

THE EPIPHANY OF ISIS

Lucius Apuleius

From the *Metamorphoses* or *The Golden Ass*, translated
by William Adlington (1566) and adapted for modern readers.

The *Metamorphoses* of Lucius by Lucius Apuleius, better known as *The Golden Ass*, is the only Roman novel to survive today. With parallels in the tradition of the Greek novel, this work is often considered the first “novel,” and inspired many later episodic romances such as *Don Quixote* and *Gulliver’s Travels*. The present selection is assumed to be autobiographical, as Lucius describes the epiphany of Isis, most probably from his participation in the Isis Mysteries themselves. It is clear in this passage that over several millennia, Isis has been transformed from her supporting role to Osiris and Horus in the Osirian Mysteries, to the Universal Queen of Heaven, representing the totality of Divinity in the Isis Mysteries which had spread throughout the Greco-Roman world by the second century CE.

As the story has unfolded, through unfortunate contact with magic, Lucius has been transformed into an ass. Having failed to cure himself of this transformation, he finally invokes the Goddess, and in this passage, he describes her advent and bountiful remedy for his condition.

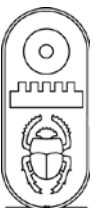


How by Roses and Prayer Apuleius Returned to His Human Shape

As midnight approached as I slept my first sleep, I awoke with sudden fear and saw the Moon shining bright, as when she is full and looking as though she had leapt out of the sea. Then my thoughts led me to the idea that it was the most secret time, when the goddess Ceres had most strength and force, considering that all human things are governed by her providence: and not only all beasts private and tame, but also all wild and savage beasts who are under her protection.

All bodies in the heavens, the earth, and the seas, are increased by her increasing motions and are diminished by her diminishing motions. As weary as I was of my cruel fortune and calamity, and even though it was very late, I found good hope of being delivered from all my misery and of sovereign remedy, in invocation and prayer to the excellent beauty of the Goddess, whom I beheld shining before my eyes. Then, I arose with a joyful face, shaking off my animal-like and drowsy sleep. Moved by a great affection to purify, I plunged myself seven times into the water of the sea—seven being a number quite favorable to holy and divine things, as the worthy and sage philosopher, Pythagoras, has declared.

Henry Fuseli, *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act IV, Scene I. A wood: Titania, queen of the fairies, Bottom, fairies attending, etc., 1796. The character of Bottom is one of many literary legacies from *The Golden Ass*.



Lucius's Prayer

Then, with a weeping countenance, I made this prayer to the powerful Goddess, saying:

O blessed Queen of heaven! Are you the Lady Ceres, the original and motherly nurse of all fruitful things on earth, who inhabits the land of Eleusis? Are you she who, after finding your daughter Proserpina, conceived such great joy that barren and unfruitful ground was made fruitful again? Or are you the celestial Venus, sister to the God Phoebus, now worshiped within the Temples of the Isle of Paphos and the sacred places of Ephesus? Venus, who in the beginning of the world coupled together all kinds of things with an engendered love, by an eternal propagation of humankind? Venus, who nourishes so many people by the generation of beasts? Ahh...in light of the deadly howlings you are displaying, it is clear that you are the dreaded Proserpina! You have the power to stop and put away the invasion of the hags and ghosts that appear unto humans, and to keep them down in the closures of the earth.

You, who are diversely worshiped, you who illuminate all the borders of the earth by your feminine shape! You,



Michael Bull, F.R.C., *Isis and Lucius*.

nourishing all the fruits of the world by your vigor and force! With whatever name or fashion it is lawful to call upon you, I pray you, please end my great travail and misery, and deliver me from the wretched fortune that has pursued me for so long.

Grant peace and rest from my adversities, if it pleases you, as I have endured too much labor and peril. Please remove from me my shape of an ass, and return me to my pristine estate. And if I have offended in any point of divine majesty, let me die rather than live, for I am fully weary of my life.

The Goddess Appears

When I had ended this prayer, finding my pleas to the Goddess brought to light, I most fortunately fell asleep. Whereupon, a divine and venerable face appeared to me, worshiped even by the gods themselves.

Little by little, I seemed to see the whole figure of her body rising out of the sea and standing before me. So then I set my mind to describe her divine semblance, whether the poverty of my human speech might suffer me, or whether her divine power would grant me proper eloquence in the task.

First, her great abundance of hair was dispersed and scattered about her neck. On the crown of her head she bore many garlands interlaced with flowers, and in the middle of her forehead was a glassy compass, resembling the light of the Moon. In one of her hands she bore serpents, and in the other, sheaves of corn.

Her garment was of fine silk and radiated a diverse array of colors, which sometimes appeared yellow, sometimes rose, and even sometimes aflame. And at other times (which troubled my spirit sorely), it even appeared dark and obscure, covered with a black robe in manner of a shield, with subtle pleating at the skirts. The welts were enticingly attractive, and here and there



Isis Finial, polychromed iron, late period Egypt, twenty-seventh to thirty-first dynasties (ca. 525-332 BCE). Finials were carried on long staffs, and marked the place of an important person in a procession, or a section for gathering. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum.

the stars could be glimpsed. In the middle of them was placed the Moon, which shone like a flame of fire. Encircling the robe was a coronet or garland made with flowers and fruits.

Her right hand held a brass timbrel, which gave a pleasant sound. In her left hand was a gold cup, from which the serpent Aspis emerged and lifted up his head with a swelling throat. Her fragrant feet were covered with shoes, which were interlaced and wrought with victorious palm. And so her heavenly form, breathing out the pleasant spice of fertile Arabia, chose with compassion to utter these words to me in her divine voice:

Behold Lucius I am come; your weeping and prayers have moved me to provide solace to you. I am she who is the natural mother of all things, mistress and governess of all the elements, the initial progeny of worlds, chief of powers divine, Queen of heaven! I am the principal of the celestial Gods, the light of the goddesses. At my will, the planets of the air, the wholesome winds of the seas, and the silences of hell are disposed. My name, my divinity is adored throughout the

world in diverse ways, through various customs and under many names.

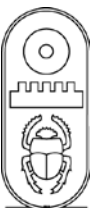
The Phrygians call me the Mother of the Gods; the Athenians, Minerva; the Cyprians, Venus; the Candians, Diana; the Sicilians, Proserpina; the Eleusians, Ceres. Some Juno, others Bellona, others Hecate. And principally, the Ethiopians in the East, and the Egyptians who are excellent in all manner of ancient doctrine and who worship me by their proper ceremonies and customs, call me Queen Isis.

Behold, I am here to take pity of your fortune and tribulation; I am present to favor and aid you. Leave behind your weeping and lamentation and put away all your sorrow. Rather, look upon the healthful day that is ordained by my providence, and therefore be ready to attend to my commandment.

The day following tonight is dedicated to my service, by an eternal religion. After the tempests of the sea have ceased, my priests and ministers customarily offer in my name a new



Bust of Isis-Sothis-Demeter, white marble, Roman artwork, second part of Hadrian's reign, ca. 131-138 CE. From the gymnasium in the Villa Adriana, near Tivoli, discovered in 1736. Collection of the Gregorian Egyptian Museum. Photo by Marie-Lan Nguyen/Wikimedia Commons. Isis was identified with all of the major Goddesses of the Mediterranean world, and assimilated their attributes.



You will live blessed in this world, and you will live gloriously by my guidance and protection.

ship as a first fruit of my navigation. I command you not to profane or despise the sacrifice in any way. Tomorrow the High Priest, following in procession under my divine guidance, shall carry a garland of roses next to the timbrel in his right hand. Follow my procession among the people, and when you come to the priest, make as though you would kiss his hand, but instead snatch at the roses. When this is done, I will rid you of the skin and shape of an ass, a kind of beast I have long time abhorred and despised.

Above all, beware and do not doubt me or have any fear, even as difficult as it may seem for these events to be brought to pass. Because in the same hour that I have come to you, I have also commanded the Priest a vision of what he shall do, and all the people by my commandment shall be compelled to give you place and to say nothing!

Furthermore, do not worry about whether any person shall abhor your ill-favored and deformed figure, as you will be among so fair and joyful ceremonies and in such good company that this will not be cause for concern. Nor would anyone in attendance be so foolhardy as to blame and reprove your sudden restoration to human shape, lest in doing so they should gather or conceive any sinister opinion. Also know this for sure: that the rest of your life until the hour of death shall be bound and subject to me!

And do not regard it as an injury to be always in my service, since it is by my countenance and benefit that

you will become a human. You will live blessed in this world, and you will live gloriously by my guidance and protection. When you descend to Hades, that subterranean place where you will see me shining (as you see me now) in the darkness of Acheron, and reigning in the deep profundity of Styx, you will worship me as one who has been favorable to you. And if I perceive that you are obedient to my commandment, adhere to my religion, and merit my divine grace, then know that I will prolong your days above and beyond the time that the fates have appointed and the celestial planets ordained.

When the divine Image had spoken these words, she vanished away! Upon awakening, I arose, feeling the various parts of my body mixed with fear, joy and sweat, and I marveled at the clear presence of the powerful goddess. And while being sprinkled with the water of the sea, I recounted in order her admonitions and divine commandments.



Royal Sistrum. Sistra were used by women in Egyptian Temple worship since early dynastic times, particularly in the rites of Goddesses. Isis, mother and creator, was often shown holding a water container (the flooding of the Nile) and a sistrum. Sistra are still used today in the Liturgies of the Alexandrine Christian Tradition (Coptic, Ethiopian, Eritrean). From the collection of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum.