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### Lucius's Rose: Symbolic or Sympathetic Cure?

Max Nelson  
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# **MythosEikonPoiesis**

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Herausgegeben von  
Roger Beck

Wissenschaftlicher Beirat:  
Gregory Nagy, Richard Martin

**Band 6**

# **Intende, Lector – Echoes of Myth, Religion and Ritual in the Ancient Novel**

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Edited by  
Marília P. Futre Pinheiro, Anton Bierl  
and Roger Beck

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## Editors' Preface and Acknowledgements

This collection presents a selection of fourteen papers and seven contributions to a Roundtable originally presented at the Fourth International Conference on the Ancient Novel (ICAN IV), which was held at the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, in Lisbon, from 21–26 July 2008. In particular, the volume explores the connections between myth, religion and ritual on the one hand and the ancient novel on the other. Despite the recent and intensified scholarly interest in the field of myth and ritual, inquiry into major shifts in mythical and ritual poetics is still in a preliminary stage. The essays in this collection advance our understanding considerably as they probe the intersections of myth and ritual with the plots of the novels. Topics include such issues such as poetics and intertextuality; myth, rite and magic; rites of passage, gendered ambiguities and transgression; morality and religiosity; narrative, folktale and performance. Despite the variety of texts examined, one common purpose is the effort to question the assumption that myth and ritual are a mere underlying religious basis, and to focus instead on how they influence and shape the plot of the novel.

First of all, Marília Futre Pinheiro takes the opportunity to express her utmost gratitude to her fellow editors, Anton Bierl and Roger Beck, for their accurate reading and editing of the papers, and for their friendly, collegial and continuous support during the long process of preparing this volume. Special thanks are also due to our conference sponsors. In the impossibility of naming them all, we thank, in the person of the President of the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Dr. Rui Vilar, all those who contributed to making ICAN 2008 a success.

A team of key-note speakers of ICAN IV together with Marília Futre Pinheiro was responsible for the selection of the contributions to the different themes. Consequently, all articles assembled in this volume were already carefully reviewed before they were delivered in Lisbon in 2008.

After the conference, Marília Futre Pinheiro picked Anton Bierl as co-editor of the area Myth, Ritual and Religion. Soon afterwards both decided to coopt Roger Beck. Marília Futre Pinheiro and Roger Beck together with Anton Bierl chose the selection of the articles for this volume.

Marília Futre Pinheiro and Roger Beck, in correspondence with the authors, made numerous suggestions for improvements and cuts. They wish to thank the authors for their patience and cooperation.

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wish to express their thanks to the authors for their patience, cooperation and careful reviewing.

Thanks are also due to Alison Smith, who further edited the English both of Anton Bierl's Roundtable and of his other contribution to the volume, as well as to Ann-Kathrin Stähle and Austin Diaz, both student assistants of Anton Bierl in Basel, who carefully read the manuscript for style, especially in the bibliographies, and for the English, again respectively. We further thank Katharina Legutke, Project Editor Classical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies at de Gruyter, for supporting the publication process, as well as Mr. Florian Ruppenstein for producing this volume.

Last but not least, Marília Futre Pinheiro and Roger Beck wish to thank their fellow editor, Anton Bierl, for kindly volunteering to publish this work in his series *MythosEikonPolesis*.

Marília P. Futre Pinheiro  
Anton Bierl  
Roger Beck

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Max Nelson

## Lucius's Rose: Symbolic or Sympathetic Cure?

**Abstract:** It has been argued that the story of Lucius's asinine quest for a rose represents a search for beauty and knowledge which is finally fulfilled when Lucius regains his human form. It is suggested here instead that the use of the rose is not so much symbolic as sympathetic and that it is linked to ancient magical practices.

In the surviving Greek story of Lucius's metamorphosis Palaestra states that the cure to return Lucius from ass to human form is to eat roses (*Luc.* 13). Lucius tries to eat roses unsuccessfully on three different occasions (14, 17 and 20), hopes to find some again (51–52), and finally succeeds at the end when he gets hold of a wreath of roses at a banquet in the arena (54). Similarly, in Apuleius's treatment of the story Photis tells Lucius that the cure for his condition is to eat roses (*Met.* 3,25,3). Lucius attempts to do so unsuccessfully three times (3,27,2; 3,29,5 and 4,2,8), then must simply wait for the spring for roses (7,15,1; 10,29,2 and 10,33), when he finally succeeds in eating some given to him as a crown by a priest of Isis (11,6,2 and 11,13,2).

During the sixteenth century, a number of authors interpreted Lucius's rose allegorically. Thus Filippo Beroaldo, in the earliest commentary on Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*, took the rose to represent 'knowledge' (*scientia*) or 'wisdom' (*sapientia*),<sup>1</sup> and following him, William Adlington, in the preface to his English translation of the work, spoke of the 'sweete Rose of reason and vertue' and 'the sweete floure and fruit' of studies.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, fairly anachronistically, other sixteenth century authors rather took the rose to symbolize the word of God or the Christian sacrament of penitence.<sup>3</sup>

Surprisingly little attention has been paid to the presence of the rose in this tale among more recent commentators, most taking it as a fairly trivial detail. In one of the few lengthy modern discussions, Nicole Fick-Michel shows that when the rose is mentioned in Apuleius, outside of the context of Lucius's quest, it is associated with love and joyfulness. Lucius's lover Photis is covered in roses (*Met.*

2,16,1) and in the Tale of Cupid and Psyche they are found worn by Venus at a banquet (6,11,1) and strewn by the Hours at the couple's wedding (6,24,3).<sup>4</sup> Such an erotic association of the rose is already found in the Greek story, in which Palaestra has strewn roses on the bed (*Luc.* 7) and Lucius at the end wears a garland of roses (56), in both instances in expectation of love-making. Umberto Eco in fact interprets Lucius's rose specifically as 'an erotic symbol' and explains: 'As regards the rose, because of its complex symmetry, its softness, the variety of its colors, and the fact that it flowers in spring, it appears in nearly all mystical traditions as a symbol, metaphor, allegory, or simile for freshness, youth, feminine grace and beauty in general.'<sup>5</sup> No doubt, as Eleanor Irwin has shown, already among archaic Greek poets the rose symbolized beauty, particularly female beauty, because of its color, fragrance and delicacy.<sup>6</sup> One may wonder, however, why an erotic symbol would be used as the means for a physical and spiritual transformation, one which in fact requires the abandonment precisely of 'lowly pleasures' (*Met.* 11,15,1 [*serviles ... voluptates*]). Barbara Seward says that it is 'the power of love as it operated in the human heart' which Lucius's rose is meant to symbolize;<sup>7</sup> but surely the presence of such a theme of love is not immediately apparent either in the Greek or Latin story of Lucius.

On the other hand, Fick-Michel has argued that while roses can act as simple erotic symbols Lucius's search for the rose symbolizes, in fact, the quest for both beauty and knowledge, returning then in a way to Beroaldo's interpretation.<sup>8</sup> Presumably then, when Lucius finally receives the rose from the priest of Isis he also attains beauty by regaining his human shape and gains knowledge through enlightenment in the cult of Isis.<sup>9</sup> For Fick-Michel then, the rose has not only a physical but a much more spiritual significance, but one that she is unable to parallel precisely in other Greco-Roman literature, although it is familiar from *The Romance of the Rose* and other later works.

Other scholars have gone so far as to interpret the rose in Apuleius, not so much as emblem of Venus, but of Isis. Just as the ass is the symbol of Seth-Typhon, the Egyptian god of evil, so is the rose the symbol of Isis, goddess of

1 Beroaldo 1500, fol. 2v. and 266r., respectively, cited in Galsser 2008, 217 with n. 84 and 219–220 with n. 91, respectively. See also Carver 2007, 178–179 and 320 on the first passage.

2 Adlington 1566, n.p. For Adlington's use of Beroaldo, see Carver 2007, 319–320.

3 See the citations in Galsser 2008, 253 and 267. Bradley 2012, 39–40 takes the rose as a symbol of redemption paralleled in Christian martyrologies in which it symbolizes salvation.

4 Fick-Michel 1991, 387. The use of roses to signal erotic contexts in the work is also pointed out by Scobie 1978, 45.

5 Eco 1992, 57.

6 Irwin 1994.

7 Seward 1960, 11.

8 Fick-Michel 1991, 386–391 (and see also Fick 1971, 339–343).

9 For the rose in Egyptian cult practice, see Griffiths 1975, 159–161.

goodness.<sup>10</sup> Of course, the problem with such an interpretation is that the rose is already found in the Greek story of Lucius which ostensibly had no Isiac message.<sup>11</sup>

Eco has astutely commented that 'the rose is a symbolic figure so rich in meanings that by now it hardly has any meaning left.'<sup>12</sup> Was this, however, the case in antiquity?

I would suggest that rather than the rose being symbolic in a straightforward literary sense, it may have been sympathetic in an occult magical sense. In Apuleius, when the sorceress Pamphile, in the form of an owl, wishes to regain her human shape, she drinks and bathes in spring water mixed with anise and laurel leaf (*Met.* 3,23,2).<sup>13</sup> It seems obvious here that we would not find in the use of these ingredients a subtle spiritual symbolism but rather simply a magical formula, and thus similarly Lucius's rose can be seen as a simple magical remedy.

While there have been numerous studies of the magical element in Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, few have had anything to say about the rose. Most deal with the Egyptian or Thessalian background, Apuleius's own reputation as a magician, the theme of curiosity, or the aspect of conversion to a higher form of magic. Apuleius's *Apology*, while intended as a defense against charges of magic, goes a long way to demonstrate both Apuleius's interest and widespread knowledge of the subject, and *The Golden Ass* too certainly contains reminiscences of authentic rituals, and such details as Lucius's use of the rose may have been carefully retained from the original because of its actual magical significance. In fact, the idea of a rose as remedy for asininity may go back to tales of Midas.<sup>14</sup>

10 See, for instance, Rist 1937, 276. For connections between asses and the cult of Isis, see Frangoulidis 2008, 169–171. For the rose as a symbol of Venus and of Isis, see Bradley 2012, 38–39.

11 This is pointed out by Morgan 1998, 3329. To counter such an objection, Trencsényi-Waldapfel 1969, 516 falls back on the generally dismissed theory that Apuleius's story came first and the Greek version was a parody of it.

12 Eco 1984, 3.

13 Compare the *moly* which Hermes gives Odysseus to protect him from being turned into a pig by Circe (*Hom. Od.* 10,281–306). Apuleius also mentions humans transforming into beavers, frogs and rams (*Met.* 1,9,1–4), domesticated and wild animals (2,5,7), birds, dogs, mice and flies (2,22,3), weasels (2,25,1), and snakes (8,21,3), but unfortunately not the means of regaining human form in these instances. Augustine (*Civ. Dei* 18,18) says that female innkeepers in Italy were said to turn men into beasts of burden by giving them something in cheese; he believes that if this happened, the men remained asleep while demons appeared as the animals. In the Babylonian Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 67b) Jannai turns a female innkeeper who tried to poison him into an ass by giving her something to drink.

14 Krappe 1947, 228 argues this, pointing out that in different versions of Midas's story, he was turned into an ass and had a famous rose garden. For more on the possible connection between the tale of Lucius and that of Midas, see Winkler 1985, 301–302.

I will briefly explore both the occult notion of natural sympathy and antipathy of substances as well as the medical concept of changeable qualities and allopathic cures in an effort to uncover the magical meaning of Lucius's rose.

Around 100 BC Bolus of Mendes wrote a work on antipathies and sympathies, a few quotations of which survive (often under the name 'Democritus').<sup>15</sup> It may have been he who is quoted as saying that the ass is antipathetic to the scorpion (fr. 15 Wellmann from the *Geoponica* 13,9,6 and 15,1,25, where it is attributed to Democritus, and see also Pliny *Hist. nat.* 28,42,155), though nothing extant which can be attributed to him deals with roses. The most substantial surviving work on the special properties and connections, either sympathetic or antipathetic, of various animals, flowers and stones is the so-called *Cyranides*, a late antique compilation in its extant form.<sup>16</sup> Among other material, it discusses the antithesis between asses and scorpions (2,31) but also provides a tantalizing reference to a type of rose used in garlands for festivals of the gods known as *onothyrasis* ('ass's staff') or *onomalache* ('ass's mallow') (1,15).<sup>17</sup> Whatever the origins of the Lucius story, it seems clear that both Lucian (the possible author of the Greek version known to Photius as authored by Lucius of Patrae [*Bibl.* 129], what may be the anonymous epitome of which is found among Lucian's works) and Apuleius (the author of the derivative Latin version) knew the *Cyranides* or at least similar texts. Thus Lucian speaks of people who seek a cure from Cyrrane (*Podagra* 174), which has been taken as a reference to the *Cyranides*.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, Apuleius was accused of having cut a fish to acquire his wife Pudentilla (*Apol.* 40,5 and 42,2), and although he denied the use of fish in magic (30,4; 31,1 and 32,1), a recipe using a cut fish to cause desire in a woman is found in the *Cyranides* (4,62).<sup>19</sup>

Another example of Apuleius's genuine knowledge of magical practices involving the notions of sympathy and antipathy can be provided. Apuleius claimed to have a statue of Mercury made of ebony because that wood was at hand (*Apol.* 61,7–8) but he himself knew that one ought not to sculpt a Mercury from any type of wood (43,6, and see *Iamb. Vit. Pyth.* 34) and in fact a Greek magical papyrus proves that the proper wood of Hermes was ebony (*PGM VIII,13*)<sup>20</sup> and an ebony

15 See in general Wellmann 1928.

16 For a useful introduction to this work, emphasizing the need for a better edition, see Bain 1993.

17 This is cited in passing in Winkler 1985, 301 n. 20.

18 See Festugière 1944, 205–206.

19 The connection is made in Nelson 2001, cited in Bradley 2012, 286 n. 14.

20 The connection is made in Abt 1908, 302.

statuette of Mercury has even been found in Carthage.<sup>21</sup> Although, unfortunately, unlike the case of the ebony statue, I have found no precise magical text or implement to substantiate the claim that, as ebony was thought sympathetic to Mercury/Hermes, roses were considered antipathetic to asses, there is circumstantial evidence which could lead to that conclusion.

In the mid-twelfth century AD, Constantine Manasses connected roses with the sun (*Comp. chron.* 125) and in later anonymous passages on planetary sympathies roses are connected with the sun and with gold as well as with lions.<sup>22</sup> The connection between the sun and gold is one that can be traced back to antiquity.<sup>23</sup> Indeed various ancient lists of planet/metal sympathies<sup>24</sup> as well as planet/stone sympathies<sup>25</sup> survive, but lists of planet/flower sympathies and planet/animal sympathies are rare, though existing ones mention both roses and asses, with asses connected to Saturn or the moon.<sup>26</sup> At least a rose/sun/gold/lion chain of sympathy resonates to some extent with material in Apuleius. John Winkler, for one, argued that the title *Asinus Aureus* ('The Golden Ass') was an oxymoronic one used already by Apuleius for his own work, one which had strong occult insinuations, and which also called to mind Seth-Typhon's link in Egyptian myth to both gold and asses.<sup>27</sup> Just as gold and asses might be considered generally antithetical it would make sense that a rose, as a plant sympathetic to gold, would be viewed as antithetical to asses.

A further promising route may be that opened by Galen, a contemporary of Lucian and Apuleius. Galen believed that all animals partake in the qualities of hotness or coldness and of dryness or wetness (*De temper.* 1,1) and thought that a perfect balance among these was needed for good health (1,3). Thus if one were too hot, one needed cold, too dry, wet (3,5). Galen further suggested that man is the most balanced of all beings (2,1) and holds the middle position (1,6) while asses have natures very similar to those of humans (*De foet. form.* 2) and have

21 Sichert 2002, 479.

22 Texts can be found in Weinstock 1940, 122. For the sun and roses, see also, for instance, *Picatrix* 3,1,6.

23 See, for instance, Anon. *Schol. Pind. Isthm.* 5, Cels. in *Orig. Contr. Cels.* 6,22, and Procl. *Comm. in Pl. Tim.* 14c ap. Olyrop. *Comm. in Ar. Meteor.* 59.

24 See, for instance, the listing in Partridge 1937.

25 See, for instance, the listing in Halleux and Schamp 1985, 222.

26 See, for instance, *PGM XIII*, 24–26 and 355–357, where the rose is mentioned among other planetary flowers but its planetary connection is not made explicit (for the problem with this list, see Nelson 2000, 381 n. 75). In Ps.-Albert. *Magn. Lib. secr.* 22 the sun is linked to the corrigiola flower. For the ass and Saturn, see Weinstock 1940, 122, and for possible reasons for this association, see Bouché-Leclercq 1899, 318 n. 1. For the ass and the moon, see *Picatrix* 3,1,9.

27 Winkler 1985, 297–271 and 317–315.

similar mental faculties (*Anim.* 5). According to the twelfth century Bernardus Silvestris, who followed this Galenic system, asses tend to be cold and wet while lions are hot and dry (*Cosm.* 2,13), thus making them antipathetic.<sup>28</sup> According to the allopathic system of Galen, the standard cure for asses would be the hot and dry, and while the sun was considered hot and dry,<sup>29</sup> and was connected to lions (as seen above), so sympathetically might the rose, as the flower of the sun, be thought to be hot and dry.<sup>30</sup> Giving an ass a rose could possibly have been medically thought to cure it to some degree of its asinine nature and make it more balanced, like a human.

In conclusion, the appearance of the rose in the Lucius story betrays knowledge of real arcane practices. No contemporary text precisely elucidates the significance of the rose but passages from medieval authors seem to illuminate matters. In the end it may have to be admitted that ancient occult practices remain obscure today.

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28 Bernardus in fact says that asses are phlegmatic and lions choleric, but phlegm is the cold and wet humor while cholera is the hot and dry one. Galen at least says that lions are hot (*De temper.* 1,5). If asses are thought to have the same nature as Saturn, they would be cold and dry, but if they are thought to be like the moon, they would rather be cold and wet (see Ptol., *Tetr.* 1,4 on Saturn and the moon).

29 See, for instance, in an author contemporary with Lucian and Apuleius, Ptol. *Tetr.* 1,4.

30 However, following Platearius, Thom. Cant. *Nat. rer.* 10,42 speaks of the rose as cold and dry, and the same is found in Peter the Deacon's *Book of Degrees* (as cited in Thorndike 1958, 751).



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