduct" (pp. 64-67). Female involvement in politics evidently violated societal expectations and assigned gender norms, no matter how often it occurred (Fantham et al., 1995). We can thus conclude that these shows of 'masculine' characteristics were only praised when correlated with actions seen to benefit the male agenda, typically localized to elite families.⁸

The Chaste, the Daughter & the Wife. Women were noticed when they were of use to men. This is seen in Cooper's argument, which is staked on the idea that aristocratic women saw their 'invisibility,' in public and domestic spheres as one aspect of a powerful, if covert, identity,

⁸ We should note that in the case of Agrippina, the male benefited from her actions would seem to be Germanicus, not the emperor Tiberius, who was the head of this particularly intense family.

especially given that this invisibility could provide a convenient cover behind which they could hide their substantial influence within their familial connections. Because women were directly affected by the rise in divorce tied to changes in the economic and political role of marriage, she suggests that these married Roman women clung to their domestic function. Thus, because women were allotted areas of control within their familial structure, they fiercely protected that which they had power over and displayed resentment when that position was challenged. In the eyes of these women, they function as the “arbiters” of masculine virtue by embracing their domestic and familial duty (Cooper, 1990, p. 14). Daughters of elite families were used as political tools throughout Roman history, however, the increased frequency of divorce from c.160 B.C.E. onward meant that daughters could be utilized through marriage more than once (Cantarella, 1981; Rawson, 1991).⁹ Additionally, the increased popularity of marriage *sine manu* meant that women often obtained more power indirectly within marriage by remaining under the legal authority of their fathers, or a male guardian from their own natal family (Gardner, 1986). Traditionally, girls married as young as twelve and were often under the constant guardianship of a man unless they had proven loyal to their duty as chaste women. We see this aspect of male control through the tradition of *cum manu* versus *sine manu* marriages that still maintained male involvement in affairs (Gardner, 1986).¹⁰ While women married *sine manu* could appeal to her father (or male guardian) to initiate divorce, her freedoms were still closely tied to a man within

⁹ For the purposes of this paper, this is a simplified introduction to the female role in marriage and family. There are plenty of cases of women, especially in court and elite circles, that challenged the balance of gendered power. This suggests that while the patriarchal ideal was certainly in place, there were areas in which women could claim agency and influence for themselves. For more on the utilization of marriage, see Eva Cantarella’s *Pandora’s Daughters* (1981), which argues that there was an ‘emancipation’ of women toward the end of the 2nd century C.E. Additionally, she argues that the practice of female guardianship and political marriages fell out of practice around this time.

¹⁰ *Cum manu* (with hand) marriages marked an older form of Roman marriage that placed the woman under the legal control of her husband. *Sine manu* (without hand) marriages either kept the woman under the legal control of her father, or, in many cases, allowed her to keep a hand in her own legal affairs.

her family. Outside of this, the few ways to gaining social autonomy included birthing at least three children, taking up the role of a vestal virgin, or continuing as a *univira*, all of which enunciate where the emphasis of female worth was placed (Pomeroy, 1975). Even once married, women may experience many marriages, often for political reasons, and divorce may occur if she had not met the expectations of marriage and motherhood, though, significantly, divorce may also be initiated by her father or another male guardian, and this does not require the demonstration of cause (Rawson, 1991; Dixon, 2013).

However, while a woman married *cum manu* had very little legal autonomy, a woman who married in a free marriage was considered legally independent of her husband. Whereas if a woman was *sui iuris* she had her own jurisdiction, a *cum manu* marriage simply transferred legal authority over the bride to the husband from the father (or male in the natal family).

Additionally, whereas divorce could *always* be instigated from the woman's side, whether it be through herself, father, or male relative, a woman who was *sui iuris* in their marriage could freely decide to end the marriage *on her own*. Thus, ironically, it is in marriage where female control is socially accepted, though from Plautus through Cicero this clearly causes significant anxiety for the husband. The ability for a woman to actively initiate divorce indicates significant agency within the marriage, especially given that divorce would result in returned dowry to the woman's family. We can see this sort of female control in Terentia's marriage to Cicero, where she not only displayed autonomy in her own finances, but also arranged the marriage of Tullia, their daughter, without the involvement of Cicero (Claassen, 1996). In her study of Roman mothers, Dixon navigates through the responsibilities of the elite mother concerning her daughters. Here, not only was the mother strapped with the responsibility of teaching her daughter how to be the proper wife, but she was also in charge of negotiating the dowry and

leading her daughter through divorces. Unlike the son, the daughter was not permitted to disobey her mother's instructions (Dixon, 2013). The mother was seen to have learned the tasks of supervising the entire household, and she had to be skilled in managing the responsibilities of social life and motherhood in general (Dixon, 2013). Thus, the complex social and legal realities of a woman's involvement in her familial life, which actually afforded her considerable agency and influence, were often at odds with the far simpler cultural ideal of what men expected women to be.

II. The 'Submissive' Female in Apuleius

Introduction to Roman Sexual Ideology. In some genres of Greek and Roman literature, women, characteristically, have power over men sexually, which makes them dangerous creatures of seduction to whom men lose their minds. The *puella*, for instance, dominates the narrative of Roman erotic poetry, where they are frequently represented as creatures with little control over their urges, and who nonetheless place the male amatory ego in their thrall, the *servitium amoris* (servant of love). Since the 1980s, in the academic study of ancient sexuality, the Penetration Model, associated with Michel Foucault, has generally been accepted as an accurate assessment of power relation between the penetrators (adult male citizens) and the penetrated (women, slaves of both genders, and the conquered) (Foucault, 1978; Parker, 1997). Although this assessment is often assumed to be post-structuralist, it is actually completely binary, a phallogentric structure that fails to acknowledge the agency, active position, and pleasure that women can control in sex, and even in ancient Rome discounts the significance of this control in ancient literature. Holt Parker's teratogenic grid has attempted to outline the possibilities of male/female sex in ancient Rome, all of which place the woman in the permanent passive position with no room for movement. Within his structure, women have "exactly three

possible sexual passiv[e] [abilities]: to be fucked in the vagina, the anus, or the mouth” (Parker, 1997, p. 49). Throughout his argument, Parker maintains that any penetration of the citizen male is a “monster producing” scenario in antiquity. However, this implies that if a woman sought out and enjoyed this penetration, she would also be seen as “monster producing” because this sudden agency and activity challenges her definition as passive (Parker, 1997). Beyond its simplification of the female role, which erases her subjectivity, this model also fails to address the subjectivity and sexuality of freedmen, which is nonbinary to the extent that this category falls politically and socially between ‘active’ and ‘passive.’ Given the Penetration Model’s dichotomy between the adult male citizen as the sole appropriate identity of active (penetrator) and the necessarily passive role of everyone else (penetrated), this model drastically simplifies the dynamics that occur in the bedroom, at least in an author like Apuleius, reflecting a similarly simplified assessment of the social and political role of women.

Carson’s “Women, Dirt, and Desire,” in contrast, discusses an alternative reality in which women experience both desire and pleasure. However, the women in these cases are depicted as being uncontrollable if they are not bound to men through marriage (Carson, 1990). Moving to the structuralist view of gender and sexuality in antiquity, Carson’s research, indebted to French structuralists such as Detienne, Loraux, Vernant, and Vidal-Naquet, outlines a field of oppositions in which women, given their wild and wet nature, are closer to beasts than men, given the self-control and dry nature of the latter. Therefore, while Parker asserts that female sexual agency is viewed as abnormal, and the active woman is a monster, structuralism explores an opposite construction of women as hypersexual and unbound. Between these conceptual opposites, we should consider sexual scenes in literature in which women exercise sexual agency and authority and are not represented as savage. According to Parker (1997), “feminine passion

[...] must be simultaneously active (hence the sexual meaning of *morigera*, ‘actively pleasing the man,’ [...] and passive, still under the control of the husband” (p. 56). Yet throughout the narrative of the *Golden Ass* we have instances of women who have power over their own sex life that is (arguably) separate from a man and are not oriented toward male pleasure.¹¹ Therefore, whereas the Penetration Model accentuates the passivity and penetrable nature of women, the structuralist model articulates the raw, wet, leaky, wild, and dangerous sexuality of women, which is found in many literary genres.

In comparison to these extremes, Apuleius gives us something in between: women as in-control sexual agents. Amongst these examples is Apuleius’ witch, who, while represented as dangerous and sexually unsatiated, also skirts the edges of what it means to be a ‘Roman witch,’ who is often defined by her horrendous appearance and actions. However, despite the threat they pose, the witches of the *Golden Ass*, who display extreme sexual and social autonomy, are also seen as beautiful and alluring. Thus, between Apuleius’ examples of positive female agency—such as Photis and the goddess Isis—and his more ‘threatening’ women, who are still treated with dignity (in contrast to how many Roman authors handle witches), we have a dynamic range of female characterization. Therefore, this would place women in antiquity closer to the middle category of ‘human,’ and more parallel to men if not exactly ‘same.’

Many consider the Roman novels to be part of the *fabula* genre of fables, which Quintilian states are for the minds of unsophisticated individuals who naively listen to what is meant for entertainment (*Inst.* 5.11.19). Thus, *fabulae*, in theory, have the dangerous ability to influence and “soften” those who read them (Langlands, 2006). If we look to Apuleius’ *Golden*

¹¹ We should consider the scenes throughout book 9 which characterize both the Roman opinions/fears of adulterous women. However, it is also throughout these instances that a man is considered to be the fooled and passive member of the relationship as the wife takes the reins of her sexual pleasure.

Ass, we can trace powerful women that maneuver within, and sometimes around, their socially accepted roles while simultaneously manipulating the system to gain power over their own sexual and societal identity. The problem is not with Apuleius, but with an academic dichotomy between the women as passive socket or bestial seductress, which is challenged by this attempt to read women in Apuleius as neither one nor the other.

We should next consider some of the many instances throughout the *Golden Ass* that illustrate women who control their sexual pleasure. Through an analysis of the active agency of Byrrhena, Photis, Psyche, and the *matrona* in Book 10, I seek to establish a claim of female control in Apuleius' narrative.¹² Whereas it has been argued that even when women are seen as 'active' in sex, they are still the passive recipient, I seek to reconsider our definition of *passive*. Instead of considering passivity a result of penetration as strictly a function of a penis in an orifice and a one-to-one relationship between political status and sexual role, we should consider the movement and actions of the bedroom and who is under the mercy of these actions. Through the progression of female control in the *Golden Ass*, which begins with the depictions of Byrrhena and Lucius' relationship with Photis, and reaches its climax in Book 10 when the *matrona* seizes total control over her night with Lucius, the theme of female sexual agency is developed and strengthened over the course of the *Golden Ass*. This is consistent with, and runs parallel to, the novel's representation of witches, which recuperates the abject as a source of power, while at the same time casting the male protagonist as the abject for much of the narrative.

¹² For Part I of this thesis, I will be primarily looking at the main human characters of the narrative (Photis, Byrrhena, Psyche, the *Matrona*, etc.).

Byrrhena. The depiction of superior women begins in Book 2 with the characterization of Byrrhena and her home. Byrrhena, as an elite woman, may have been socially under the guardianship and guidance of a man in her family, but this is never made explicit. Studies on prominent women in Roman history, such as women of the imperial court, or wealthy women in the late Republic, such as Cicero's wife, Terentia, highlight the ways in which women are frequently defined in relation to the men in their lives, even as they may have wrestled some political power and distinct influence (Cenerini, 2013; Claassen, 1996; Hallett, 1989). However, not only is there no mention of a husband or father in Byrrhena's home, but she seems entirely in control of her estate. Moreover, the *Golden Ass* has the double, or perhaps triple, cultural vision of being a novel in Latin by an author from Madaurus in North Africa, with a Greek setting, and while Roman women were not given any official political power and often had to maneuver through men to gain influence, they still had considerably more freedom and social visibility than often isolated Greek women (Cenerini, 2013; Pomeroy, 1975; Woof, 2013).¹³ Byrrhena is seemingly an unmarried woman (as there is no mention of a previous or current marriage) who keeps herself in the public sphere as a woman of influence. The only reference to an outside familial connection is Byrrhena's reflection on her sister (Lucius' mother) and her love for Lucius as her nephew. Aside from our narrator, the only men in Byrrhena's life are the slaves she owns, and the men who join her for dinner. This implies that she has an active and public lifestyle, which is contrary to the 'ideal' of women whose modest public persona serves only to bolster the reputation of the men of the home.

When she is first introduced in Book 2, she approaches Lucius in the market, surrounded by rich jewels, fabrics, and her staff (*aurum in gemmis et in tunicis, ibi inflexum, hic intextum*,

¹³ Note: This reference to Greek women is focused primarily on Athenian women.

matronam profecto confitebatur).¹⁴ However, what is especially evident is the power she radiates as Lucius finds himself unnerved that *she* directs her attention to him without any apology. They enter her home, and her dedications to notably fierce goddesses allude to her feminine strength. Each column depicts a statue of Nike with her wings unfurled in victory, and in their company is a clothed Diana with her dogs, and a lingering Actaeon lurking in the background. In his discussion, Slater points to R.G. Peden's theories that the goddess of victory here is a concealed epiphany of Isis-Victoria-Fortuna (Slater, 1998, p. 28). This is significant given not only Winkler's (1985) observations about the hidden symbolism of Isis throughout the entire novel but also the foreshadowing of a female deity that ends Lucius' story. Furthermore, we should remember that Diana herself is one who avoids the company of males and is sworn in loyalty to her fellow sisters, and the specific depiction of the goddess in this scene is more tightly tied to her role as huntress rather than as maiden (Pomeroy, 1975; Slater, 1998).¹⁵ This is especially relevant given that Actaeon here has gazed upon a clothed Diana and is punished for it. Here, it does not appear that Diana's chastity was threatened, but rather Actaeon's unwanted presence is what brought about his punishment—perhaps warning those entering Byrrhena's space that their welcome is within her power. That said, the nature of Diana's robe, blown back against her (*veste reflatum*) creates a dual image of the huntress, flanked by her dogs, and the desirable maiden—given the nature of the erotic gaze in this scene. However, unlike Photis' earlier depiction as the *Venus Pudica*, Diana appears to be aware of Actaeon's gaze and while he watches her, she watches him; Diana, it appears, is aware of her sexual appeal (Slater, 1998).

¹⁴ Apul. *Met.* 2.2 : In gold-encrusted gems and gold-embroidered garments, she certainly declared herself a matron.

¹⁵ For more on Artemis/Diana and her connection to females and opposition to men in relation to gender see Pomeroy, 5.

Pomeroy's observation of Diana and her feminine power is intriguing, especially given her theory that the ancient world assigned the term 'virgin' to goddesses such as Athena and Diana (Artemis) simply because of their failure to marry. Most importantly, "Artemis retains control over herself; her lack of permanent connection to a male figure in a monogamous relationship is keystone of her independence" (Pomeroy, 1975). Moreover, like the huntress goddess, Byrrhena represents an independent woman, consistent with the symbolism of female victory present within her home. As mentioned, while Byrrhena announced herself to be a *matrona*, a wife, (*matronam profecto confitebatur*), there exists a paradox in this title, as neither she nor Lucius ever alludes to the existence of a husband.¹⁶ She is without a man, she is in control, and her home reflects that. Further, as Lucius enters the home of Byrrhena, he steps into the atrium's suspended moment and becomes part of the story. Unknowingly, this is the first instance where he is subjected to the gaze of women. Through the lens of the female gaze we should consider the sequence of views as one would enter the sculptural program of the atrium. The water flowing through the Diana-Actaeon sculpture would, through reflection, add a new viewing position to the scene. Without the water, the set dissolves into binary oppositions of the male gaze (Lucius and Actaeon) and female objects (Diana and Nike). Actaeon is already seen as 'caught' by the female gaze of Diana, who holds agency and power. However, *because* of this reflection, it is revealed that the outer scene of the Nikes looking down upon Lucius establishes a reversal in power in which the female gaze dominates the scene (Slater, 1998). This moment thus underpins the development of the female gaze that becomes prominent throughout the rest of the novel. From Psyche's evaluation of the sleeping Cupid to the *matrona* as she watches the

¹⁶ Apul. *Met.* 2.2. "Certainly, she declared herself a matron."

performance of Lucius and becomes enthralled, the strength of female control, in the reversal of the traditional male gaze, is a sustained theme in the *Golden Ass*.

Photis. Photis, as a slave, would naturally be seen as sexually available to the master of the home. This is why Lucius directs his attention toward her initially. But rather than being the passive victim, she takes the reins. Additionally, her sexual relationship is not referenced in a negative light, in contrast to the adulterous women referenced throughout the side tales of the novel. When Lucius enters Milo's home, he does so with the intention of launching a sexual campaign against the servant-girl, Photis, after learning from his aunt, Byrrhena, that Milo's wife, Pamphile was a well-known witch.¹⁷ Moreover, this revelation takes place in Byrrhena's home, after Lucius has witnessed her great atrium. The connection between Diana/Artemis and the goddess Selene/Hecate, both associated with the moon, childbirth, and witches, is crucial given that the witches throughout the *Golden Ass* are known for transforming men into beasts. In the scene of Diana and Actaeon, Actaeon is mid-transformation—thus contributing to this theme of women who have power over the identity and bodies of men.

The witch's handmaiden seems like the perfect candidate to be Lucius' vehicle in gaining access to the magical rites of Pamphile. The first real encounter we see with Lucius is when he enters the kitchen intending to seduce her, but it becomes clear that she is the one who places him under her spell. She begins by preparing meat (*tucchetum*), chopping it, and preparing the appetizer. Ironically, if we look forward to the rest of this passage, it surely seems that she is preparing more meat than what is in front of her. Lucius' eyes begin at her torso, noting the way he can see her chest's red band beneath her thin garments. His gaze then travels downward to the

¹⁷ Apul. *Met.* 2.6

ways that her hips move as she stirs her bowl (*ollulam istam cum natibus intorques*).¹⁸

Significant is the close correlation between *ollula* and *nates* here. The ‘little pot’ here is acting as the metaphor of the vagina, and the movement of her hips articulates this.¹⁹ Photis, however, is actively moving her body in a way that is both visually and linguistically sexual—a linguistic metaphor of female masturbation. We can see this in the way that she stirs her pot with her lively palms (*floridis palmulis*).²⁰ Emphasis here is placed in the circular motion (*in circulum*), and beginning in a careful and slow motion, she continues her rotation as she shakes and stimulates her own body. If we look to the word choice, *succutiens* implies that the quivering is coming from below. Additionally, while *inlubricans* is referring to the way she is synchronizing her own bodily movements, we cannot ignore the insinuation that this verb means to lubricate. Thus, we are given the image of her pleasuring herself. Additionally, while *membra sua* on one level is indicating the whole of her body, it seems to also refer to Photis’ clitoris, especially given Lucius’ reference to his own *membra* just a few lines later.²¹ From here, the pace escalates as Photis metaphorically reaches a climax, until, finally, she *undabat* (gushes). While *undabat* has the literal meaning of “rising in waves,” we can see here how Photis is both arching her spine and, with the wet nature of the verb, reaching a climax in her pleasure.

This passage (2.7), while describing Lucius’ gaze as he watches Photis prepare food, simultaneously places sexual agency in her hands. Here, Photis has taken sexual control over the

¹⁸ You stir around that little jar with (your) ass (Apul. *Met.* 2.7).

¹⁹ J.N Adams covers the utilization of *ollula* as a metaphor for vagina in his *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* pg 29 & 87. He also discusses the significance of these household objects both in Apuleius and in Pseudo-Lucian’s *Asinus*

²⁰ Note this moment, as the focus on Photis’ palms here anticipates the description of her as Venus, covering her genitals with her “rosy palm,” which comes a few short chapters later.

²¹ J.N Abrams notes that *membrum* typically refers exclusively to male genitalia, (46) and while *membrum* can indicate a vagina, it is typically associated with *muliebre* to denote the feminine aspect. But we should not ignore the purposeful repetition of these words so closely together within this metaphor. Further *membra* is also seen to denote a female organ in elegy (See Ovid’s *Am.* 3.7) (224); we may conclude that Apuleius is borrowing this usage.

situation. Following this moment, Lucius acquires an erection and quickly falls under Photis' spell. He is amazed by the way she moves, how she prepares this honey-sweet appetizer (*mellitum pulmentum*), and how a man would be so blessed and lucky should she permit him to dip his fingers into the dish. It is clear that Apuleius is writing about more than food.²² As Lucius watched Photis, his own mental activity and her movements acted as the prelude to their sexual encounter. While the audience was presented with the linguistic imagery of Photis fingering herself, we now see that Lucius desires to be the one to dip his fingers into her. Lucius is clearly using *pulmentum* as a metaphor when he states that any man would be lucky to dip his fingers into it, when Photis has undeniably already dipped hers.²³ As Lucius sings his praises to Photis, and begs for the bed, there is a distinct lack of force or control in his own narrative voice. Finally, this charming and talkative girl (*lepida alioquin et dicacula*) stops Lucius and warns him of the spell that he will fall under if she grants his wish. She tells him to depart from her fires (*foculo*, emphasizing the sacrificial element) and warns that if her spark touches him, he will be entirely engulfed in a fire that no one can extinguish aside from her (*Nam si te vel modice meus igniculus afflaverit, ureris intime nec ullus extinguet ardorem tuum nisi ego*).²⁴ Here, we should note the similarities between Photis' warning and the incantations of curse tablets.²⁵ This is significant given Photis' own connection to magic (possibly as an acolyte?) and is worth further investigation given the negative and overly sexual connotations of witches. As we will see in

²² For the sexual symbolism of food, see Emily Gower's *The Loaded Table* "In [Apuleius'] *Metamorphoses*, where the narrative is both a retrospective account of the perils of *voluptas* and the product of newly-learned rhetorical *ubertas*. Stuffed or rich dishes in the text can be seen as figures for cloying pleasure and for the literary *copia* to which Apuleius aspires" (p. 122 n53). We can see this connection between food and sex in Apuleius in 1.4, 2.7, 5.15, 7.11, 9.22.

²³ Note that the preparation of this recipe, with its sexual metaphors, also reflects the preparation of magical potions, all of which hold traits that can support these sexual metaphors, and are characterized in a "monstrous" way. This is significant given Photis' tenuous connection to magic and the part that she plays in Lucius' transformation.

²⁴ See note 2 for translation (Apul. Met. 2.7).

²⁵ The role of witches and their sexual and societal agency in relation to *The Golden Ass* will be explored later in this study.

Part II, Photis' own playful association with magic underscores Apuleius' writing and rewriting of the witch topos, which differs greatly from the terrifying, grave-dwelling witches of Horace and Lucan. Photis, while not herself a witch, is not only closely tied to Pamphile (her mistress), who *is* a well-known and feared witch, but also Lucius seeks out Photis in order to gain access to magic. Here, Photis' own words and warnings are alluding to the abject transformation that Lucius will undergo through magic.

Lucius finally looks to Photis' upper body (i.e her face) and all of his own control breaks (*nec diutius quivi tantum cruciatum voluptatis eximiae sustinere*) and he forces a kiss onto her neck.²⁶ However, his objectification of her body is quickly crushed as Photis turns her head and forces him to meet her eyes. Once more, she warns him of what her 'love' will do to him and she continues to patronize him by naming him as a schoolboy (*scolastice*) as she foretells his fate. However, Lucius is already under her spell. Keeping to the imagery of passion inflamed, Lucius gives himself over to her kisses and declares himself to be already prostrated and burned by her fire (*super istum ignem porrectus assari*).²⁷ At this point, Photis—through her tongue—has penetrated Lucius before he could penetrate her, thus denoting Lucius as the passive member of this exchange. As this sexual spell now meets its climax, Lucius declares that he will obey her and that he is lost to her generosity. Significantly enough, this is when Photis turns to him and announces herself to be his personal sexual slave (*mancipata sum*), almost as though granting him the idea that he is in fact in control of this entire situation. Nevertheless, just as soon as she 'submits' herself to him, she gives him more orders. As if for battle, she instructs him to prepare himself (*compara te*), as she plans to bravely fight from her own soul (*ex animo proeliabor*).

²⁶ For a while I was no longer able to endure the great torture of such extreme pleasure (Apul. *Met.* 2.10).

²⁷ I (having been laid) prostrate to be burned above that flame (Apul. *Met.* 2.10).

At this point, Lucius is forced to dine with Milo and endure his conversation, but instead of his interests lying in those around him, Lucius is consumed by thoughts of Photis. Eager to leave the dinner, Lucius dismisses himself and goes to his room to find that Photis has prepared an elaborate atmosphere of food, drink, and reclining for the two of them. It is easy to assume that Photis is taking on the role of servant and attendant much as she would do for her owners. However, when Photis enters the room wearing and distributing buds of roses, the scene is given deeper meaning. Those who have read Apuleius' *Golden Ass* may recognize how the symbolism of roses has been foreshadowed here. Photis approaches with garlanded roses (*rosa sertata*) and roses unbound in the curves of her skirts (*rosa solute in sinu tuberante*). She presses closely and takes hold of him, fastening the flowering garland to him (*ac me pressim deosculato et corollis revincto ac flore persperso adripit*).²⁸ We should remember that once Lucius takes on a donkey's form, it is only roses that can return his human form. Thus, this scene extends itself into both a foreshadowing of the trouble to come as well as the significance that Photis holds. Here, she is both his downfall, given her own part in his transformation, and his savior. This is especially ironic given Lucius' original intention to bed her as a way to learn more about her mistress's magic. From here, the two of them exchange wine back and forth in a way that is clearly meant to intoxicate Lucius. She extends the drink to him and encourages him to drink before she herself starts to partake. Even here, the language implies that while he drinks, she merely sips (*meque respiciens sorbillat dulciter. Sequens et tertium inter nos vicissim et frequens alternat poculum*).²⁹ This, perhaps, emphasizes that Lucius, being fully intoxicated (*cum ego iam vino madens*), is not of clear or controlled mind while Photis is.³⁰

²⁸ After she kissed me closely and bound me with garlands and sprinkled me all over with flowers, she seized me... (Apul. *Met.* 2.16).

²⁹ And seeing me, she sipped sweetly. And the bowl frequently alternates between us three times (Apul. *Met.* 2.16).

³⁰ When already I (was) dripping with wine (Apul. *Met.* 2.16).

While she sits back and sips on her wine, Lucius can endure no longer and pulls back his clothing to reveal the extended evidence of his tortured lust: *paulisper inguinum fine lacinia remota impatientiam veneris Photidi meae monstrans*.³¹ The utilization of *impatientia* and *patiens* shows the true extent of Lucius' torture, as he can no longer sustain the impact of Venus and is actively suffering. From here, he begs her to take pity on him and to end his suffering before his erection falls. The language engages imagery of weapons and battle as he compares his full erection to a tightly stretched bow (*arcum meum et ipse vigorate tetendi*)³² and accuses Photis of launching an attack upon him (*proelio quod nobis sine fetiali officio indixeras iam proximante vehementer intentus*).³³ We must note how Photis is in control of this situation. She makes him act first, beg first, while she cultivates her own pleasure. Then, once Lucius begs, it must be her decision to act on his requests.

Without hesitation, Photis then pushes aside the dishes among them and grants Lucius' pleas. She, stripping herself bare (*renudata*) lets loose her hair and, interestingly enough, is compared to Venus herself rising from the water (*ad hilarem lasciviam in speciem Veneris, quae marinos fluctus sumit pulchra reformata*).³⁴ This is significant on two separate levels. The first is that Lucius is seeing Photis on the same level as a goddess, thus suggesting that her 'spell' on him has done more work than we may have thought previously, but also, this comparison between a mortal woman and the goddess Venus nods toward the Cupid and Psyche episode that follows just a few books later. The comparison of Photis to Venus anticipates the worship of

³¹ Briefly from the (clothing's) hem having been moved back, I revealing to my Photis the impatience of (my) love (Apul. *Met.* 2.16).

³² And I having vigorously extended my bow (Apul. *Met.* 2.16).

³³ *proelio quod nobis sine fetiali officio indixeras iam proximante vehementer intentus*: (I) deeply intent on the battle now at hand, which you had declared with no priests to hurl the spear into enemy territory (Apul. *Met.* 2.16).

³⁴ To the cheerful playfulness in the likeness of Venus, who submerges the seaborne waves having reemerged beautiful (Apul. *Met.* 2.17).

Psyche as Venus. While Psyche will bear the punishment of this transgressive comparison in Book 5 and 6, here the danger falls on Lucius, and this is consistent with his implicit identification with Actaeon earlier in Book 2.

Ironically, Photis and Psyche are two very different characters and, sexually, their agency is not comparable. We can see this in the way that Photis instantaneously takes control during sex, as she has since the beginning of their encounter. Photis covers her groin with her rosy hand, as though still holding to modesty. This careful focus on Photis' hand not only draws us back to her 'flowery/lively' hand that had been stirring her 'pot,' but the repeated imagery of roses pushes us to prepare for the eventual emergence of Isis in Book 11. In the following lines, standing before him naked, she declares war on him; Photis questions Lucius' own ability to be a man (*si vir es*) should he not meet her challenge. Photis' words insist that Lucius meet her demands, and she will not accept anything less (*nec enim tibi cedam nec terga vortam; [...]* *derige et grassare naviter et occide moriturus*).³⁵ We should note that up until this cry to battle, Lucius has yet to touch her sexually. This dynamic between the two of them, in many ways, reflects the social battle between men and women in the familial and social spheres, a conflict whose roles are not nearly so binary as the Penetration Model would suggest. This heteronormative, but far from female-passive, scene helps to reflect the true strain between men and women, should we choose to see sexuality beyond the lens of the Penetration Model. Here, we have a battle for agency and dominance—something that is especially emphasized in Photis'

³⁵ Nor will I yield to you nor turn my back...focus yourself and attack and slay (me), even as you are about to die (Apul. *Met.* 2. 17).

declaration that this is a fight in which no one will survive (*hodierna pugna non habet missionem*).³⁶

Following this battle proclamation, the sexual relationship between Lucius and Photis moves forward to intercourse. What first becomes noticeable is the singular and active position that Photis takes. She, undeniably, is dominant in this encounter. *She* speaks, *she* mounts the bed, *she* takes position above him, and *she* moves her body along his length for his pleasure. These present active participles (*dicens, residens, subsiliens, quatiens*) reflect the agency that Photis has throughout this scene. It is here that Photis, once again, is compared to Venus in the heat of sex, and it is only (assumedly) after Lucius finds his release that the verbs shift into an inclusive plural. Up until this moment, Lucius was the passive member, regardless of who is penetrating whom. Photis had control, and it is she who was acting on him. Furthermore, it can be gathered that Photis, too, found sexual gratification in this moment given the grouped action of Lucius and Photis breathing heavily, tired from the action (*dum lassis animis et marcidis artibus defetigati simul ambo corruimus*).³⁷ The enunciation of a dual action, seen through not only the plural verb (*corruimus*) but also the addition of “together” (*ambo*), reiterates the mutual gratification of Photis and Lucius.

In the sexual encounter that takes place after the Festival of Laughter, Photis offers him “a boyish gift,” possibly to atone for the role she played in his public humiliation.

Sic nobis garrientibus libido mutua et animos simul et membra suscitatur: omnibus abiectis amiculis ac tandem denique infecti atque nudati bacchamur in Venerem, cum quidem mihi iam fatigato de propria liberalitate Fotis puerile obtulit corollarium (3.20).

³⁶ Today’s fight has no dismissals (survivors) (Apul. *Met.* 2.17). NOTE: this is using language specifically from gladiatorial combat and the arena, not warfare in general, thus creating a true level of competition behind its meaning.

³⁷ While with exhausted souls and failing limbs we both collapsed together, utterly spent (Apul. *Met.* 2.18).

Thus, having talked, our mutual lust simulates our like minds and bodies, with all (our) clothes thrown aside and at last with our nudity open, we raved in Venus, when already I had been exhausted, Photis, in (her) generosity, offered the boyish gift.

Significant here is the *corollarium* that includes a pun on *corolla*, a little crown of flowers as a metaphor for a boy's anus. Thus, even when submitting herself to the passive position of anal sex, offered through her own generosity rather than taken by force, Photis maintains her control and agency. In a world where women, especially slaves, have little control in their lives, we are given a glimpse of a woman claiming power and dominance in a situation where she is expected to be passive. Not only has she given pleasure, but she has taken it as well.

In contrast to Photis, her Greek counterpart, Palaistra, in Pseudo-Lucian's *The Ass* is instantly considered "a little maiden," (τὸ παιδισκάριον), and Loukios' observations of Palaistra is rooted in her sexual 'duty' and work as a slave. As a stark contrast, gone is the metaphor to female masturbation and pleasure in the kitchen-scene. Instead, the language is clear that Loukios looks upon Palaistra reductively, as an object, and intends to 'dip' himself into her with penile penetration. Rather than putting a spell on Lucius, Palaistra holds no agency in the encounter and is instead treated as the sensual slave as Loukios dominates her. Palaistra, despite taking up the role of 'trainer,' a position that is reflected in her name, in their ongoing wrestling metaphor, acts as a contrasting figure to Photis. She takes the bottom position and dutifully acts out the stereotype of the slave who knows how to pleasure well. She may be commanding him to move this way and that, but he is still the active member. In Apuleius' narrative, in contrast, Photis emphatically takes control of her pleasure and desire, at least metaphorically, before seeing to Lucius. Photis may be the penetrated party here, but Lucius is passive to her desires, and thus we should begin to reevaluate the concept of 'passivity' in Roman literature and culture.

Psyche. Rather than Photis' agency throughout her relationship to Lucius, Psyche assumes a passive role in her relationship to Cupid, creating a stark contrast in the narrative that exemplifies the socially accepted, normative position that women were supposed to assume in the bedroom. From the start of her narrative, every decision and action has been made *for* Psyche rather than showcasing her own decision making or agency throughout this embedded narrative. Once Psyche is taken to Cupid's palace via Zephyr's winds, she wanders the halls and is entertained by the invisible voices until night comes. Then, in the darkness of the bedroom, Psyche has no sight available to her and is susceptible to anything that might come her way. The enunciation of Psyche's fear in this visionless solitude (*tanta solitudine*) comes through with three consecutive verbs, each increasing the level of terror (*metuens, pavet, horrescit*) as she thinks about her own vulnerability, and more specifically, her virginity. Interestingly enough, the only active decision that Psyche has for the next two chapters is this fear, for the moment that Cupid enters the room he becomes the dominant husband who controls her sexually as he controls the home. He, unknown to her in every way (*ignobilis maritus*), mounts the bed and makes Psyche his wife before he departs without a word (*torum inscenderat et uxorem sibi Psychem fecerat et ante lucis exortum propere discesserat*).³⁸ From here, the direct object of the actions is not even Psyche herself, but the label for her new marital status (*novam nuptam*) in the new context of her slain virginity (*interfectae virginitatis*). Almost as though Psyche herself was removed from the conscious agency of dealing with the loss of her virginity, it is the voices that then tend to her—all without us experiencing her own thoughts about the matter (*statim voces cubiculo praestolatae novam nuptam interfectae virginitatis curant*).³⁹

³⁸ He mounts the bed and makes Psyche a wife for him and before the rising of the dawn, he had departed (Apul. *Met.* 4.4).

³⁹ Immediately the servant voices stationed at the bedroom take care of the new bride for the sake of her lost virginity (Apul. *Met.* 4.4.).

Following the first night of marriage, the narrative continues to place Psyche as the direct object of Cupid's conjugal visits each night (*ea nocte ad suam Psychen sic infit maritus*).⁴⁰ We should note how, from the start, Psyche resembles a possession more than she resembles an active participant in the marriage. As if she were a child, Cupid, still unknown to her eyes, (*namque praeter oculos et manibus et auribus ut praesentius non nihil sentiebatur*) instructs her of what she should and should not do as news of her sisters comes to them.⁴¹ Throughout their relationship, Cupid resembles the *praeceptor* (instructor) described throughout Latin literature that must teach his young bride how to be a proper wife. He is dominant in the household, and even after Psyche is convinced by her sisters to disobey Cupid, she is left at his mercy and the mercy of others for the rest of the narrative.

Despite Cupid's constant warnings for Psyche to beware of her jealous sisters, Psyche, often referred to as simple-minded (*simplicitate nimia*), is won over by her sisters' false fear and sets out to slay her husband. She, while otherwise 'weak' in mind and body, is given strength by fate, having gathered her strength through rage (*tunc Psyche et corporis et animi alioquin infirma fati tamen saevitia subministrante viribus roboratur*).⁴² Up until this point, Psyche's role as daughter, wife, and potential mother has been the stressed point in the plot's narrative. The tale began with her distress over her inability to marry due to her beauty, with her parents desperate to find a husband, with her need to be obedient to her new husband (Cupid), and then with her need to be the proper wife to ensure the best outcome for her child's future. The idealized femininity of Psyche is her defining characteristic; however, persuaded by her sisters

⁴⁰ Each night the husband goes to his Psyche (Apul. *Met.* 4.5).

⁴¹ For, with the exception of her eyes, he was known fairly well through her hands and ears (Apul. *Met.* 4.5).

⁴² Psyche is often referred to as simple when she is going against her husband's instructions (Apul. *Met.* 5.15). (*simplicitate nimia*), 5.16 (*fatuae*), 5.18 (*simplex et animi tenella*), 5.23 (*dum insatiabili animo Psyche*), (5.24) (*simplicissima Psyche*). Translation: then Psyche, otherwise weak in mind and in body, with (her) rage having been supplied, was given strength in power by fate (*Met.* 5.22).

she decides to investigate her husband's true identity. Armed with the lamp and a razor, she takes on the boldness of a man (*prolata lucerna et adrepta novacula sexum audacia mutator*).⁴³

As she gazes upon Cupid's sleeping form, in a scene that evokes the numerous instances of the sleeping woman discovered by the male aggressor, the following ekphrastic description of the god flips the traditional role of the male gaze. It becomes one of just *gaze*—reflected through Psyche's female gaze and reinforced through the gaze of the reader.⁴⁴ She is stunned by the sight and becomes defeated in her tired mind. She trembles and settles herself down, seeking to hide the razor she had previously intended to use against her husband (*at vero Psyche tanto aspectu deterrita et impos animi marcido pallore defecta tremensque desedit in imos poplites et ferrum quaerit abscondere*).⁴⁵ After the brief consideration of killing herself out of shame, she stops and takes a moment to look at her *husband's* features. She sees his golden head, his luscious milky skin, and his tender feathers—and it is in this description that Cupid is viewed as the beautiful piece of art that he is.

*Videt capitis aurei genialem caesariem ambrosia temulentam cervices
lacteas genasque purpureas pererrantes crinium globos decoriter impeditos alios
antependulos alios retropendulos quorum splendore nimio fulgurante iam et
ipsum lumen lucernae vacillabat per umeros volatilis dei pinnae roscidae micanti
flore candicant et quamvis alis quiescentibus extimae plumulae tenellae ac
delicatae tremule resultants inquieta lasciviunt (Met. 5.22).*

She sees the delightful hair of the golden head drunken with ambrosia, the milky-white neck and the blushing cheeks, the gracefully strewn coils of hair straying, some in the front, some in the back, whose excessive glittering luster caused the light of the lamp itself to flicker; over the shoulders of the fleeting god are white dewy wings, gleaming with youth, and with all else at rest, the outer tender feathers shudder with a delicate tremble and restless they frisk about.

⁴³ With the lamp brought forward, and the razor having crept (forward), (Psyche) was moved by the boldness of a man (Met. 5.22).

⁴⁴ Reflective of scenes such as Tarquin and Lucretia, Dionysus and Ariadne, Satyr and Maenad, and Propertius and Cynthia.

⁴⁵ But truly Psyche was deterred at the great sight and not in control of her mind, she was defeated in the rotten exhaustion of her soul, and trembling she sunk to her inmost knees and sought to hide the iron (Met. 5.22).

We should note how Apuleius has crafted a scene that is both frozen and animated at the same time, moving through iconically perfect pieces of Cupid's body in a way that recalls Mulvey's fetishizing gaze, but applied here to the male body (Mulvey, 1999). Cupid, while being a living work of art, is still and silent under Psyche's searching gaze. We might imagine that the only thing breaking the silence here is his gentle breathing and the rustling of his godly wings. The scene picks up pace as the peace is broken by Psyche's own swelling emotion and curiosity for the lover who has, until now, been a complete mystery to her. In her excitement, she begins fondling his weaponry and is pricked by Cupid's arrow, thus being symbolically penetrated by him yet again, but now through her own inchoate agency.

Quae dum insatiabili animo Psyche, satis et curiosa rimatur atque pertrectat et mariti sui miratur arma depromit unam de pharetra sagittam et punctu pollicis extremam aciem periclitabunda trementis etiam nunc articuli nisu fortiore pupugit altius, ut per summam cutem roraverint parvulae sanguinis rosei guttae. Sic ignara Psyche sponte in Amoris incidit amorem (Met. 5.23).

Which (i.e. the arrows) while Psyche, with an insatiable mind, with ample curiosity, prods and examines and she admires the weapons of her husband, she takes one arrow from the quiver and testing its very edge with the tip of her thumb, with the too-strong pressure of her trembling joint, it pierced more deeply, so that through the first layer of skin, the small drops of rose-colored blood drip. Thus, unknowing, Psyche spontaneously falls in love with Love.

Here, we must read Psyche's interaction with Cupid's arrow in two different ways. On the most basic layer, Psyche is handling the weapons of Cupid that have caused so much chaos throughout this entire story, but, on a metaphorical level, we are given a different insight into the loss of Psyche's virginity, which, from the standpoint of desire, seems to happen here for the first time. Unlike her first night in marriage, Psyche is not only able to see her husband, but she is the one handling the weapons that will prick her. The agency of this penetration has been placed in her hands. As the arrow metaphorically pierces Psyche's finger (read: hymen?), her own pleasure mounts into a frenzy of lust for the god that she has married. Additionally, we should note that

while Psyche ‘spontaneously’ (*sponte*) falls in love with Cupid, *sponte* can also mean ‘willingly’ which would position Psyche paradoxically between ignorance and desire. We can see this in the way that she throws herself upon his prone figure and begins to press kisses on him, all the while worrying that he will wake. While Cupid is still deep in his slumber, Psyche is controlling the sexual activity between the two of them, and her pleasure is the only force directing the scene until we see an image of ejaculation that brings everything to a halt (*tunc magis magisque cupidine fragrans Cupidinis prona in eum efflictim inhians patulis ac petulantibus saviis festinanter ingestis de somni mensura metuebat*).⁴⁶ In a visual representation of the ecstasy that Psyche independently experiences throughout this scene, the lamp that she grips tight—a doublet for Photis’ *ollula*—ejaculates a hot droplet of oil onto the god’s shoulder.

sed dum bono tanto percita saucia mente fluctuat lucerna illa sive perfidia pessima sive Invidia noxia sive quod tale corpus contingere et quasi basiare et ipsa gestiebat, evomuit de summa luminis sui stillam ferventis olei super umerum dei dexterum (Met. 2.23).

But while with great excitement surging through [Psyche’s] wounded mind, that lamp, either in wicked faithlessness or hostile jealousy, or it itself was eager to touch and to somewhat kiss such a body, from the tip of its flame it gushed out a droplet of burning oil onto the right shoulder of the god.

Here is a depiction of a one-sided orgasm, on the *female* side. This is made especially clear when Cupid, upon waking, finds himself not only in pain, but is also consumed by rage at his wife’s disobedience. Psyche, upon taking up the task of learning her husband’s identity, may have gained knowledge, more independence, and autonomy in her marital relationship, but it is clear through Cupid’s reaction that the masculine boldness of Psyche throughout this scene has, in consequence, emasculated the god.

⁴⁶ Then, burning more and more with desire for Cupid, she passionately gapes, laying on him, and with wide open and insolent kisses quickly applied, she fears (about) the length of his sleep (*Met. 5.23*).

The Matrona. In assembling this picture of the penetrating yet passive male, we should consider finally the scene of the *matrona* in Book 10. Here, much as in his relationship with Photis, Lucius takes the backseat in the sexual encounter, but in a very different way. He, as a donkey, has no agency over the situation. He has no voice to declare what he wants, has no hands to direct her where he wants, and it is the woman who uses Lucius' elongated member as she pleases. From the outset, we should note the similarities in the construction of the beginning of the *matrona*'s scene and that of Photis'. In both instances, the women have arranged for the mood to be set with elaborate utensils and luxurious food, fostering the assumption that the women are there to please and serve the man. The truth is rather the opposite. Like Photis, the *matrona* begins to orient the scene toward her own pleasure as she drops her clothing (*tunc ipsa cuncto prorsus spoliata tegmine*) and rubs both herself and Lucius with oil. Here, we should begin to note how all actions are being insistently done *to* Lucius.⁴⁷ She rubs him with oil (...*oleo balsamino meque indidem largissime perfricat*)⁴⁸ and then presses her insistent kisses on him (*tunc exosculata pressule*).⁴⁹ Following this, Lucius takes note in his internal monologue that her advances are not like those of a prostitute, and perhaps this is intentional on Apuleius's part, establishing that the *matrona* is no common whore and is intent on her own pleasure rather than a man's.

This addition to the dialogue (*non qualia inpupanari solent basiola vel meretricum poscinumia vel adventorum negantinummia*) highlights this point in case the reader had not understood the married woman's status, influence, and wealth earlier (*pollens et opulens*).⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Then right away she altogether stripped from clothing (*Met.* 10.19).

⁴⁸ From the same place she generously anoints me with balsamic oil (*Met.* 10.19).

⁴⁹ Then, pressing close, she fondly kissed (me) (*Met.* 10.19).

⁵⁰ Not the kind of kisses common in brothels, either of mercenary whores, or of male visitors who would do it for free, but pure and sincere (*Met.* 10.19). The acts of the *matrona* here remind me of Latin texts that scandalize the wives of emperors and elite men with tales of sexual acts that most likely did not take place.

However, it is also clear that the *matrona* is not in her right mind. The moment she saw Lucius, she was consumed by lust, and Lucius described her using the image of an ass-loving Pasiphae in her desire for him, this frenzy is enunciated through her instantaneous declarations of love for the donkey.^{51 52} Following this, the *matrona*'s control continues as she takes hold of him by his halter and makes him recline—here, *capistro*, which I translated here as “halter,” can also be taken as “muzzle.” If we take its meaning as muzzle, the visual image awarded is one of more force and control than the simple act of guiding someone back would allow.⁵³ Here, it is almost as though she is the trainer, the owner, and the alpha in contrast to our tamed beast. It is evident in the text that Lucius is eager to have intercourse with this woman, but his passivity in the exchange is almost comical, as what follows does not allow his donkey-form to be active.

Lucius' horror becomes evident the moment he looks to his own beastly form and then to her supple frame and realizes that he is hideous in comparison to her, alluding to his own abject body in comparison to her beauty. On a deeper level, this is Lucius realizing that he has no true control over the situation—thus making him the ultimate abject body. Through magic, so often considered abject (as we will discuss in length), Lucius is stripped of corporeal and social identity. It is only now that his process of emasculation is truly stressed. In terms of both the structuralist and the Foucauldian analysis of ancient sex/gender, the beatable Other (the animal) becomes the ostensibly active male penetrator, and yet one without any sexual agency. He has too large and too many legs to mount her (*quem ad modum tantis tamque magis cruribus possem delicatam matronam inscendere*), his hooves are too rough to embrace her (...*membra duris*

⁵¹ Little by little she fell in admirable (strange) desire for me; seizing not any cure for her frenzied lust, to the likeness of the ass-loving Pasiphae, she passionately awaited my embraces (*Met. 10.19*).

⁵² “*Amo*” et “*cupio*” et “*te solum diligo*” et “*sine te iam vivere nequeo*.” I love, I desire, I love only you, I already am unable to live without you (*Met. 10.21*).

⁵³ *Capistroque me prehensum more, quo didiceram, reclinat facile*. And taking me by the muzzle, she easily makes me recline in the manner that I had learned (*Met. 10. 21*).

ungulis complecti), his teeth are too large and deformed to kiss her (*amplo ore tamque enormi et sadeis dentibus deformi saviari*), and, worst of all, he believes his phallus is too large for her (*mulier tam vastum genitale susciperet*).⁵⁴ Here, perhaps, is the only indication that Lucius believes he is still in control of this encounter. While the *mulier* is certainly the one *taking* his penetration into her own hands, we can also imagine him expecting to be the active penetrator. However, the *matrona* maintains control as she continues her whisperings (*molles vocales*), moanings (*dulces gannitus*), and kisses (*adsidua savia*).⁵⁵ Her control and ownership (*adsidua savia*) continue, employing the metaphor of Lucius as her pet. She calls him her little dove and her sparrow, claiming him as hers alone.⁵⁶ The emphasis is placed on the *matrona*'s own sexual pleasure once more. The reference to Lesbia's sparrow, which is believed by many to be a poem about her own masturbation, or at least a poem which reimagines the male phallus as a pet that she controls, may lead us to connect the metaphorical dots from Photis' *ollula* to Psyche's *lucerna*, and see in the donkey-as-sparrow the metaphor of a phallus that exists for female pleasure.

The intercourse between Lucius and the *matrona*, in contrast to Photis, is one of completely unequal partners, in which the *matrona* is claiming all the pleasure for herself. Lucius, in this instance, is the sex toy. It is the *matrona* herself who utilizes Lucius like a living dildo and as the instrumental object as she grasps onto him and pulls him into herself, all the while he tries to pull away to spare her from his beastly size (*artissime namque complexa totum me prorsus sed totum recepit. Illa vero quotiens ei parcens nates recellebam accedens totiens*

⁵⁴ Apul. *Met.* 10.22

⁵⁵ Apul. *Met.* 10.22

⁵⁶ Reference to Catullus 2.

nisu rabido et spinamprehendens meam adplicitiore nexu inhaerebat).⁵⁷ This is the nadir of Lucius' sexual existence, perhaps for the rest of the narrative, for it is the moment that he expresses feelings of emasculation like he had not before. As the *matrona*'s sexual appetite continues, he fears that something is wrong with him, that he cannot truly satisfy her, especially as the rest of the night is spent with the woman riding Lucius like the donkey he is.⁵⁸

Thus, starting with Photis' sexual control, Apuleius steadily deepens his portrayal of female agency in sexual and social encounters until the climax is reached in Book 10 and 11 of the *Golden Ass*. Lucius goes from having a sexual experience with a slave girl, a relationship in which they both express their own agency within pleasure and desire, to having no voice nor hands to take agency in sex. Additionally, it is no small matter that the novel ends with Lucius' redemption, which takes the form of a goddess both foreign and paradoxically central to religious practices in the high Empire: the goddess Isis who is herself both Other and Same. This, in turn, may reflect the not fully or centrally Roman origins of Apuleius himself, as he describes himself as half Numidian and half Gaetolian. In his north African and mixed-race origins, and his command of Latin and Greek literature, Apuleius himself is both Other and Same, and thus it would be difficult to fix him securely in the category of the penetrator or the penetrated.

III. Conclusion

The women throughout the *Golden Ass* are creatures of strength and power. Women's political status and public voice were restricted in the high Empire, and yet they were surprisingly capable of social influence, agency within marriage and economic power. Apuleius'

⁵⁷ For closely she embraced all of me (the whole me having been embraced), but she received all. However many times I pulled back my buttocks, sparing her, each time leaning in with passionate force, grabbing my spine, she clung to me in a tight embrace.

⁵⁸ *Ut hercules etiam deesse mihi aliquid ad suppleendam eius libidinem crederem*: I believed that something lacked for me, when it came to the need to fulfill her pleasure.

narrative renegotiates this paradox, demonstrating how Roman women establish their own ability to regain control within a phallogocentric society. These illustrations of significant female power begin with the characterization of Byrrhena, Lucius' aunt, an elite woman and a *matrona* without any explicit ties or obligations to a man. Her power is notable not only through her wealth but also through the control of her home and its decorative program. The palpable absence of a male figure in Byrrhena's life indicates one of the many ways that Apuleius has written powerful and active female characters into his novel. Additionally, the sculptural composition in Byrrhena's atrium sets the stage for a powerful female gaze that will structure sexual relationships throughout the narrative. Photis, who is first introduced in Book 2, offers a stark contrast to her Greek counterpart. This is evident in her characterization, which is defined by her confidence and control over her own desires, and in her sexual relationship with Lucius. Beginning with a sly metaphorical representation of female masturbation, this relationship is notable for the emphasis it places on Photis' pleasure and desire rather than Lucius'.

As the novel deepens its portrayal of female agency, its construction of the myth of Cupid and Psyche first exhibits the traditional role of the Greco-Roman wife, and then presents Cupid as the object of the female gaze while handing sexual agency back to Psyche. In a reclaiming of her virginity and sexual pleasure, Psyche's metaphorical emancipation sets the stage for the penultimate display of positive sexual autonomy. The novel, which began with a relationship in which both partners had mutual pleasure, ends with the copulation of an elite woman with Lucius as donkey, with the female clearly on top. At the climax of the narrative, the *matrona* takes Lucius, whose donkey-form allows him no agency, and exploits him for her own pleasure. Through the progression of Lucius' experience as a beast we can see active agency slipping away from him and being placed into the hands of women. As we follow the chain of female

agency from Byrrhaena to Photis to Psyche to the *matrona*, we must reevaluate the interpretive dichotomy that would make women either sockets or hopelessly leaky vessels. For Apuleius, the truth clearly lies somewhere in between, and this would clearly resonate with women's lived experience in the 2nd century CE.

Additionally, the progression of female characterization throughout the novel draws attention not only to the balance of gendered power, but also underscores the female role (i.e. the witches) in Lucius' abject body. This progression, beginning with Meroë, gives a glimpse into chaos, continues deeper into the abject, then is ultimately redeemed through Isis. In Part II, I will discuss the correlation of the abject and the witches of Roman literature and how, in Apuleius, the topos of 'witch' is rewritten to not only highlight the assumed 'flaws' of women in antiquity, but also how this rewrite places power in the abject.

PART II: The Empowered Abject

Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject deals with the power of horror. The abject, which is anything that threatens social and corporeal identity, is often shown as an extension of societal fears, projected on those ostracized from the larger (patriarchal) society. Above all, the abject is associated with the maternal (and female) body, and thus all women, by extension, are considered abject. The *Golden Ass* is rich with examples of women manipulating their current circumstances to take power and authority for themselves. Throughout our analysis of the sexual dynamics in this novel, it is clear that while some of the women are portrayed as giving lip service to the notion of the 'dominant man,' the text is flexible enough on gender roles to suggest that they are simultaneously harvesting their own pleasure and agency in the bedroom, establishing themselves as an equal partner if not a dominant one. While these cases of sexual authority do not fit cleanly into the phallogentric Penetration Model or structuralist construct, we must next turn to the women throughout the *Golden Ass* who are not only heavy with lust and condemned for it, but are also manifestations of the out-of-control female identified by structuralist critics, often making them the personification of the fear of the monstrous female.

These women, these witches, not only prey on the virility of young men, but simultaneously molest and manipulate natural forces to their own ends. While these women are both horror-producing and dangerous, we should take care to note their function both within the novel and also their magical motivations and how the Roman witch stereotype affects their reception throughout the *Golden Ass*. The witches of the *Golden Ass* dramatize the 'classical' fear of women, a reaction to the violation of social norms, often fantastically exaggerated. The depictions of the Roman witch often embody horror, rich with imagery of decay, emasculation, and the excretion of bodily fluids—all key characteristics of the abject. Yet, at the same time,

Apuleius' inclusion of witches that both fall into and away from the stereotype of the Roman witch functions to highlight how the powerless may have claimed power for themselves through magical means, especially when society had granted them very little, at least outwardly. While women, according to the structuralist theory, may have been viewed as wet, leaky, and raw, Apuleius has established episodes (both negative and positive) of women taking what is considered their greatest flaw, their abjection, and wielding it for incredible power, effectively establishing it as their strength. Thus, through a close reading of the witches of the *Golden Ass*, climaxing with the Isis's redemption of Lucius, we can see a narrative that is rich with the empowered abject.

I. The Roman Witch and the Abject

The Theory of the Abject. The witch of Roman antiquity is designed to invoke horror. Apuleius' Meroë and Pamphile use their magic to bring men to their beds, Horace's Canidia and her coven can be seen harvesting a young man for his liver (an ingredient for a lust potion), and Lucan's Erictho transgresses the role of midwife as she rips a fetus from a pregnant woman as an ingredient for a spell. Abjection, which is anything that disrupts personal, societal, or corporal identity and order, does not respect the rules of the societal norms or expectations (Kristeva, 1941, p. 4). In Kristeva's theory, abjection, from *ab + jacio*, meaning to "throw/cast away," manifests in symbols of decay, bodily wastes such as urine, pus, blood, feces, sweat, death, incest, murder, and, in the end, the female body—all of which emphasize this concept of that which is thrown away (Kristeva, 1941, p. 3). Because of the nature of abjection, that which is excreted is both a symbol of necessity (we defecate, bleed, and urinate because we are alive), yet "what goes out of the body, out of its pores and openings, points to the infinitude of the body proper and gives rise to abjection," and in turn demonstrates a constant struggle between what is

considered to be ‘clean’ and what is seen as pollution (Kristeva, 1941, p. 108). Witches, throughout Latin literature, are notorious for spilling not only their bodily fluids but the fluids of others as well. Pamphile’s workshop includes the preserved gore of others amongst her hoard of body parts, Seneca’s Medea mutilates her own body during a ritual, and Meroë empties her bladder on a man.⁵⁹ Additionally, given that the witch herself is a manifestation of the abject, this disgust and horror is extended to her body, the source of abjection.

The literary focus on the physical attributes of the witch’s body supports both Sherry Ortner and Susan Bordo’s analysis of the female body as a corporal site for negativity, held separate from a man’s (Bordo, 1993; Ortner, 1974). Across many cultures, the female body is seen as corporal while the male body is seen as spiritual (read: cultural). This association stems from childbirth and childrearing, keeping the mother as the primary caretaker (and thus authority) of all that is ‘yucky’ and natural (given her role in procreation and birthing). However, while Ortner utilizes this concept to discuss expected gender roles, Bordo explores how, because of this process, the woman herself is a site of negativity. Specifically, “if the body is the negative term, and if woman *is* the body, then women *are* that negativity,” and in turn they are seen as a distraction from knowledge and cultural development itself (Bordo, 1993, p. 5). Additionally, the body (female) is then permanently seen as passive to the “guiding force” of the active (male), which dominates all (Bordo, 1993, p. 11). Thus, if women are seen as negative and are the source of abjection, given Kristeva’s attention to the process of separating identity from the mother, then the consequence is that women are consistently internalizing this belief that their bodies (and identities) are ‘bad,’ and that they are the source of unwanted and aggressive behavior directed toward them (Bordo, 1993, p. 8). Therefore, if the abject is a constant threat to health,

⁵⁹ Pamphile: *Apul. Met.* 3.17; Medea: *Sen. Med.* 797-810. Meroë: *Apul. Met.* 1.14.

the self, and society, and women *are* abject, then we must consider Bordo's attentiveness to the mental vulnerability of women placed beneath the weight of this ideology. Moving forward, Stratton and Schons both adapt Kristeva's concept of abjection within psychoanalysis to create an argument that witches are abject manifestations of Roman societal ideology, as the category of the abject arises from the projection of anxiety-provoking behaviors and aspects of the body onto marginal groups, in this case, old women. However, I would argue that the witches in Apuleius' novel are prime examples of women who have been burdened by the weight of the body as abject, and instead of collapsing beneath it, they have manipulated and maneuvered their circumstances to empower themselves, shaking off their passivity in exchange for an active role in their own narrative.

Through the representation of monstrous women in literature, folk tale, or art, the reader can access these abject emotions, confront them, and then reject them (Schons, 1998, p. 21). This is no different with the Roman witch. Utilizing Kristeva's theory, Melissa Schons (1998) illustrates how the witch "violates borders and boundaries, deals in abject concepts [...] and justifies fear of fertility by illustrating its opposite," in contrast to the Roman *matrona* (p. 22). And while her focus is primarily on Horace's witches, she illustrates how the literary treatment of the witches, heavy with slander, calls attention to the writing of hatred, which Kristeva (1941) says is the "spoken outcome of emotion," and ultimately acts as an instrument of separation, meant to ostracize the target of the hatred (p. 191). Through her horrendous actions the Roman witch functions not only as a literary villain, but also systematically breaks the gendered expectations of women throughout Roman culture in the 1st- 2nd century C.E. and separate her from the rest of Roman society.

This, especially, can be seen in their relation to female monsters throughout Roman literature more broadly. The existence of the *lamia*, a female serpentine monster, revolves around imagery of death, destruction, and, often, sex. According to Schons (1998), “the negative beliefs about magic and the *lamia* in Roman society establish preconditions in Roman thought for the negative portrayal of the witch in Latin literature (p. 16).” As we outlined in Part I, the Roman *matrona* was expected to oversee the *domus* and see to the function of the family, whereas the man functioned outside the home and in the thick of culture. With the witch, the association of the woman with *domus* and family is grossly exaggerated into equivalence with the decaying body. Similarly Clover suggests, that horror is informed by Thomas Laqueur’s theory of the archaic one-sex body, in which male and female have one sexual organ, but on a sliding scale of inside/outside, the male’s function on the outside, the woman’s inside. As a result, the inside is inferior and the outside superior, but there is the horror-producing threat of a chaotic collapse of one into the other (Clover, 1992, p.14). However, Schons primary objective is to illustrate the ways that the Roman literary witch blatantly crosses these boundaries both physically and metaphorically, and thus threatens the entirety of functional society.

In contrast, Kimberly Stratton (2014) pulls from *both* literary and material evidence to show how magic, especially in literature, “express anxiety over controlling the stability and boundaries of the body” (p.153). Further, despite material evidence suggesting that attempts at magic *appeared* to be a primarily male-center activity, it is women that wield magic in literature.⁶⁰ This leap from the significant involvement of males in actual practice (which seems evident in the material record) to a fictional narrative of entirely women suggests that the ability

⁶⁰ While I do not spend much attention on material evidence, Jack Winkler (1990), Kimberly Stratton (2007), David Frankfurter (2014), and Esther Eidinow (2019) all provide thorough and unique analyses of the material evidence of curse tablets and their correlation with gender, and each concludes that men appear to be the majority of magic tablet authors.

to manipulate nature and others (effectively) was a source of fear to the Romans. By assigning females as the source of this magic, Stratton effectively aligns Roman witches with Kristeva's claim that the maternal, feminine body is the ultimate locus of the abject. In her argument, Stratton records in detail how the witch enacts the abject, most of which concerns her violations of the human and social body. Stratton's primary focus, however, revolves around this concept of the social body and how the Roman witch threatens it through her subversion of gender roles and acts of adultery (2014).

As we showed in the first part of this analysis, the representation of women in Roman literature is often, but not always, dichotomous, split between the 'good' and the 'bad.' While the 'good' female was an image of chastity, loyalty to domestic values, and obedience to the husband, the 'bad' female transgressed all these boundaries by acting on account of her motivation and desires. This is significant given the criminalization of adultery during and following the Augustan period. According to Catharine Edwards, the use of women's chastity and marital fidelity as Roman symbols, in turn, created this increased concern with adultery, rather than the reality of female moral decay (1993). Further, the depictions of the 'common witch' are not so much connected with specific literary figures, but instead convey a combination of "complex concerns of inappropriate power-grabbing, sexuality, role reversal, and suspicion of old age that were central to the fear and accusation of witchcraft that might be performed by more 'common' women in antiquity" (Pollard, 2009, p. 119). Thus, ultimately the Roman witch, and magic more broadly, are associated with stereotypes of destruction and identities of chaos and death. Borrowing from Bordo and Clover, this would reflect an archaic fear of the collapse of the male "outside" of agency and culture into a female "inside" of the body and decay.

As we have established, abjection is that which most deeply threatens one's physical integrity, self-identity, or society. In antiquity, nobility was not simply an inborn characteristic but a trait to be nurtured through careful training and discipline of the (male) body. This corporal ideology is seen in Soranus' *Gynecology* and Galen's *Hygiene*, both of which demonstrate how the (ideal) qualities of male and female children were fostered differently (Stratton, 2014). Moreover, the corporal integrity of the elite's own was highly protected through judicial law, as the body of the citizen was considered entirely separate from slaves and foreigners (Garnsey, 1970; Parker, 1997; Walters, 1997). This protection was mainly present in sexuality, especially regarding young male citizens. By consequence, women's bodies threatened the system, because they were not only penetrated but could bear children as well. Their status was naturally lower than men, in part because of this Penetration Model; thus, "reading ancient representations of magic through the lens of ancient corporal ideology and the concept of abjection illuminates depictions of gruesome, threatening, and morbid rituals performed by female characters" (Stratton, 2014, p. 157). These texts can be divided into two main categories: the abjection caused by violated bodies, and stories where magic violates the social body through the challenging of gender roles (Stratton, 2014, p. 158). While witches are abject in many ways, the real horror is the fact that the Roman witch, throughout her narrative, is 'active' to the male 'passive.' Thus, a witch would be the abnormal woman with an abnormal sexual appetite and role. Given the correlation between literary readings of the abject and associations with female magic, I will pay special heed as we move forward to the ways the witches violate not only the physical body but the social body as well. These violations are manifested in a witch's connection with necromantic practices, magical control over love and body, and her sexual control.

Because these women are using magic to both gratify their sexual desires and to commit adultery, the ideological charge is especially heavy given that its nature threatens the patriarchal structure itself. Here, women are using their own means to circumvent male power in order to satisfy themselves, and thus they threaten networks of inheritance and patronage central to elite male identity. Thus, “when viewed through the theoretical framework of abjection, these depictions of women’s craving magic and adulterous lust express deeper anxieties about preserving social order and safeguarding elite men’s hierarchical privileges” (Stratton, 2014, p. 164). In general, the central goal of women’s magic within Roman literature seems to center around manipulating men sexually. In this process, the ‘bad’ female unravels set norms and pulls society into her wet, leaky, and uncontrollable spheres. Because women had very little mobility in traditionally male spheres, including formal institutions such as law and religion, the nature of witches highlights how women may have reclaimed their agency in order to maneuver where they wish.⁶¹ The witches of Rome not only move effortlessly (via magic) from one lover to the next, but they also summon the power of the infernal gods in a way that male priests could never imagine. Through their power, the Roman witches forge their own path. Clover (1992), in her treatment of the rape-revenge subgenre of horror, discusses the concept of the ‘angry woman,’ who, despite the horror that others may assign her to, ultimately allows a woman to be considered the perpetrator rather than a victim (p. 17). This is consistent with the emergence of the Final Girl who takes agency in many horror films of the 70s and 80s. When applied to the witches, this showcases the ways in which they are, metaphorically, casting off the shackles that bound them to societal norms.

⁶¹ For a fuller account of women’s role in religious spheres, see Pomeroy 1975.

Furthermore, this reconceptualized look into horrific women, and their role within the narrative, emphasizes the play of gender between the victim and assailant. According to Clover, the assailant is almost exclusively male, but deeply troubled in terms of gendered characteristics. The victim, meanwhile, is typically female, but the Final Girl, who defeats the gender-troubled “monster,” is a woman who takes on male qualities of agency and aggression (p. 12). This correlation, while applied to modern horror movies, is just as prevalent throughout ancient representations. The witch, who is separated from her ancient sisters in behavior and appearance, not only empowers herself through magic, but seeks out her oppressor and effectively unmans him (Clover, 1992, p. 49).

The women of the *Golden Ass* constantly challenge the meaning of female ideals and expectations, and this challenge is particularly dramatic in the case of the novel’s witches. Many of the witches, who harness the extreme power of magic but are not defined by an aged, haggard appearance, highlight a societal fear of socially autonomous women. Additionally, it is through magic that the male voice of Lucius is stripped of all corporal and social identity and enclosed within the abject form of a donkey’s body instead. This emasculation of Lucius for the majority of the novel’s plot is the epitome of horror, which is consistently dramatized through the crushing labor and abuse that Lucius must sustain as he moves from one owner to the next. However, with the final image of Isis superior, the witches are not only effectively phallicized, but the plot’s horror halts with the restoration of Lucius’ human form. Thus, as Clover looks to *Carrie* as a feminist story, so too should we see the witches of the *Golden Ass* as women finding power through channels of what others consider their flaw (p. 4).

II. Magic and Witchcraft in Antiquity

Defining the Witch. Multiple characteristics can identify the witch of ancient literature. They claim, or are said, to possess powerful and supernatural abilities, they prepare and use potions and incantations, they (especially in Roman literature) are seen lurking in graveyards and harvesting body parts. They are animalistic, seen with beasts of all sorts, and are considered evil-doers (*maleficae*) and even whores (*lupulae*). Terms for witches, depending on the context, can range from a wise woman (*saga*), a well-experienced woman (*veteratrix*), or merely an old woman (*anus*) (Paule, 2014; Richlin, 1992). In order to establish the defining attributes of Roman witches, especially as they appear in Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, we must consider the differences in Greek and Roman literary representations of these women and what it tells us about the evolution of gender expectations and the treatment of women in antiquity. While we have noted the key characteristics of witches above, Paule has painstakingly shown how the title 'witch' carries very little stable meaning. As Paule (2014) notes, "each witch is, in essence, a blank canvas onto which a myriad of fears and anxieties may be mapped," which, in turn, may allow us to understand how the anxieties that surrounded the female sex in Roman and Greek antiquity were expressed through the canvas of the witch (p. 746). The witch of antiquity is the distillation of Carson's uncontrollable and unbounded woman. Not only do they consistently overstep the fixed boundaries of society, through their wielding of supernatural forces and in their free movement as they go where they want and sexually conquer whom they please, but they additionally cannot be safely boxed within the category of 'woman' (Carson, 1990, p. 135). Witches, as I will discuss at length, are notorious for stealing the potency and virility of young men and claiming that sexual power for themselves, often using men to fulfill their bottomless sexual drive. Additionally, given antiquity's concern with moral and physical hygienic practices,

as we move forward, we should note not only the correlation between the witch and dirt (i.e., uncleanness often associated with death and bodily fluids), but also their near disregard for any social boundaries such as gendered expectations, spheres, and hierarchies.

The Greek and Roman witch varies, moving from a fantastical goddess-like, sometimes immortal, woman to an old woman of nightmares. Barbette Spaeth (2014) has pointed out that Greek witches often appear young, beautiful, divine in nature, and seem inclined to help (at least initially) rather than harm (p. 48).⁶² In contrast to the Roman witch, whose mortality and corpse-like appearance are often stressed, early Greek examples, such as Medea and Circe, are divine in appearance and lineage. While Spaeth acknowledges that the concept of magic, which we will consider to be the belief that one is manipulating natural forces through unnatural means (i.e., potions, incantations, enchantments, curses), was not fully formed in antiquity until around the fifth century BCE, these two women are undeniably associated with magic.⁶³ Both Medea, a priestess (*ἀρήτιρα*) of Hecate, and Circe, known as the ‘dread-goddess’ (*δεινή θεός*), fall into our defining characteristics of witches. They formulate potions, are heavily associated with nature, possess unnatural abilities to manipulate the laws of nature, and often utilize their abilities to their own advantage. Like many witches throughout antiquity, both Medea and Circe often act on their sexual desires and impulses. Medea is initially eager to help Jason because of her attraction to him, and her hope that he would marry her, and ultimately, she seeks revenge when she is sexually scorned. Likewise, Circe agrees to return the human form of Odysseus’ men only once he has bedded her and earned her trust (*Od.* 10.340-369),⁶⁴ but even Hermes is

⁶² In contrast to this, Elizabeth Pollard (2008) has outlined the ways in which even Greek witches are shown to pervert the gendered expectations of the ideal woman. This will be discussed in depth later in the argument.

⁶³ Here, note that the first full treatment of Medea is in Euripides’ play in 431 BCE, and then in Apollonius of Rhodes’ *Argonautica* in the 3rd c. BCE.

⁶⁴ I am hesitant to fully talk about Circe’s sexuality in the *Odyssey*, however, given that it can also be argued that she only suggested the bed (initially) as a way to save her own life.

quick to warn Odysseus of her sexual prowess and ability to ‘unman’ him (*Od.* 10.300-321).⁶⁵ Thus, while it is clear that these women ought to be feared, their cunning (feminine) wiles require even more caution given their ability to bend nature to their will.

In contrast to the goddess-like Greek witch, the Roman witch is almost exclusively a nightmarish old woman that is closely associated with female monsters such as *strix* (a bird of ill-omen, or, a vampire), and *lamia* (half-serpentine female demon), both of which are traditionally known to be monsters that feed on young men (Leinweber, 1994; Spaeth, 2014). We can see this in the descriptions of witches such as Canidia and Sagana, who are both defined as hideous and animalistic creatures who prowl graveyards at night (Hor. *Sat.* 1.8). Moreover, Lucan’s Erictho is characterized by her uncombed hair, resembling a horde of vipers, her face, haggard with age, her ghastly clothes, and her overall awful face (*Phars.* 6.515-18; 6.654-66). Overwhelmingly, these witches can be identified by their old age, ugly appearance, and unkempt nature.⁶⁶ In the author’s tone of disgust and repulsion, these descriptions are consistent with the larger invective against older women found in Latin literature. Their actions often violate taboos directly, and their defining characteristic is unsatiated lust that no one is willing to fulfill (Richlin, 1992). Moreover, given the age of the witches, we must not forget that, on many levels, these witches form part of a larger cultural disdain for older women, emphasizing their age, repulsive physical deterioration (often focused on the vagina), sexual insatiability, and rejected love life (Richlin, 1992). Ultimately, the “invective against *vetulae* constitutes a sort of apotropaic satire that attempts to belittle and control the power of old women, pitting the phallus against the threat of sterility, death, and the chthonic forces” (Richlin, 1992, p. 113).

⁶⁵ μή σ’ ἀπογυμνωθέντα κακὸν καὶ ἀνίγνορα θήη: "lest when you are stripped naked she should make you weak and un-manned."

⁶⁶ As we move forward, we will note those that fall *outside* of this description, such as Pamphile and Photis in the *Golden Ass*, and the Sybil in the *Aeneid*.

Additionally, whereas we have acknowledged that Greek literary witches often appear to help before they harm, Roman witches are altogether more negatively regarded than their Greek counterparts, especially during the 1st and 2nd century C.E. (Spaeth, 2014, p. 41). This highlights the shift from a beautiful sorceress, who functions within a fantastical world, to a Roman crone, who operates within real-world environments such as Thessaly (however fictionalized).

The topos of the witch-hag, which emerged in the Augustan period with the elegists (Propertius, Tibullus, Ovid), Virgil's Sibyl, and Horace, is not limited to age, and includes transgressive and gruesome behaviors that work to directly invert the image of the Roman *matrona* (Schons, 1998). Given their close association to nature, their power to control men, and monstrous representations, we should recognize how the Roman witch blatantly perverts expected female behavior and roles, often as an exaggerated liminal creature that is more beast than human, and paradoxically also semi-divine in her power to control nature. Beginning with Horace, these women are presented as far beyond their sexual prime, and this, in turn, reverses the societal expectations of whom Roman men were typically attracted to—thus effectively removing any doubt about who is controlling the sexual relationship. Not only do these women continuously use and manipulate men to fulfill their sexual desire, but also the image of the lustful old woman invokes disgust. The descriptions of these women closely resemble corpses, and “they mingle the opposing poles of life and death of fertility and decay; they transgress natural order in addition to social order,” thus emphasizing that the bodies of these witches are more correlated with death than with the natural function of reproduction (Stratton, 2014, p. 163). Moreover, these descriptions imply that (without their power), these witches should be irrelevant to Roman society. They, widely, are not married, they do not care for children, and they can no longer reproduce. Nevertheless, instead of fading into the shadows of society, these

women, at least in literature are harnessing the power to make themselves notable to those who would wish them invisible. It seems plausible that this holds up at least a cloudy mirror to the informal power of women in Roman imperial culture.

Through a close reading of the witches in Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, and a comparative look at the witches in Latin literature, I argue that in response to broken societal norms and growing female influence and agency, male anxieties surrounding these changes manifested in texts about the personification and actions of the female Roman witch. As they operate outside the expectations of the ideal *matrona*, the figures of Roman witches portrayed in male-authored texts reflect that the text is haunted by an alternative reality where 'passive' women reclaim sexual and social autonomy by harnessing preternatural power, allowing them to manipulate both their world and the men that currently control it. As we move through the characterization of witches in the *Golden Ass*, we should note not only those who operate closely to the Roman trope, such as Meroë, but also those who skirt along the edges, such as Pamphile and Photis. Finally, by weaving witches who are to be feared, yet are not the witch-hag that Roman literature so often deals with, Apuleius has built a narrative of powerful women that converge into the supreme and all-powerful force of Isis, a goddess rooted in magic herself. Thus, we can establish that, like sex, the powerful women of Apuleius' narrative are not nearly so black-and-white as binary interpretive models would suggest. Instead, Apuleius often presents magic, and the women connected to it, in a way that is both repulsive and alluring, chaotic and balanced, threatening and redemptive, suggesting that the literary and the real-life women behind these forces should be considered within their specific historical contexts rather than as a monolithic whole.

III. Witches of the *Golden Ass*

Meroë. The first depiction of witches in the *Golden Ass* begins in a tale. From the start, the overall tone through which witches are represented is negative, yet as we will see, they still do not fall squarely into the topos of the Roman witch. When we are first introduced to Meroë, Aristomenes tells Lucius of how he found his friend, Socrates, in complete disarray. His friend “was a man transformed by his pitiable, skeletal emaciation,” dressed in drags and sitting on the side of the street (1.6). Aristomenes cries about how Socrates’ entire family thought him dead, and he felt shame even looking at the husk his friend had become. Significant here is the complete loss of Socrates’ identity, pride, and worth as a result of his sexual encounters with the witch Meroë, a lust-filled old woman. Unsure why he had engaged with Meroë in the first place, Socrates laments that he was a fool. One minute she had been serving him food, and the next, she had been laying him in her bed.⁶⁷ From Socrates’ perspective, not only has his free-will been revoked, but also Meroë is little more than a chronic disease of which he cannot rid himself, though it turns out that he is also desperately afraid of her. Interestingly, while Meroë is mentioned to have many lovers, never are these relationships considered the result of a potion or spell—instead, *she* makes men fall madly for her, despite her age, which is perhaps emphasized in her name’s stem, *mer(a)*, meaning pure. This active sex life is interesting, given traditional invective narratives against old women in literature, primarily from elite men, suggesting that we should be careful about mistaking this literary evidence for lived reality, where older women were most likely still found attractive (Richlin, 1992). This makes Apuleius’ description of Meroë so significant, for while she is described as an *anus* (old woman), she is also described as a good woman (*bona uxor*) and, more importantly, as exceedingly attractive (*admodum*

⁶⁷ Note: this is very similar to the treatment of Lucius by Photis.

scitulam).⁶⁸ Meroë's characteristics both rewrite 'typical' invective narratives against old women and redefine what a Roman witch means. While Socrates clearly expresses hatred toward Meroë, he never lingers on his inability to perform, certainly not in the same way that Horace does throughout *Epode* 8 and 12.⁶⁹ However, Socrates is terrified of the witch, claiming that if they speak ill of her, it will bring her wrath.

While the title of *saga* at its most basic level implies a wealth of knowledge, the characterization of Meroë, who is described as a godlike wise woman (*saga divina*), is vastly different from the other *sagae* depicted throughout Latin literature. While Cicero characterized *sagae* as older women with undivine knowledge (read: unprophetic), authors such as Columella and Frontinus have assigned divinatory power to these women. Moreover, the *sagae* of Horace are purifiers, and those of the elegists are professionals in the erotic arts. However, while Meroë shares these erotic traits that the *sagae* of elegy display, unlike them, she is not a professional practitioner who is paid for her services. Instead, Apuleius' "*sagae* possess skills far beyond simple amatory magic, and their behavior—including corpse defilement, mordant facial disfiguration, and the commission of dispassionate murder—borders on the monstrous" (Paule, 2014, p. 750). Because of this wild contrast between the *sagae* of Roman literature, Paule concluded that the title is useless to differentiate the skills and path of the Roman witch. However, we should not discredit the root of what a *saga* implies. While their knowledge may not all be identical, it is, in fact, significant to give heed to the knowledge these witches specialize in, whether it be erotic, poisonous, necromantic, prophetic, healing, etc. This is

⁶⁸ Apul. *Met.* 2.7

⁶⁹ Amy Richlin (1992) provides a close reading of these invective poems, often emphasizing the ways in which the narrator is not only disgusted by the physical form of the old woman (who is, at times, his lover), but also stresses his impotence when he is with her.

especially the case of Meroë, who both displays a rich knowledge in the craft of magic, and exhibits unnatural godlike abilities that challenge nature.

Meroë, the divine witch (*saga divina*) has immense powers that challenge those of the gods. Like many descriptions of witches, she can bring down the heavens (*deponere caelum*), suspend the earth (*terram suspendere*), harden the rivers (*fontes durare*), dissolve mountains (*montes diluere*), lift up the seas (*manes sublimare*), extinguish the stars (*sidera extinguere*) and bring light to Tartarus itself (*Tartarum ipsum inluminare*) (1.8). What is most interesting here is both the witch's ability to undo all the gods have put into place and the insistent emphasis on how she can (possibly) remove the gods from their seat of honor altogether (*caelum deponere; deos infimare*). Meroë primarily uses her abilities in her sexual affairs—whether for attracting men to her or for revenge. Following Socrates' description of her physical power, his panic seems to elevate when he considers how she preys on men from across the world (*Indi vel Aethiopes utrique vel ipsi Anticthones*) and makes them fall in love with her (*ut se ament*). Moreover, she can emasculate her lovers (1.7). However, while Meroë is an old woman, she is never described with the same language that other Roman authors use for their fearsome hags. Instead, Socrates, as he stands naked, simply cries that he was brought to his current state by bad luck, and a good woman, *bona uxor*, underscoring just how separate Meroë should be from the topos of the Roman witch, who is known as *anything* but good. That said, Meroë, very clearly, is still abject. As we will note, the mutation of Lucius' human form functions as the abject body throughout the narrative, his physical and social identity entirely lost as he is sold from one horrible owner to the next. Nevertheless, it is through Meroë that we receive our first taste of what is to come: whether or not Meroë utilizes her magic for her own lustful desires, she does not hesitate to use it for revenge. Socrates' fear of the witch stems from her history of turning

past lovers and rivals into different wild beasts, ranging from frogs to rams, and in doing so, she, like Circe, is bringing the male form closer to dirt and the abject.

Through Meroë we can see a complex dynamic that blurs the lines of gender and pollution. Unlike many witches throughout Latin literature, Meroë does not reside in the wild or dirty areas—she is an innkeeper. Thus, the first ‘dirty’ figure that appears in this story is Socrates himself, brought to destitution. This dynamic is significant given that women were believed to be more susceptible to impurity and pollution, and that while different from the “triad of prohibitions” (giving birth, defecating, and urinating), the triad is a distinct example “of the frequent assimilation of a uniquely or distinctively female activity to ‘dirt,’” and women quickly became associated to dirt and creatures of pollution themselves (von Staden, 1992). By this correlation, Meroë, *anum sed admodum scitulam*, while not obviously ‘dirty,’ has very clearly polluted Socrates through her association to him, much as she has done to many of her other lovers.⁷⁰ This pollution is interesting, especially given Socrates’ emphasis that much of Meroë’s revenge stems from her envy of others (whether of lovers or business competitors). In her analysis, Pauline Ripart (2016) draws attention to the ways that the “web of envy” contains necrotic tendencies that work to “dry up” all the good around it (p. 107). And given that Ripart’s argument stems from the theory that women, are in fact, a symbol of envy, we should note that many people, especially males, were considered vulnerable to the dangers of envy, and applied to Ripart’s claim, this helps to solidify the belief that women themselves were viewed as a threat to male virility (Clarke, 2002). Thus, Meroë, and her envy, is the actual danger, as her envy is the root of her magic.

⁷⁰ The old but very elegant woman (Apul. *Met.* 1.7).

Meroë may be cast as the villain, but as she and her sister, Panthia, break into the men's room as they sleep, Apuleius grants Meroë a voice in her narrative. Her revenge on Socrates will be because he abandoned her. Thus, with a sponge and an unsheathed sword, the two approach the sleeping men. Symbolically here, both witches hold not only something wet (the standard 'danger' of women) but a phallic image as well, the sword.⁷¹ Charging forward, Meroë names Socrates as both her Endymion and her Catamitus (Ganymede) appropriating for herself the active female gaze of Selene and the active male gaze (at another male) of Zeus. This underscores her agency in this scene, across gender. Following this, Meroë laments that Socrates has placed her in the feminine role of Calypso, but unlike the goddess, Meroë is not content with weeping over the abandonment. Her revenge comes in the form of symbolic emasculation, as the witches remove his heart. Socrates may be asleep, but meanwhile Apuleius paints a very submissive portrait of Aristomenes. Panthia laughs at his cowardice, enunciating his prostrated form (*prostrates grabattulo subcubans iacet*) (1.12). Panthia sees Aristomenes and suggests that they cut away the manliness from his 'paralyzed limbs' (*membris eius destinatis virilia desecamus*), the two women joking about Aristomenes' lack of virile courage. Here, we should take a moment to reflect on the characterization of Meroë and her sister in contrast to Canidia and Sagana. As we have established, Horace's witchy sisters are cast under a light of horror and disgust throughout his *Satires*; yet, while Apuleius established Meroë as an old woman, his description of her features transgresses the trope of the Roman witch, as she is established as being an exceedingly elegant and attractive woman (*admodum scitulam*). Thus, through the manipulation of witches in the *Golden Ass*, Apuleius is breaking the trope of the Roman witch.

⁷¹ In *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, J.N Adams covers the utilization of weapons, such as a *gladius*, in place of a penis (20, 21, 219). This is typically seen in jokes/comedy, but here, with the utilization of the penetrative sword, a sexual innuendo would not be out of place.

However, whereas Apuleius may not have described these two witches as grotesque in appearance, their actions are conveyed through gruesome and vivid descriptions. Declaring her anger, Meroë penetrates Socrates' neck with her sword, reaches down through the hole in his throat, and rips out his heart. This symbolic emasculation is taken a step further when the witches then take turns straddling Aristomenes' face and soaking him in their urine (*varicus super faciem meam residents vesicam exonerant*).⁷² As previously mentioned, the abject primarily deals in the loss and manipulation of bodily fluids. Paired with the association of women and dirt, the scene invites further interpretation, though this will remain speculative. Anatomically speaking, the urethra is not far from the vagina itself, which instinctively draws attention to other bodily fluids of the vagina—namely, sexual secretions and menstrual blood. Men in antiquity viewed menstruation with horror, and this horror extends well into the anatomy of the female body.⁷³

This horror can be seen in gynecological treatments, where women were often prescribed concoctions involving animal feces, which were generally rejected as a treatment for men. Xenocrates states that “drinking sweat and urine and a woman's menstrual blood is outrageous and disgusting, and so are feces, no less than these,” thus putting menses blood on the same level of horror that excrement was viewed (von Staden, 1992, p. 9). Further, like dirt and women, menstrual blood was a substance of oppositions: it could harm or be beneficial, and it could purify or pollute.⁷⁴ This association between women and dirt can be seen not only in the excessive frequency of women being told to bathe, but also in the male reluctance to touch the

⁷² With feet spread apart, straddling above my face, they empty (their) bladder (1.13).

⁷³ In his study of Hippocratic practices, Heinrich van Staden extensively traces the correlation between women and dirt, and more specifically, how this belief is rooted around the vagina. His observations are based on the gender-biased treatments involving feces as gynecological treatments (1992).

⁷⁴ Von Staden catalogues the very full list of what he calls ‘menses’ magic, most of which is pulled from Democritus, Aristotle, Plutarch, and Pliny. Here, menstrual blood is said to dull and blunt knives, yet simultaneously ward away harmful bugs from crop and avert whirlwinds. However, performed at the wrong time (or in the wrong way) menstrual blood can just as easily destroy crops and bring natural disaster (14, 24).

vagina and in the belief that dirt alone could remove dirt. Given that women (almost exclusively) were prescribed dirt in order to cleanse themselves (especially in their vagina), women themselves were viewed as dirt (von Staden, 1992, p. 15). This ‘vagina-as-pollution’ belief is especially prevalent in the ancient treatment of *os impurum*, which established oral sex as dirtying to not only the provider, but to society as well (Clarke, 2002, pp. 163-4). The vagina, especially one of an *anus*, as Richlin (1992) puts it, is filthy and destroys the penis, and “the depiction of women’s genitalia [...] is restricted to strongly negative contexts, often connected with repellent old age” (p. 115). The image of Meroë and Panthia situating their vagina over Aristomenes’ face, as though forcing *cunnilingus* on him, provides a vivid ‘polluting’ image that establishes Aristomenes not only as a disgrace, but as lower than a passive member of anal penetration as well.

Thus, the emptying of Meroë’s bladder on Aristomenes’ face perhaps functions on two different levels. At the first level, the inclusion of both Meroë’s sword (which penetrated Socrates) and her urine may be a metaphor of ejaculation, much as the lamp’s oil functioned for Psyche in Book 5. Alternatively, given the image of Meroë straddling Aristomenes’ face with her vagina, we may be seeing a direct image of Meroë dirtying Aristomenes with her feminine pollution (metaphorical menstrual blood), a thought that is especially ironic given that Meroë herself is most likely past menopause. Nevertheless, this association between urine and menstrual blood may be further supported, given that once they leave, and Aristomenes is left “naked, cold, and soaked with urine as if freshly ejected from the womb of (his) mother,” effectively connecting the weight behind menstrual blood and reproduction.⁷⁵ If Meroë is ‘birthing’ Aristomenes, so to speak, then Apuleius is effectively highlighting both Meroë’s own

⁷⁵ *Nudus et frigidus et lotio perlutus quasi recens utero matris editus* (1.14).

inability to reproduce (given her age), yet simultaneously assigning power to her that allows her to control her own identity and narrative. Thus, the vagina, the abject, is empowered because it is necessary for birth, and so too is Meroë. Regardless, this is a vivid image of perverted female roles—leaving us with a man who has been stripped of all confidence and identity and emasculated to the point he has returned to an infantile state (1.14). By the time Meroë leaves the men, gender has, in theory, been swapped amongst them. By Meroë's sword (our metaphorical phallus), Socrates receives a symbolic vagina from which Meroë rips his heart, both she and her sister take control of Aristomenes' mouth through their urination, and by wielding the sword, Meroë claims control over her words and narrative.

Pamphile. Lucius, rather than being perturbed about Aristomenes' tale, is even further intrigued by magic. The next witch we encounter is the wife of Lucius' host, Milo. As with the excess of lust, adultery acts as another significant trope in the characterization of Roman witches. Tibullus talks about magic rites that allow his lover to enter his bed without her husband's knowledge (1.2.41-58), Propertius talks about the magic that his lovers use to deceive husbands (4.5.5-18), and Pamphile is notorious for flying into the dead of night in search of lovers (3.21). However, the elegist's lovers, their *puellae*, are only cursed with withered old age when they are imagined as punished for their infidelity, forced to wander in search of sex. And whereas Meroë was characterized as an old (but attractive) woman, Pamphile tiptoes around the borders of what it means to be a Roman literary witch. Not only is she never described, in contrast to the exaggerated descriptions of other prominent witches, but her behavior can almost be conveyed as alluring and sultry and her name (παμφίλη) ties her deeply to love—either suggesting that *she* is all-loving or is loved by all. Pamphile, left to our own imaginations, is an attractive and

dangerous woman, and this is enunciated by Lucius' initial reaction to her.⁷⁶ Further, we first learn of Pamphile through Byrrhena, a woman whom we have already established to be a notable figure of feminine power and influence. Like Byrrhena, Pamphile is depicted as being legally married woman who lives in a *domus*, partaking in dinners with Milo and Lucius, and whereas Milo (assumedly) does not know the full extent of his wife's power, he acknowledges her uncanny ability to predict the weather (2.11). All these preliminary descriptions work to present the holistic characterization of Pamphile: an influential wife with a side hobby for magic.

However, whereas Pamphile does not fit into the monolithic description for Roman literary witches, her lust for young men is emphasized throughout the narrative, often through the lips of other female characters. During Lucius' visit to Byrrhena's home, she conveys her fear for Lucius' safety, given that he is a young man and the woman is known to prey on men, but instead of fearing the witch, Lucius is excited by the idea of learning magic under her tutelage. Immediately, Pamphile is cast in a negative and dangerous light through a female voice, and not the male voice of Lucius. Through her malicious arts (*malis artibus*), she exhibits a primarily sexual magical drive, capturing her objects with criminal enticements (*facinorosis illecebris*).⁷⁷ She, like Meroë, is a woman whose powers are inherently harmful, coming from infernal forces (*omnis carminis sepulcralis magistra*)⁷⁸ and she has retained a reputation for her magic (*maga primi nominis [...] creditur*)⁷⁹ (although, it appears that the one individual who does not acknowledge her fearful power and wrath is her husband).⁸⁰ Consistent with the topos of the

⁷⁶ *Nexu quidem venerio hospitae tuae tempera*, "restrain yourself from the sexual bonds of your hostess..." (Apul. *Met.* 2.6).

⁷⁷ *Met.* 2.5

⁷⁸ Mistress in all chants of the crypt.

⁷⁹ She is trusted (as) a magical woman of the first reputation.

⁸⁰ In 2.11 Pamphile uses her mystical lamp to predict the weather for the next day. Milo simply considers her a cunning Sibyl who can contemplate the patterns of heaven. Lucius, ironically, follows this comment by calling her predictive talents an elementary art.

sexually driven witch, Pamphile appears to have no control over her sexual urges as she becomes enchanted by every young beauty that comes her way (*consepexerit speciosae formae iuvenem, venustate eius sumitur*).⁸¹ She does not hesitate to implant her flatteries, invade her prey's soul, and bind him with the endless snares of immense love.⁸² Furthermore, like Meroë, as well as countless other witches, Pamphile seeks revenge when men do not return her affection. We should note that amongst the witches of the *Golden Ass*, the danger of these women is somewhat limited to the male sex (aside from Meroë's attack on the pregnant woman). The women strip these men of their identity, their titles, and their physical form.⁸³ Byrrhena fears for her nephew, as his youth and beauty are those which fit Pamphile's needs.⁸⁴ As we know, it is indirectly by Pamphile's magic that Lucius is turned into an ass.

When it comes to Pamphile, she is defined by her lust and her workshop. Thus, moving forward, we should pay special attention to both Pamphile's tools and to how she uses them. In 3.16, after the Festival of Laughter, Photis' provides a first-hand description of Pamphile's magic, in contrast to Byrrhena's warnings based on gossip. She explains how her mistress ordered her to go to the barbershop and collect the hairs of the man that Pamphile coveted. However, because they (both Pamphile and Photis) are notoriously known as "practitioners of the malefic arts," the barber kicked her out (3.16).⁸⁵ In Photis' confession, she begins to describe Pamphile's workshop and mindset during her practices. Her workshop has gathered pieces of the dead, defiling those who have been buried and cried over. Her pieces come from both human and

⁸¹ (When) she sees a young man of special appearance, she is captivated by his beauty (2.5).

⁸² *Serit blanditias invadit spiritum amoris profundum pedicis aeternis alligat* (2.5).

⁸³ Pamphile, like Meroë seems to prefer the punishment of turning men into objects. *Tunc minus morigeros et vilis fastidio in saxa et in pecua et quodvis animal puncto reformat, alios vero prorsus extinguit* (2.5).

⁸⁴ *Tu per aetatem et pulchritudinem capax eius es* (2.5).

⁸⁵ *Quos me sedulo furtimque colligentem tonsor invenit, et quod alioquin publicitus maleficae disciplinae perinfames sumus, adreptam inclementer increpat* (3.16).

animal corpses, with an assortment of body parts. Hunched over a pile of still-steaming entrails, Pamphile performs a ceremony that is eerily like a religious practice. She pulls together the hairs gathered, pours libations over her altar, and then creates life in the form of the wine-skin ‘men’ whom Lucius is accused of killing during the Festival of Laughter. While the primal and animalistic motivations of Meroë and Pamphile do reflect Ortner’s larger claim that men are to culture as women are to nature, these witches leverage their supernatural powers to infiltrate and shape the cultural sphere of men.

As we will see, Pamphile keeps the ingredients for her potions in little jars, her *pyxides* (which was the common word for little jars of makeup), and thus Pamphile is simultaneously tied not only to magic, but to makeup as well, connecting her with the larger practice of cosmetic use by Roman women. The Latin word for makeup, *medicamina*, not only implied cosmetics, but was also tied to poison, witchcraft, and medicine; more importantly, these “were all crafts or skills aiming at a certain kind of control over the body and its surroundings” (Richlin, 2014, p.170). Simply stated: makeup was considered trickery, and it was often kept in a *pyxis*. This is significant given that Pamphile utilizes her tools not only to satisfy her own sexual needs but to control the sexual desires of others as well. So, where makeup was considered a tool for women who wanted to attract sexual partners, the contents of Pamphile’s *pyxis* control the desires of men. The repulsive contents of the *pyxis*, the makeup box, suggest both that Pamphile’s magic is harmful and that she must resort to smearing herself with cosmetics in order to be attractive to others. Further, the contents of makeup (at least according to our male authors) were considered disgusting, and often comparable to the horrendous recipes of witches, and thus makeup, like magic recipes, is itself abject.

In consequence, Pamphile's transformation into a bird takes on very sensual imagery. Not only is Lucius secretly peeping in through a crack in the door, but also this hiddle male gaze is emphasized by Pamphile stripping and pulling forth small jars from her little chest (*arcula quadam reclusa pyxides plusculas inde depromit*).⁸⁶ With this scene, we should remember Ovid's advice that the lover avoid seeing the cosmetics (*Medic.* 209-34) and that the process will drive a lover away (*Rem. Am.* 351-56). Nevertheless, here, Lucius is sneaking a peek at Pamphile's magical rites, rather than her adorning herself with cosmetics, though the two decidedly overlap. Without knowing that someone is watching her ritual, Pamphile pours the contents of a jar into her hand and begins massaging it over her entire body, much in the same way that one would smear makeup on oneself. As Richlin notes, the ingredients within the *pyxis*, the ingredients used for this 'adornment,' are repellent, and because the female body itself was often referred to as 'inside' (read: dirty) versus 'outside' (alluring), we are dealing with metaphors that are not only related to makeup but to the vagina as well (Richlin, 2014). This scene, then, effectively becomes Pamphile's private sexual ritual that takes on negative, yet sensual, undertones. Her form quivers as her body begins to sprout feathers shaking all over until she is transformed into an owl. Then, testing the ground with her feet, she takes flight and soars away from the male gaze peeping through the door.⁸⁷

De quis unius operculo remote atque indidem egesta unguedine diuque palmulis suis adfricta ab imis unguibus sese totam adusque summos capillos perlinit multumque cum lucerna secreto conlocuta membra tremulo succussu quatit. Quis leniter fluctuantibus promicant molles plumulae crescent et fortes pinnulae duratur nasus incurvus coguntur ungues adunci. Fit bubo Pamphile. Sic edito stridore querulo iam sui periclitabunda paulatim terra resultat, mox in altum sublimate forinsecus totis alis evolat (3.21).

She removed the lid from one of the containers and poured out its contents and rubbed them between her palms for a long time. She entirely smeared herself,

⁸⁶ From a certain hidden small chest she then pulls out rather small jars. (3.21)

from the bottom of her toes to the highest hair on her head. She spoke secret words to her lamp and quivered, her body shaking with trembling vibration. With which undulations soft feathers sprouted and strong wings grew, her crooked nose was hardened, her bent claws were gathered, [and suddenly], Pamphile was an owl. Thus, with a high hissing complaint, she tested herself and leapt a little way from the ground, bouncing around, then, she rose and flew high outside with her wings outspread.

After Pamphile's transformation, Lucius is even more eager to transform himself into a bird and take flight.⁸⁸ However, crucial here is the fact that by following Pamphile's rite, Lucius is effectively emasculating himself by bringing himself into direct contact with the abject—the magical and foul contents of the *pyxis*. Given that makeup (and, here, witchcraft) are aligned with women, and cosmetics are used to make a show of gender, by smearing himself with the same concoction, Lucius is effectively shifting his maleness into femaleness, and in this case, also into the realm of 'beast' and 'other' (Richlin, 2014). It is in this way that Lucius assumes the abject body, a moment that is gradually built up as Lucius begs Photis to aid in his transformation. Ironically, Photis, who was so unapologetically dominant in her sexual relationship to Lucius, quickly becomes his tool for destruction...yet not quite in the same way that Pamphile is. Pamphile has taught Photis some of her magical arts, but only enough that Photis could adequately perform her job as an assistant.⁸⁹ She is not an apprentice. It is on this line that Photis can claim innocence as she takes hold of the jar and presents it to Lucius.⁹⁰ Thus,

⁸⁸ Note: Pamphile's transformation into an owl has *literally* turned her into the *strix*, an ill-omened bird often used as a metaphorical term for witches. Additionally, the appearance of this 'ill-omen' comes immediately before Lucius' own disastrous transformation.

⁸⁹ Similar to Photis and Pamphile's working relationship is the one between Simaetha and her servant Thestylis. Like Photis, Thestylis must seek out her mistress' tools and arrange them as needed. Like Pamphile, her magic is motivated by love. However, the contrast between them is rooted in Simaetha's own speculation on her spell's effectiveness, suggesting that Simaetha and Pamphile (who can call down the heavens) cannot be categorized as the same type of witch (Theocritus, *Idyll*, 2).

⁹⁰ *Nec istud factum putes ulla benivolentia, sed ut ei redeunti medela salubri possem subsistere. [...] Haec identidem adseverans summa cum trepidatione inrepiit cubiculum et pyxidem depromit arcula* (3.23 & 3.24). You (should) not believe that (this) was done from any kindness, but so that I would be able to support to return her with a wholesome cure. [...] She earnestly proclaiming this truth again and again, when she, with fear, crept into the bedroom and fetched the small casket from the chest.

while Pamphile's characterization is cast in a negative light, Photis occupies a more neutral position, at least in terms of a witch's arcane knowledge. It was Pamphile's magic that was abject, that stripped Lucius of all identity and autonomy. So, what exactly was Photis' role? We might claim that Photis truly had no hand in the magic, as she is merely a servant. She knows the tools, and because of her association to Pamphile (as mentioned before) she is considered a practitioner by outsiders, but ultimately, she is not a witch.

While the magic itself is a product of a woman, it is Lucius that demands to take part. Thus, I argue that Photis cannot be at fault in this exchange. If we look back to Book 2, when Lucius first approached Photis in the kitchen, her language was charged with magical weight as she repeatedly warned him of what 'dipping' his fingers into her would mean. Thus, it is the imagery of the jar and Lucius' reaction that we should pay special attention. Not only is this little chest and little jar very similar to the language used throughout Photis' metaphor of masturbation, but also Lucius' eagerness here is not only for magic but for his access to her womanhood (vagina) as well. Lucius repeatedly kisses the jar, yet another representation of a male's mouth coming into contact with female genitalia, and in a fit of his 'fancies' throws all of his clothes to the floor and greedily scoops out the jar's contents—much in the same way that he had dipped his fingers into Photis' jar just a few books earlier. There was no spell placed on Lucius, no one to cajole him, and while Photis may have handed him the tools to his demise, it was Lucius himself, of his own volition, that caused his emasculation. It is through his rashness and impatience that Lucius soon finds his body morphing into an unrecognizable beast.

IV. Isis: Redeemer of Magic

Queen Isis. Book 11 of the *Golden Ass* marks a drastic shift in the narrative style and content. In contrast to Lucius' series of unfortunate events, the final book of the novel acts both

as an epilogue to Lucius' journey and reads like the conversion it is.⁹¹ According to John Winkler (1985) this seemingly religious book of conversion seems to be the ultimate climax to *everything* that has taken place throughout the novel. And whereas we cannot be certain whether Apuleius himself worshipped Isis, her presence is undeniably palpable in the narrative, and thus, arguably, in Apuleius' life as well. However, her presence throughout the text may also simply be a thematic choice to support Lucius' journey. Regardless, Isis, as Winkler is quick to claim, can be seen everywhere. Thus, as we move forward, we should note not only the language used throughout Lucius' encounter with the Egyptian goddess but also the history surrounding Isis' identity with gender and witchcraft and what this ultimately means for the reception of both the witches and the women throughout the *Golden Ass*.⁹²

After Lucius fled the games, where he (in donkey form) was expected to have sex publicly with a condemned woman who had poisoned her husband (and many others), he collapses into sleep in Cenchreae, on the shore of the Saronic Gulf. Book 11 opens with Lucius awakening to the force of the full moon, and the sight is instantly recognized as the supreme goddess that governs all human affairs. At this point, the identity of Isis has not been revealed, but to the audience of the *Golden Ass*, the symbolism of the moon was closely tied to the Egyptian goddess. Plutarch, throughout his survey of the goddess and her traditions, is adamant about her role as the mother of the world—as the moon itself (*Mor. De Is. et Os.* 43). However, while Lucius recognizes 'her' as the supreme goddess, he desperately works to appeal to all her cult names, effectively subsuming many of the traditional goddesses of the Greek and Roman pantheon. Surrendering to the sea itself, Lucius calls out evocations to Ceres, celestial Venus,

⁹¹ Note so different from Lemony Snicket's middle-grade series *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, that follow children who, while they do not turn into beasts, are shuffled from one horrible home to the next following the death of their parents.

⁹² Egyptian, yes, but a Hellenistic cult version here, as Lucius encounters the procession of Isis in Cenchreae.

Diana, and Proserpina in his plea to take away his pain and hardship—he wants to be returned to the Lucius that he once was. With each of the goddesses, Lucius appeals to their praises, their sanctuaries, and their inner power, calling attention not only to their namesake but also, perhaps, unwittingly, tying them each to the arcane as well. This, then, is the empowered abject, but now on a cosmic scale. Additionally, when Isis does reveal herself, she does so by claiming the identity of these goddesses, thus balancing the capacity of the witch as a topos, to subsume into itself all of the abject disgust of the female body. While this moment inherently begins to tie Isis with the ‘trials’ that Lucius underwent, we can simultaneously see that while Lucius begs to be returned to his former self, his restoration still leaves him drastically changed and submissive to the servitude of a goddess.

As Lucius weeps and cries out to the goddess, he is suddenly taken aback by the deity rising from the waves. Following her appearance, and before she can confirm her identity, Lucius describes Isis in great detail—beginning with her flowing locks, the crown of flowers and symbols encircling her brow, the deep colors of her linens, and the divine cadence of her voice. This should bring to mind both Venus’ own birth from the sea and Lucius’ description of Photis when she first undressed for him—the servant herself left with unbound hair, a garland of roses, and at the moment likened to Venus. Moving forward, the symbolism of the rose, if not already, should be undeniably clear. The rose (represented both in its physical form and through its adjective *rosa*), when first introduced, was in a moment of sexual heat. Not only did Photis stir her pot with her ‘flowery’ palm (*floridis*), but also she entered their first night together shrouded in roses, and once naked, covered her groin with her rosy hand (*rosea*). In all initial images of the rose, it is closely correlated with the vagina. Additionally, the rose itself, with its petals, closely resembles female genitalia as well. Given that Lucius constantly seeks rose throughout

the plot, then must consume its petals in order to return to his proper form, we might begin to ask ourselves what this means for gender constructs within the novel itself, especially given that my argument has worked to foreground and analyze examples of female sexual and social agency throughout the *Golden Ass*. Moreover, the rose itself, the cure for his ailment, is granted to Lucius by Isis, the ultimate female within the narrative.

Fully emerged, Isis demands that Lucius look upon her. In the following paragraph, Isis uses that time to declare not only her identity but the extent of her power as well. Here, Isis not only begins with her power—declaring herself to be the mother of the universe and queen of the underworld—but the description of her ability simultaneously relates to and counteracts the witches. We should recall that with the introduction of each witch (both in the *Golden Ass* and often outside of it), time is taken to lay out the unearthly and divine power that the women possess, a power which often results in manipulating and defying natural laws. However, here, Isis attests that “at [her] nod, [she] sets in place the lights and heights in heaven, the salubrious sea-breezes, the silences of the despairs of Hell. [Her] power, unequaled, unchanging, is worshipped throughout the world” (11.5). With each of these declarations, there is a one-to-one comparison to the power of the witches, implying the recuperation of female sexual knowledge and agency in connection with the natural world as positive. The witches snuff out the stars, bring down the heavens, stop the rotation of the earth, and fill Tartarus with light; in contrast, Isis’ power brings harmony and order to the chaos of the witches. However, this does not imply that we should separate the goddess from the witches, as Isis herself claims to be many of the very goddesses the witches call upon.⁹³ This suggests that while Isis is depicted as an entity of

⁹³ “[...] the bow-and-arrow men of Crete call me Diana Dictynna, the trilingual Sicilians call me the Proserpina of Otygia [...] some call me Juno, some Bellona; here they call me Hecate, [...] and the Egyptians, those paragons of ancient lore and learning, who worship me in ceremonies that are truly my own, they call me by my true name, QUEEN ISIS” (11.5).

order, she is also a great source for magic. As Plutarch puts it, Isis “must have in herself the source and origin of evil, just as she contains the source of good,” and while she is the female principle of nature, called by many names, and is innate for love, she also contains evil that she must continuously reject—yet she uses both for growth (*Mor. de Is. et Os.* 53).

Thus, we must begin to consider the depth behind Isis’ portrayal in Book 11 and what the consequences of her presence are. Stavros Frangoulidis (2008) spends a great deal of time considering the relationship between Isis and the larger narrative, and his analysis is deeply indebted to Winkler’s research.⁹⁴ Ultimately, as we have already begun to acknowledge, Isis and the witches act in tandem with one another, with Isis’ actions often working to undo what the witches have done prior. Frangoulidis emphasizes Isis’ authority and authenticity throughout Book 11, illustrated through Lucius’ caution as he follows the goddess’ commands. However, in contrast to the witches, whose actions are often associated with deception and trickery, Isis is refreshingly genuine in her promise to Lucius—the contract, of course, being his lifelong servitude to her. Additionally, while it was through Pamphile’s magic that Lucius was stripped of his identity and societal worth, it is through Isis that Lucius both returns to his own human form and gains *more* through his new identity as a priest. Throughout Book 11, and reflecting on the rest of the novel, the weight of Isis’ identity rewrites the narrative of not only Lucius, but the witches as well.

It has been established that witches were both abject and notorious for emasculating their prey, who were often young citizen men. Due to their unsatiated lust, uncontrollable tendencies, and unchecked power, these witches *are* the wet unhinged women of structuralism. However,

⁹⁴ Frangoulidis’ research is useful, but requires caution as there are many inaccuracies throughout the text regarding the characters and plot structure of *The Golden Ass*.

moving forward, we *must* acknowledge not only Isis' connection to magic but the positive non-
 abject associations as well. In this discussion of Isis, I make repeated use of Plutarch's *De Iside
 et Osiride*, given that he describes not only the goddess herself and the beliefs surround her, but
 also the rituals common to her cult practices. Much like the witches, Isis herself is considered to
 be exceptionally wise and a lover of wisdom (σοφὴν καὶ φιλόσοφον), much in the same way that
 many witches are referred to as *sagae*; her votaries are expected to spend a great deal of time
 studying her sacred writing, and not unlike the witches, Isis is known to be full of wrath (*Mor. de
 Is. et Os. 2, 3, 17*).⁹⁵ Additionally, Isis' core myth, reconstructing the body of her husband Osiris,
 is rich with magic, for "her power is concerned with matter which becomes everything and
 receives everything, light and darkness, day and night, fire and water, life and death, beginning
 and end" (*Mor. de Is. et Os. 77*). However, while Isis is associated with magic, it is crucial to
 acknowledge the greatest difference between the human witches and the goddess: the former
 bring about chaos and the latter restores it. Crucial to note is that this journey toward the
 empowered abject has already been in place with the representation of Meroë and Pamphile.

Isis, while a feminine goddess, has also been accorded both with both male and female
 traits—being that she is receptive to pregnancy yet emits seed as well (*Mor. de Is. et Os. 43*).
 Similar to the witches, Isis is an authoritative force who establishes her dominion over all the
 other gods, has supreme power, and has been known to play a hand in transfiguration (*Apul. Met.
 11.5*; *Ovid. Met. 9.666-797*). However, where the witches strip identity away, Isis restores.
 Winkler, notably, has paid special attention to the treatment of Isis throughout her cult, where
 she is regarded as a savior and an image of hope (Winkler, 1985, p. 278). Nonetheless, the abject

⁹⁵In chapter 17, Plutarch accounts a time when Isis was searching for the body of Osiris. When a young boy came up on her, she turned to him with a face so full of anger that he died of fright. While Isis did not intentionally kill the boy, we may remember the ways in which witches are shown to harm young men who get in their way.

is there in her gender, and her essential connection with female fertility and childbirth. She cannot be made asexual or divorced from the female body. This points back to a kind of recuperation of female sexual agency and the necessary role of old women in childbirth. Further, her treatment throughout the Greco-Roman world was characterized by popularity, visibility, and strangeness. Given her Egyptian roots, the functioning of the cult (clothes, ornaments, language, etc.) was seen to be distinctly separate. Like the witches, Isis is an ‘other,’ but rather than being ostracized, she was sought out. Many of the Egyptian godheads such as Isis, Anubis, and Harpokrates were considered to be saviors against “disturbances and dangers [...] from which [...] people [were saved] contrary to every expectation and hope” (Winkler, 1985, p. 278). Moreover, while Isis’ involvement in Lucius’ life left him permanently altered, within the narrative, his change was seen for the better. Rather than emasculating Lucius by stripping him of his corporal identity, she has returned him to his true form.

Interestingly, Isis has nonetheless left him without sexual authority, given his new vow of chastity. Additionally, in his presentation of the Isis-Osiris myth, Plutarch spends a great deal of time recounting the loss of Osiris’ phallus. Left without his ‘masculinity,’ Isis fashioned him a new functioning phallus and attached it to his body. Here, the ‘wet’ nature of Isis is what, in fact, gives Osiris life, for without the moisture his phallus would not have lived (*Mor. de Is. et Os.* 18, 36). Whereas the witches emasculated the men throughout the *Golden Ass*, Isis restores masculinity both to Lucius and to Osiris as well through magic. If the witches are abject, Isis lifts that abjection away from them through her connection to magic. She, through her cosmic order, rights their wrongs. Next, as we consider the similarities between Photis and Isis, we should acknowledge the progression of female characterizations. While Isis is seen as good (read: abject

but positively empowered) and the witches are abject, then Photis emerges as something in between—something complex, strong, and overwhelmingly human.

Photis and Isis: two sides to one coin. We began this analysis with the sexual authority of Photis, establishing her as something outside of both structuralist assessment and the Penetration Model. Among many women throughout the *Golden Ass*, Photis is a prime example of a woman who not only gives sexual gratification but takes it for herself as well. More important to notice, however, is that while Photis is both sexually authoritative and maneuvers firmly within the world of magic, she is not abject in the narrowly repulsive terms used by Kristeva. Briefly, I have tied imagery of Isis to Photis, but I now seek to analyze how these connections affect the characterization of Photis and her more profound role within the plot, no matter how brief it may have been.

The relationship between Isis and Lucius is undeniably tainted with traces of his relationship with Photis, resulting in echoes of his night with the servant as he encounters the goddess, pledges his life to her, and regains his human form. This begins with Isis emerging from the water, and while her form is divine, in many ways, she is rising in the shadow of Photis' touch upon Lucius. In the following section, both depicting the individual women rising from the sea (one metaphorical and the other literal), we should remember that Photis, on many occasions throughout Book 2, was referred to as Lucius' Venus, often in the heat of sex, and Isis, in Book 11, claims the title of Venus amongst her many identities.

“She lets all her clothes fall away and stands there naked; she lets her hair tumble down. It is a beautiful metamorphosis, in light-hearted lasciviousness, into the very image of Venus as she comes up out of the waves of the sea. It was more with an intentional desire to shade it than with an embarrassed desire to hide it that she briefly covered her smooth-shaved pubic mound with her rosy hand” (*Met.* 2.17).

“What should I see but the divine countenance rising up out of the midst of the sea [...] her hair: luxuriant, long-flowing, gently curled, falling free and unbound, it cascaded softly down around her divine neck. [...] In her right hand, you see, she bore a rattle made of bronze [...] but from her left hung down a vessel of gold” (*Met.* 11. 3-4).⁹⁶

The first passage is distinct from Isis’ emergence both due to Photis’ mortality, and the circumstance of her description. In both passages, Lucius is describing the women in a moment of desperation, the two offering different kinds of salvation to the man—Photis in the sexual sense, and Isis in the spiritual but also physical, as Isis must rescue him from his bestial, abject state. Reflected in the progression of these depictions is the evolution of Photis’ hands, shielding Lucius’ gaze from her nakedness, to Isis holding her symbols of power to the side as she demands that Lucius look upon her. While Photis was undeniably authoritative, by the end of the novel, the final image of power is a female goddess, one who demands Lucius’ chastity in exchange for the salvation only she can provide.

Moreover, in Book 2, Lucius declares himself to be prostrate to Photis, already and entirely a slave to her whims. In exchange for sex, Lucius would be subject to her desires. However, in Book 11, before Lucius could offer himself to the goddess, Isis demanded lifelong servitude in exchange for her help. Between the two books, Lucius was stripped of all agency as he was sold from one owner to the next, and even once his human form was restored, he was still left a slave to a higher being—the difference being that this was a passive position that he sought. Furthermore, while Lucius claims that it was Photis that first led him into the “labyrinthine evil,” was it also not her mistake that eventually led him to Isis (*Met.* 11.20)? To a higher social position, longer life, and connection to the goddess? And as Isis had already stated, everything has happened for a reason. So, what does this mean for Photis? Perhaps she was never

⁹⁶ Translations by Joel C. Relihan.

an instrument of destruction, but just one step to his salvation. This is echoed in the similarities between Photis and the priest, Mithras.

When Lucius is first told to join the procession of Isis, he does so without delay. Three times, Apuleius reiterates that “there was no delay,” in Lucius’ pursuit of the priest, similar to how there was “no delay” when Photis undressed for Lucius (*Met.* 2.17, 11.7). In both cases, Lucius was desperate for release, and it was through both individuals that he found relief. Additionally, once in the procession, Lucius sees the priest garlanded in roses, and we should remember Photis being depicted the same. In her commands to Lucius, Isis instructs him to approach Mithras, pretend to kiss his hand, and then pluck the roses from him (11.6). Like Photis, Lucius planned on using another as his passage to arcane rites. However, in both instances, Mithras and Photis acted upon their own free will before Lucius could exert his will. Photis, beginning in the kitchen scene, took her own pleasure and had to grant Lucius permission to seek her sexually, and Mithras, as Lucius approached, was the one who took the garlanded roses and extended them to Lucius. Thus, I have established the imagery that connects Photis, a powerful female at the beginning of the novel, to Isis, the supreme goddess at the end. Through these ties, the *Golden Ass* is bookended not only by female agency but by women who drive the entirety of the plot.

V. Conclusion

Julia Kristeva’s theory of the Subject argues that the unconscious mind finds horror in those things that threaten the integrity of the body, identity, or social boundaries. This includes, but is not limited to, bodily fluids, illustrations of death and decay, and above all, the female body. On the one hand, there is a drive to separate the female body entirely from the male, with the resulting dichotomy of superiority versus inferiority, good versus bad, and reason versus

chaos. On the other hand, the archaic one-sex model discussed by Clover and Laqueur suggests not a dichotomy, but a continuity between female and male, threatening the boundary between the two with collapse. In relation to ancient literature, many scholars have attempted to take Kristeva's theory and tie it to the monstrous representations of women, especially in the case of Roman witches, who consistently work to undermine the boundaries of society, but affectively emasculate their male prey as well. Their primary function in Roman literature is to evoke horror from the audience, especially in the case of witches such as Erictho and Canidia, who not only reside in graveyards but also tear vital organs from their prey in attempt to appease their unsatiated lust. However, whereas the witches in Apuleius' *Golden Ass* are undeniably horrific at times, they simultaneously skitter around the edges of the witch topos, in their attractiveness and the paradox of their social integration as wives and innkeepers.

Rich with unprecedented power, the witches of the *Golden Ass* work love charms, mutate the bodies of men, and can be seen handling the tools of decay. However, neither are described with the same invective that other Roman witches are. In fact, while these witches should be feared, they seem to follow the similar characterization of many other strong sexual women throughout Apuleius' narrative. Whereas I have shown that many women throughout the novel challenge what 'passive' means in Roman sexual intercourse, the witches, manifestations of the abject, take their horror and wield it as a tool of empowerment. This, often seen throughout modern horror movies, establishes a trend that phallicizes the female and grants her the role of agent rather than victim. Additionally, their chaos, woven throughout the novel, is brought to a balance and restorative close with the entrance of Isis, who rights (almost) all wrongs, but does not return sexual agency to Lucius.

While this in no way discredits the claim that witches are themselves abject, I seek to suggest that there are women who are in fact wielding what is considered (by men) their flaw and using it to empower their mobility in a gender restrictive society. While we cannot know the extent of Apuleius' intentionality in characterizing these women in such an autonomous way, we can begin to evaluate the undertones of the narrative, the representations of these powerful women, and in turn begin to reevaluate the assessment of women as either the leaky or the penetrated in the Roman world.

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