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Apuleius and the Esoteric Revival: An Ancient Decadent in Modern Times

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This article seeks to excavate a noteworthy source of inspiration for the interlocking decadent and esoteric movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the classical Latin writer Apuleius. Apuleius' life and works brought together decadent literature, magic, witchcraft and the esoteric strand in pagan religion – the same conjunction that later manifested itself in Britain and France in the late Victorian era. Apuleius is sometimes referred to in the academic literature as an influence on modern decadence and the occult revival, but no sustained study of his role in this regard has yet been produced. This essay will proceed in the following way. First, we will undertake an overview of Apuleius and his novel *The Golden Ass*. Second, we will locate the position that Apuleius occupied in the literary context of the nineteenth century, with particular reference to the decadent tradition. Third, we will survey his influence on the modern esoteric revival in general. Finally, we will examine specifically his influence on revived goddess-worship.

Apuleius and *The Golden Ass*

Apuleius was born around the mid-120s CE in Madauros in modern Algeria.[1] We do not know what his full name was. His ancestry was north African, and his father was a prominent local figure. His education took him to Carthage and Athens; he subsequently spent time in Rome, where he acquired something of a literary reputation. In 155 CE, he decided to journey to Egypt, but due to illness he stopped at Oea in modern Libya. There, he lodged with a former student friend of his named Pontianus and ended up marrying Pontianus' mother, who was a wealthy widow. By his own account, he entered into this marriage at Pontianus' instigation, but her family believed that the union had been brought about through sorcery. Apuleius was accordingly tried for witchcraft in 158/9 CE. A published version of his defence speech – the *Apologia* – still survives. We may presume that he was acquitted, as conviction would have meant death. In the succeeding years, Apuleius lived in Carthage as an honoured figure and served as a priest of the imperial cult. His date of death is unknown: it might have been any time after the late 160s.

Intellectually speaking, Apuleius was a Middle Platonist, although modern scholars' views differ on the quality of his philosophical thought.[2] Attempts have been made to argue that he drew on ideas from the Gnostic and Hermetic currents.[3] A number of surviving works are attributed to him (in some cases spuriously), and these include several rhetorical and philosophical texts. His best-known work, however, is *The Golden Ass*, more properly called the *Metamorphoses*, the only complete Latin novel that has come down to us from classical times. It is based on an earlier Greek story (*Lucius, or The Ass*) but it seems that Apuleius introduced autobiographical elements into the novel, and its two most memorable parts appear to be largely original compositions. One of these is Book 11, which deals with the hero Lucius' conversion and salvation. The other is the fable of Cupid and Psyche, a fantastic story about a beautiful princess who marries a god, falls from his presence, and then undergoes several trials before she is reunited with him.

A brief summary of the novel's plot is in order. The narrator lodges in a house where the wife of the family is a witch, and he begins an affair with a slave-girl called Photis. In an attempt to emulate the wife's witchcraft, and in collaboration with Photis, he accidentally turns himself into a donkey. In this guise, he passes through the hands of a series of abusive owners, including robbers and effeminate priests of the Syrian Goddess. He is sold to a baker; the baker anally rapes a man who cuckolds him, and the baker's wife induces a witch to attack her husband supernaturally. Lucius is subsequently sold to a market gardener whom he gets killed, and he ends up in the possession of a wealthy man who teaches him tricks and allows him to have sex with a human woman. He is scheduled to engage in another copulation with a condemned criminal, but he manages to escape. In the final part of the novel, Book 11, Lucius receives an epiphany from the goddess Isis (we may call this the Visitation of Isis). The spell which turned him into a donkey can be reversed if he eats roses. So, at Isis' direction, he attends a festival of the goddess and eats a bunch of roses carried by a priest. He is subsequently initiated into Isis' private mystery cult. Afterwards, he journeys to Rome at the behest of the goddess, where he undergoes two further initiations into the cult of Osiris. There the novel ends.

It will be apparent even from this brief summary why *The Golden Ass* has been treated as a significant source-text for ancient religion and magic. By his own account, Apuleius was an initiate of a number of mystery cults;[4] and he seems to have deployed some of his specialist knowledge in the novel. Alison Butler has written of Book 11:

> This is the earliest account of a mystery religion initiation and its discernible components are those to which later initiatory esoteric societies, such as the Freemasons, the pseudo-Rosicrucians and their offshoots, remain true.[5]

We must not forget, of course, that *The Golden Ass* is a ribald work of fiction; and its religious elements can accordingly be seen as ironic, exotic literary confections. Yet "sceptical" readings of the novel ultimately fail to convince.[6] It has been noted, for example, that Book 11 exhibits the anthropologically authentic features of a religious conversion.[7] In any event, it is sufficient to note for our purposes that nineteenth-century writers seem to have taken Apuleius' religious knowledge and sincerity for granted.

The novel is of particular interest for its treatment of the mystery religion of Isis, one of the principal goddesses of ancient Egypt. By Hellenistic times, she had become the focus of a quasi-monotheistic initiatory cult which spread through different parts of the Graeco-Roman cultural world. Our knowledge of the Isis cult before Apuleius' time is limited, but we do have one source of information in the form of aretalogies, or 'pronouncement[s] by the goddess Isis in which her deeds and qualities are set forth in the first person'.[8] In the Visitation of Isis, the goddess delivers a famous aretalogy, which seems to draw on authentic older Egyptian and Greek traditions.[9] The Visitation is precipitated by a prayer made by Lucius to the goddess, in which he calls on her under several different divine names and identities, eliding her with other goddesses of the ancient Mediterranean. Isis duly manifests herself from out of the sea. We may quote from William Adlington's classic translation of the aretalogy in which she asserts her supreme divine status:

> I am she that is the naturall mother of all things, mistresse and governesse of all the Elements, the initiall progeny of worlds, chiefe of powers divine, Queene of heaven, the principall of the Gods celestiall, the light of the goddesses: at my will the planets of the ayre, the wholesome winds of the Seas, and the silences of hell be disposed […] 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, other Bellona, other Hecate […].[10]

The Visitation scene, while striking, is not unique in Apuleius' writings. In the Cupid and Psyche story, for example, he identifies Venus as 'the primaeval mother of the universe, the first source of the elements'.[11] Venus perhaps plays an analogous role in that episode to the role of Isis in *The Golden Ass* as a whole. At any event, Apuleius' monotheising conception of a single Great Goddess is consistent both with what we know of the historical Isis cult and with his own intellectual inheritance from Platonic philosophy, which posits that disparate entities – including, it seems, even goddesses – can be seen as partaking in a higher unity.[12] It does, however, merit noting that Osiris seems to quietly take over from Isis as the supreme deity in the course of Book 11. Additionally, in several other writings attributed to him, Apuleius seems to indicate that he believes in a quasi-monotheistic male god.[13] Osiris might be seen as the ultimate supreme Platonic divine entity, while Isis is a little lower in the metaphysical hierarchy.[14]

So much for Apuleius' novel and the religious influences on it. We will see presently how Apuleius came to act as a conduit into mystery religion and goddess-worship for a selection of nineteenth-century figures who made it their business to take an interest in such things. First, however, we must look at another, related group of modern figures who drew influence from Apuleius: the decadent artists and writers of the late nineteenth century.

Apuleius and Decadence

Apuleius was a presence in English letters throughout the nineteenth century. It is perhaps unsurprising that he struck a chord with the early Romantic poets, given their leanings towards Platonist philosophy and religious transgression. One of John Keats's best known pieces, the 'Ode to Psyche', was influenced by the tale of Cupid and Psyche; and the Visitation of Isis may have inspired a passage in *Endymion*.[15] For his part, Percy Shelley wrote in 1817 that 'the splendour of Apuleius eclipses all that I have read for the last year'.[16] One of his poems – 'Sweet Child, thou star of love and beauty bright' – was directly inspired by an epigram of Plato that was cited by Apuleius.[17] We may also note that Apuleius was a main source for the Anglo-Irish poet Mary Tighe's epic *Psyche, or the Legend of Love* (1805).

Apuleius' influence grew in later years. While he was never really central to English literature, there do seem to have been a disproportionate number of published translations of *The Golden Ass*, or parts of it, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – that is, in the period commonly associated with the aesthetic and decadent movements.[18] Special mention may be made here of some contemporary translations of the Cupid and Psyche episode. William Morris, a figure of major significance for aestheticism, penned a version of the story in 1865, which was published as part of his *Earthly Paradise* (1868–1870). Walter Pater included his own translation of the story in his novel *Marius the Epicurean* (1885).[19] William Adlington's Elizabethan translation of the episode was republished in 1897 by Vale Press (Ballantyne Press), a publishing house run by Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon (who also worked with the Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley, and John Gray). Finally, there was Edward Carpenter's translation of the story, which was published in London by Sonnenschein in 1900; Carpenter was a homosexual socialist with Neo-Pagan sympathies.

It has repeatedly been noted that artistic aestheticism and decadence in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods had a close relationship with occultism and Neo-Paganism, as well as with socially transgressive behaviour such as homosexuality.[20] Apuleius' writings formed part of this conjunction. As one unsympathetic contemporary observer, the Catholic theologian William Francis Barry, wrote:

> It must be well understood that disciples of the school known as Decadent, though by no means classic in a noble sense, are unquestionably Pagan, deriving their inspiration from Catullus, Apuleius of the 'Golden Ass', Petronius Arbiter, and the host of Greek lyrical singers whom Cicero could never, as he observes, find leisure to read.[21]

That the shade of Apuleius hung over these Pagan, decadent *littérateurs* is not a new observation, although it is one whose ramifications have been under-explored. The popular occult writer Montague Summers wrote that *The Golden Ass* 'has a fascination, perverse and baroque as it may often be, which is equalled by few books of any literature. Unbroken is the spell which that decadent mystic has cast upon the ages.'[22] D. H. Lawrence described Apuleius as 'decadent and sensuous', containing 'the last throb of the old way of sensuality, Babylon, Tyre, Carthage'.[23] C. S. Lewis, who wrote his own iteration of the Cupid and Psyche story in *Till We Have Faces* (1956), described *The Golden Ass* as a 'strange compound of picaresque novel, horror comic, mystagogue's tract, pornography, and stylistic experiment'.[24]

Part of the appeal of *The Golden Ass* for decadent writers was its form. Apuleius was a member of a literary movement known as the Second Sophistic, which focused on cultivating the art of rhetorical declamation. Apuleius accordingly manifests a rich, exuberant style. *The Golden Ass* is written in an idiosyncratic, poetic form of Latin with a large, obscure vocabulary and an elaborate syntax. The novel's prose style was repeatedly condemned as degenerate and debased from the Renaissance onwards,[25] but it was viewed rather differently by the decadents. The novel also employs a series of carefully crafted stories-within-the-story, which tend to have perverse and magical themes. The most famous of these is the tale of Cupid and Psyche, which is probably a Platonist allegory of the soul's fall into matter and subsequent reunion with the divine.[26] Other such stories are less edifying. One involves transvestitism, and several involve adultery. A man is killed by two witches who urinate on his face. A dead man is called back to life and another man is mutilated by witches. There is the tale of Charite, which tells of a love triangle that ends in murder and suicide. There is a story involving the death of a father and his three sons, and a story of multiple poisonings. All this is of a piece with the novel as a whole, which presents the reader with unrelenting violence, scatology, and taboo-breaking sex. The sex is perhaps the most significant element, encompassing as it does everything up to and including homosexuality, adultery, and bestiality. As Keith Bradley notes, in Apuleius, 'sex is a predominantly dangerous, and sometimes violent, force that jeopardizes and erodes all the various boundaries and bonds that normally order and regulate society'.[27] He thus had more to offer to fin-de-siècle decadents than theologizing about Isis.

As to specific contemporary writers who were influenced by *The Golden Ass*, we have already mentioned Walter Pater (1839-1894). In Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*, the eponymous young hero attends a festival of Isis, just as Lucius does, and Apuleius makes a personal appearance as a foppish philosopher who talks about daemonology. The way in which Pater introduces *The Golden Ass* into the narrative is particularly interesting. The book makes its appearance as a luxury physical object, a gift given by Marius to an older youth named Flavian:

> What they were intent on was, indeed, the book of books, the 'golden' book of that day, a gift to Flavian, as was shown by the purple writing on the handsome yellow wrapper following the title […]. It was perfumed with oil of sandal-wood, and decorated with carved and gilt ivory bosses at each end of the roller.
>
> And the inside was something not less dainty and fine, full of the archaisms and curious felicities in which that age delighted, quaint terms and images picked fresh from the early dramatists, the life-like phrases of some lost poet preserved by an old grammarian, racy morsels of the vernacular and studied prettinesses …[28]

What we have here is an example of a broader trope from decadent culture: what Linda Dowling called 'the fatal book', which has the 'power decisively to change an individual life'.[29] This motif is best known, of course, from Oscar Wilde: the mysterious "yellow book" that corrupts Dorian Gray. In real life, Wilde claimed that his personal "golden book" was Pater's own *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*.[30] Wilde seems to have drawn this term both from the passage of *Marius* quoted above and from Algernon Swinburne.[31] That Apuleius formed part of this web of decadent intertextuality is clearly significant. Dorian Gray's "yellow book" is generally thought to be Joris-Karl Huysmans's (1848-1907) *À rebours* [*Against Nature*] (1884). In this novel, the protagonist, Des Esseintes, is a convinced admirer of Apuleius and owns a copy of the 1469 Roman *editio princeps* of his works.[32] He does not care for the standard authors like Virgil and Cicero, but he has a soft spot for later, supposedly degenerate writers. This recalls what we have said about Apuleius' allegedly deficient prose style. We have here a boldly perverse rejection of the traditional French admiration for the disciplined perfection of Ciceronian Latin: a small but significant decadent act of rebellion against narrowness and pedantry.

Apuleius also made his way into the decadent visual arts. When Aubrey Beardsley depicted *The Toilette of Salome* in 1894, he drew her as the stereotype of the 'modern society woman on whose bookshelf festered unread copies of Apuleius, Baudelaire and de Sade'.[33] By this time, the German Symbolist artist Max Klinger had also portrayed the story of *Amor und Psyche* (1880) in a series of prints. Perhaps the last sighting of Apuleius among the decadents came in the mystically inclined Welsh writer Arthur Machen's novel *The Hill of Dreams* (1907). The book's hero is named Lucian Taylor, an obvious reference to Apuleius' Lucius, and Machen recounts the young Welshman seeing visions of ancient performances of classical stories, including from Apuleius' novel.[34] *The Hill of Dreams* was semi-autobiographical, and it comes as little surprise that Machen himself later recalled, in an explicitly autobiographical work, that he had consciously modelled the construction of his stories on Apuleius.[35]

Apuleius and the esoteric revival

Scholars have shown limited interest in investigating the link between Apuleius and the revived Paganism and esotericism of nineteenth-century decadence, even though that link was expressly remarked upon at the time. Anatole France had already noticed the connection by 1890.[36] I quoted in the last section the judgement of the Catholic scholar William Barry. During World War I, the prominent Anglican cleric Dean Inge compared Apuleius to the 'decadent ritualists [of] our own time', and commented that 'spirits and ghosts, sacraments and oracles, white magic and divination, make up the larger part of his religion' (Inge, a leading modernist theologian, was fighting his own battles with the Anglo-Catholics in his church and their particular brand of perverse exoticism).[37]

Pausing there for a moment, it is curious and significant that a link between literary artistry in the decadent style on the one hand and esoteric religion on the other is already found in the life and work of Apuleius. This has implications for the way in which we seek to explain the reappearance of the link in the late nineteenth century. It makes it more difficult for us to attribute it purely to time-bound considerations: we cannot simply say that the hegemonic Christianity of the Victorian era led decadent writers to reach opportunistically for occult and Neo-Pagan themes *pour épater les bourgeois*. There may be some inherent psychological link between the mannered transgressiveness of form and content that we find in decadent writing and an interest in the magical and mystical forms of religious praxis.

Historically speaking, Apuleius' influence on the occult revival did not come out of nowhere. Already in the early part of the nineteenth century, he was well known to esoteric writers. One of these was Francis Barrett, who included Apuleius in his work *The Magus*.[38] Another was the well-known Platonist philosopher and Neo-Pagan Thomas Taylor, who published a translation of the Cupid and Psyche story in 1795 and a further translation of *The Golden Ass* and other works in 1822.[39] Taylor was one of those who interpreted the story of Cupid and Psyche as an allegory of the soul's descent into matter. Another English adaptation of the Cupid and Psyche story, by Hudson Gurney, was published and republished in several editions around the turn of the nineteenth century. Gurney informed readers that 'APULEIUS was a Platonist and a Mystic, and […] he is perpetually recurring to the rites and cabbala of the many religious fraternities into which he had been initiated'.[40] This highlights a key point. Apuleius seems to have been characterized by a series of nineteenth-century writers as an initiate of the mysteries: a kind of ancient Freemason.[41] Indeed, the reception of Apuleius by contemporary Freemasons was crucial to his influence on the occult revival. He caught the interest of a series of Masonic writers who combined their Freemasonry with an interest in ancient mystery religion.[42] Apuleius' activities in the Isis cult were connected with the modern Craft by several significant figures in the occult revival, including Kenneth Mackenzie (1833-1886) and John Yarker (1833-1913). In his *Royal Masonic Cyclopaedia*, Mackenzie offered an allegorical reading of the novel relating to wisdom and divine providence. He concluded with the words: 'The whole romance abounds with allusions of an interesting kind to the Freemason, and should be studied by every true Brother of the Mystic Tie.'[43]

It is not difficult to find further evidence of Apuleius' influence on leading figures of the occult revival. Éliphas Lévi and Madame Blavatsky were both familiar with his work;[44] and his legacy can be seen in and around the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, the pioneering magical order which was founded *circa* 1888 (and whose rituals are a fairly good example of decadent performance art). William Wynn Westcott (1848-1925), the order's principal founder, wrote of *The Golden Ass*: 'This story should be studied by all Freemasons and Rosicrucians'.[45] Other prominent members of the Golden Dawn who did just that included Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers (1854-1918), who later founded his own cult of Isis around the turn of the twentieth century in Paris,[46] and W. B. Yeats (1865-1939), who liked the theme of the individual on a quest for spiritual truth and incorporated it into his personal mythology.[47] In addition, we must mention here the most notorious Golden Dawn magician of all, Aleister Crowley (1875-1947). Crowley's play *Tannhäuser* (1902) includes two speeches concerning Isis that seem to recall the Visitation. The Great Beast also put *The Golden Ass* on his reading list for his students, and elsewhere included Apuleius in a list of strange and sensationalist writers alongside Huysmans and Machen.[48]

Apuleius and goddess-worship

Finally, we may consider a more specific aspect of Apuleius' influence on the Golden Dawn and other actors in the esoteric revival – that of goddess-worship. Apuleius appears to have given significant impetus to the religious idea that the divine takes the form of a syncretistic Great Goddess: an idea which is expressed powerfully and memorably in the Visitation of Isis. Interestingly, the leanings towards male quasi-monotheism that are also found in Apuleius' writings do not seem to have been pursued by decadent-era esotericists. They presumably struck them as too conventional.

In the field of Pagan Studies, Apuleius is freely recognized as a source of modern goddess-worship.[49] Yet this remains an under-researched point. In his seminal history of Neo-Pagan witchcraft, *The Triumph of the Moon*, Ronald Hutton traces how the idea of a syncretistic Great Goddess acquired a place in post-Enlightenment British culture.[50] His research indicates that the idea entered the cultural bloodstream by two principal routes: Romantic poetry, going back to the time of Keats and Shelley, and the work of academic classicists. Hutton's narrative is expertly crafted, but it is not entirely complete. It leaves out some parts of the story, including the reception of *The Golden Ass* and the Visitation of Isis, which formed in effect a third source for the Great Goddess idea.

Consistently with what we have seen, the first mentions of the Visitation of Isis among nineteenth-century esotericists seem to occur in the works of writers on Freemasonry (several of whom were Americans). The philo-Masonic writer John Fellows made reference to the Visitation and declared that Isis was 'the universal nature, or the first cause, the object of all the mysteries'.[51] The Masonic grandee Albert Pike made specific mention of the Visitation in his work.[52] The well-known Masonic encyclopaedist Albert Mackey compared Isis in the Visitation to the Whore of Babylon in the Book of Revelation.[53] Evidently, the pagan associations of Apuleius were not necessarily positive even in esoteric circles. By the twentieth century, the Visitation of Isis had become the common property of esotericists, Masonic and otherwise. The American occultist Manly P. Hall quoted the Visitation in his 1928 work *The Secret Teachings of All Ages*;[54] Dion Fortune took the idea that all goddesses are one from Apuleius' work;[55] and Robert Graves quoted the Visitation at length in his eccentric classic *The White Goddess*.[56] More interestingly for our purposes, the Visitation had by this time undergone another development: it had passed into the domain of Neo-Pagan liturgy.

How exactly did this happen? A clear view of developments in this area has been obscured by the myth of the Cambridge coven. It is sometimes said that in the nineteenth century a group of students at Cambridge University used Apuleius as a source-text for Neo-Pagan rituals. This notion has been current both among practising Neo-Pagans and in academic circles.[57] The story is, however, very likely to be false. Its ultimate source seems to be Montague Summers, who reported an alleged rumour that Francis Barrett 'founded a small sodality of students' which studied 'dark and deep mysteries', and which 'perhaps persists even today'.[58] Barrett's biographer, Francis King, was prepared to take this claim seriously.[59] But Summers is not a trustworthy source, and scepticism is the better option. The Cambridge coven story was subsequently taken up by E. W. (Bill) Liddell, the author of a body of material which sought to claim that the Essex cunning man George Pickingill (1816–1909) was a major influence on the development of modern esotericism and witchcraft. Nine witch covens that were allegedly founded by Pickingill were said to have used the Visitation of Isis in their rituals. Pickingill supposedly got this idea from the Cambridge group, which had used the ancient classics (along with Keats and Shelley) as a source for their activities.[60] Liddell's writings are generally regarded as spurious, and there is no reason at all to believe that they are accurate on this point.[61]

In truth, the first appearance of Isis as a universal goddess in Neo-Pagan magical ritual came with the Golden Dawn, which incorporated a distinct strand of goddess-worship into its system. Isis in particular – the 'Great goddess of the forces of nature'[62] – was mentioned repeatedly in the order's rites.[63] As early as his initiation into the second grade of "Theoricus", the Golden Dawn magus was informed of a female divine figure who was simultaneously Isis, the kabbalistic Queen of the Canticles, the angel Sandalphon and the bride of the Book of Revelation (an interesting inversion of Mackey's disapproving use of Biblical imagery).[64] Another example of Isiac worship in the Golden Dawn tradition comes in the "Ritual for

Transformation", which seems to have been composed somewhat later than most of the other rituals. This rite also refers to Revelation, and contains an invocation of Isis which culminates in the following passionate rhetoric:

> O mother, O archetype eternal of maternity and love, O mother, the flower of all mothers […]. O Isis, great queen of heaven, supernal splendour […]. Hail unto thee, O thou mighty mother, Isis, unveil thou, O soul of nature, giving life and energy to the universe.[65]

Some Golden Dawn members even believed that they had been favoured with their own visitation from the goddess. Florence Farr and Elaine Simpson had a trance vision on 10 November 1892 in which they saw a figure who claimed to be 'the mighty Mother Isis; most powerful of all the world'.[66] The Golden Dawn's ideas about the divine feminine undoubtedly had more than one source (including in particular the Kabbalah) and they cannot be ascribed solely to influence from Apuleius. Nevertheless, it is strongly plausible that the order's syncretic, quasi-monotheistic conception of Isis was mediated through the Visitation. This would be probable even if it were not already clear from other sources that the fin-de-siècle esotericists who operated in and around the Golden Dawn had read their Apuleius.

The best known modern expression of the Visitation of Isis is a piece of liturgy used by Wiccan witches which is known as the "Charge of the Goddess". Gerald Gardner, the founder of Wicca, wrote the Charge in the 1940s; the original version was entitled "Leviter Veslis". Gardner was a well-read man and we know something about the content of his reading from a combination of his published "non-fictional" books on witchcraft (*Witchcraft Today* (1954) and *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (1959)) and a list of books that the Wiccan Church of Canada purchased from his estate. This evidence attests that he was familiar with Apuleius, as well as with Apuleius' modern admirers Dion Fortune and Robert Graves. The text of the Charge does not directly quote the Visitation of Isis.[67] But the general resemblance of the Charge to the Visitation – both texts being dramatic self-revelations by universal goddesses – is too great to dismiss.[68] Moreover, the Charge begins with a list of historical goddesses,[69] which clearly recalls the syncretic conception of the Great Goddess found in the Visitation. In Gardner's original "Leviter Veslis", the passage in question ran as follows:

> Listen to the words of the Great mother, who of old was also called among men Artemis, Astarte, Dione, Melusine, Aphrodite, Cerridwen, Diana, Arianrhod, Bride, and by many other names.[70]

We may also note that Gardner remarked of the Charge that 'a similar charge was a feature of the ancient mysteries' and it is difficult to know what he can have meant by this if not the Visitation.[71] The Visitation was essentially replaced and supplanted by the Charge in Wiccan circles, and perhaps in Neo-Pagan circles more generally. Wiccans still read Apuleius (as well as Graves and Fortune) but if they want to construct a ritual text for the epiphany of a divine figure, it would seem that they tend to adapt Gardner's Charge or one of the variants on it. To this extent, we might say that the Visitation of Isis has perished by absorption.

Like many of the men and women of the decadent and esoteric currents, Apuleius came from a comfortable background and yet ended up cutting something of a marginal figure in his own culture. His apparent interest in and knowledge of magic, the supernatural and initiatory religion made him an unusually attractive source for nineteenth- and twentieth-century occultists, and the fact that he wrote on transgressive themes in a decadent style served only to increase his appeal. Yet he has not to date received the attention that he deserves in accounts of decadence and the esoteric revival. It may be hoped that this article will go some way towards remedying this deficiency.

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[1] On Apuleius' biography and self-presentation, see Julia Haig Gaisser, *The Fortunes of Apuleius & the Golden Ass* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 1–20.

[2] See, for example, Friedemann Drews, '*Asinus Philosophans*: Allegory's Fate and Isis' Providence in the *Metamorphoses*', in *Aspects of Apuleius' Golden Ass*, *Volume III*, ed. by W. Keulen and U. Egelhaaf-Gaiser (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 107–31 (pp. 110–12).

[3] See Jean-Pierre Mahé, 'Quelques remarques sur la religion des Métamorphoses d'Apulée et les doctrines gnostiques contemporaines', *Revue des sciences religieuses*, 46 (1972), 1–19, and Hans Münstermann, *Apuleius: Metamorphosen literarischer Vorlagen* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1995), pp. 195–211.

[4] See Apuleius, *The Apologia and Florida of Apuleius of Madaura,* trans. by H. E. Butler, pp. 55–56.

[5] Alison Butler, *Victorian Occultism and the Making of Modern Magic: Invoking Tradition* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 94.

[6] On the interpretation of the novel as a whole, and of the Cupid and Psyche episode and Book 11 in particular, see

E. J. Kenney, ed., *Apuleius: Cupid & Psyche* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 6–17; P. G. Walsh, ed., *Apuleius: The Golden Ass* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), pp. xxiii–xliii; Stavros Frangoulidis, *Witches, Isis and Narrative* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), pp. 175–76, 200–02; Claudio Moreschini, *Apuleius and the Metamorphoses of Platonism* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), pp. 59–69, 81–83, 87–115.

[7] See Nancy Shumate, *Crisis and Conversion in Apuleius' Metamorphoses* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), pp. 310–28. Shumate herself thinks that Apuleius was not a true believer, but rather an acute observer who understood the psychology of true belief.

[8] Matthew E. Gordley, *The Colossian Hymn in Context* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), p. 147; see generally pp. 147–51.

[9] See J. Gwyn Griffiths, *Apuleius of Madauros: The Isis-Book* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), pp. 138–40, and Mareile Haase, 'Epithets of Isis', in *Brill's New Pauly*, ed. by Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider, 6 vols (Leiden: Brill, 2005), VI, p. 967.

[10] Apuleius, *The Golden Ass of Lucius Apuleius*, trans. by William Adlington (London: Chapman and Dodd, 1922), p. 219. The passage is *The Golden Ass,* 11.5.

[11] Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 4.30.

[12] See Friedemann Drews, 'A Platonic Reading of the Isis Book', in *Apuleius Madaurensis Metamorphoses: Book XI: The Isis Book*, ed. by W. H. Keulen et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 517–28 (p. 519).

[13] See *On the Heavens*, 37; *On Plato and his Doctrine*, 1.5; *On the God of Socrates*, 3; and *Apologia*, 64.

[14] See Stefan Tilg, *Apuleius' Metamorphoses: A Study in Roman Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 80–82, and Drews, 'A Platonic Reading', pp. 519–20, 524.

[15] Keats cited Apuleius as a source for the 'Ode': see Horace E. Scudder, ed., *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1899), pp. 142, 370–01. On *Endymion*, see Jennifer N. Wunder, *Keats, Hermeticism, and the Secret Societies* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 134–35.

[16] See Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Poems of Shelley: Volume Four: 1820–1821*, ed. by Michael Rossington, Jack Donovan, and Kelvin Everest (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 301.

[17] See Kathleen Raine, *Blake and the New Age* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 101–03.

[18] In England, such translations were reprinted at least ten times by George Bell and Sons (originally Bell and Daldy) between 1872 and 1914. Other popular editions were published by David Nutt (London, 1893), Alexander Moring (London, 1904), Imperial Press (London, 1904), and Clarendon Press (Oxford, 1910).

[19] The translation is creative in nature, being moulded by Pater's aestheticism: see Eugene J. Brzenk, 'Pater and Apuleius', *Comparative Literature*, 10 (1958), 55–60.

[20] See Jennifer Rachel Hallett, 'Paganism in England 1885–1914', unpublished PhD thesis (University of Bristol, 2006), Chapter 4; Kelly Anne Reid, 'The Love Which Dare Not Speak its Name', *The Pomegranate*, 10 (2008), 130–41; and G. J. Wheeler, 'Discourses of Paganism in the British and Irish Press During the Early Pagan Revival', *The Pomegranate,* 19 (2017), 5–24.

[21] William Barry, *Heralds of Revolt* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904), p. 295.

[22] Montague Summers, *The Vampire in Europe* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 42.

[23] D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 167.

[24] C. S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1956), p. 313.

[25] For an historical perspective on this issue, see S. J. Harrison, *Framing the Ass* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 17–24, 28–31 and 40–41, and Silvia Mattiacci, 'Apuleius and Africitas', in *Apuleius and Africa*, ed. by Benjamin Todd Lee, Ellen Finkelpearl, and Luca Graverini (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 87–111.

[26] For reflections on the origins of this story, and its links with the Platonist and Gnostic currents, see Chiara O. Tommasi Moreschini, 'Gnostic Variations on the Tale of Cupid and Psyche', in *Intende, Lector*, ed. by Marília P. Futre Pinheiro, Anton Bierl, and Roger Beck (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), pp. 123–44.

[27] Keith Bradley, *Apuleius and Antonine Rome* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), p. 230.

[28] Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean* (London: Macmillan, 1885), pp. 40–41. Note also that Pater compares Apuleius to Théophile Gautier at p. 44.

[29] Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 164.

[30] William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald, eds., *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: Autobiographies* (New York: Scribner, 1999), p. 124.

[31] See Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 93.

[32] Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. by Robert Baldick (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 31.

[33] Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man?: A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1988), p. 39.

[34] Arthur Machen, *The Hill of Dreams* (London: Martin Secker, 1924), pp. 145–47.

[35] Arthur Machen, *Things Near and Far* (London: Martin Secker, 1923), p. 104.

[36] See Mircea Eliade, *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 51.

[37] William Ralph Inge, *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, 3rd edn, 2 vols (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003), I, p. 93.

[38] Francis Barrett, *The Magus* (London: Lackington, Allen, and Co., 1801), pp. 143, 158–61. In these places, Barrett

was plagiarizing Pierre Bayle’s *Dictionary Historical and Critical* (s.vv. ‘Apuleius’ and ‘Zoroaster’), but he changed Bayle’s text where the latter’s sceptical outlook differed from his own.

[39] Thomas Taylor, *The Fable of Cupid and Psyche* (London: Leigh and Sotheby, 1795), and Thomas Taylor, *The Metamorphosis, or Golden Ass, and Philosophical Works, of Apuleius* (London: Robert Triphook and Thomas Rodd, 1822).

[40] Hudson Gurney, *Cupid and Psyche: A Mythological Tale from the Golden Ass of Apuleius*, 3rd edn (London: J. Wright, 1801), [first page, not numbered].

[41] Wunder makes a similar point to this, although without furnishing contemporary evidence. See *Keats*, p. 63.

[42] See Hyppolito Joseph da Costa, *Sketch for the History of the Dionysian Artificers* (London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1820), pp. 15, 17; Theodore A. Buckley, ‘The Golden Ass of Apuleius’, *The Freemasons’ Quarterly Magazine*, 1 (1853), 39–47; ‘“X”, ‘The Ancient Mysteries’, *Freemasons Magazine and Masonic Mirror,* 4 (1858), 881–87 (pp. 884–85); A. F. A. Woodford, ed., *Kenning’s Masonic Cyclopaedia* (London: George Kenning, 1878), pp. 37, 343–44; and, from a somewhat later period, W. L. Wilmshurst, *The Meaning of Masonry* (London: William Rider and Son, 1922), Chapter 5.

[43] Kenneth R. H. Mackenzie, *The Royal Masonic Cyclopaedia of History, Rites, Symbolism, and Biography* (London: John Hogg, 1877), p. 276. For Yarker’s views, see *The Arcane Schools* (Belfast: William Tait, 1909), pp. 107, 112, 136–37.

[44] See Éliphas Lévi, *The History of Magic*, 2nd edn (London: William Rider and Son, 1922), pp. 204–06, and H. P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, 2 vols (Pasadena: Theosophical University Press, [n.d.]), II, pp. 108, 146, 362–63.

[45] R. A. Gilbert, ed., *The Magical Mason* (Wellingborough: Aquarian, 1983), p. 275.

[46] It would seem that Mathers’ endeavours in this regard were indebted to Apuleius. See Caroline Tully, ‘Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers and Isis’, in *Ten Years of Triumph of the Moon*, ed. by Dave Evans and Dave Green (Harpenden: Hidden Publishing, 2009), pp. 62–74.

[47] See P. Th. M. G. Liebregts, *Centaurs in the Twilight* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), p. 95, and Brian Arkins, ‘The Roman Novel in Irish writers’, *Irish University Review*, 32 (2002), 215–24 (p. 222).

[48] See ‘A ∴ A ∴ Curriculum’, *The Equinox*, 3.1 (1919), 18–37 (p. 23); *Magick in Theory and Practice* (1924), Appendix I; and *Magick Without Tears* (1943), Chapter LXXIV.

[49] See Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 33; Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, rev. edn (New York: Penguin Compass, 1986), p. 536; and Barbara Jane Davy, *Introduction to Pagan Studies* (Lanham: AltaMira, 2007), p. 119.

[50] See Hutton, ‘Finding a Goddess’, in *The Triumph of the Moon*, pp. 33–44.

[51] John Fellows, *The Mysteries of Freemasonry* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1860), p. 133.

[52] Albert Pike, *Morals and Dogma of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry* (Charleston: Supreme Council of the Thirty-Third Degree, 1871), p. 80.

[53] Albert G. Mackey, *An Encyclopedia of Freemasonry and Its Kindred Sciences* (Philadelphia: Moss, 1879), p. 80. This passage was derivative of George Stanley Faber’s *The Origin of Pagan Idolatry*, 3 vols (London: F. C. and J. Rivington, 1816), III, p. 642. Faber was not a Freemason, but he had a similar agenda of interpreting the Book of Revelation as connected with ancient mystery religion.

[54] Manly P. Hall, *The Secret Teachings of All Ages* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2003), pp. 121–27.

[55] See Robert Laynton, *Behind the Masks of God*, 2nd edn (Stoke-on-Trent: Companion Guides, 2016), p. 65. See also Ben Gruagach, *The Wiccan Mystic* (Eden Prairie, MN: WitchGrotto, 2007), p. 243.

[56] Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*, 4th edn (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), pp. 65–68.

[57] See J. Phillips, ‘A History of Wicca in England: 1939 to Present Day’, paper given at 1991 Wiccan Conference in Canberra (revised 2004), available online at http://geraldgardner.com/History_of_Wicca_Revised.pdf [accessed 18 December 2019], and Chas S. Clifton and Graham Harvey, eds., *The Paganism Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 16.

[58] Montague Summers, *Witchcraft and Black Magic* (London: Rider and Co., 1946), pp. 161–62.

[59] Francis X. King, *The Flying Sorcerer* (Oxford: Mandrake, 1992), pp. 25–26; see also p. 35 n.8.

[60] E. W. Liddell, ‘Secrets of the Nine Covens’, *The Cauldron*, [February 1984]. Available online at http://www.the–cauldron.org.uk/Resources/Secrets%20Nine%20Covensa.pdf [accessed 18 December 2019].

[61] See Hutton, *Triumph*, pp. 298–307.

[62] See Israel Regardie, *The Golden Dawn*, 7th edn (Woodbury: Llewellyn, 2015), p. 386.

[63] On Isis in the Golden Dawn, see Hallett, ‘Paganism’, pp. 191–92.

[64] See Regardie, *The Golden Dawn*, pp. 194–95. Perhaps surprisingly, the Virgin Mary is missing from this list, although we might note that in the same period Sir James Frazer referenced Apuleius in a memorable passage linking Isis to Mary: see *The Golden Bough*, 3rd edn, 12 vols (London: Macmillan and Co., 1914), VI, pp. 118–19.

[65] Regardie, *The Golden Dawn*, pp. 549–50.

[66] Lynne Hume and Nevill Drury, *The Varieties of Magical Experience* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2013), p. 181.

[67] Its direct sources comprise principally Crowley and the American anthropologist Charles Leland. See Ceisiwr Serith, ‘The Sources of the Charge of the Goddess’, http://www.ceisiwrserith.com/wicca/charge.htm [accessed 18 December 2019], and Ronald Hutton, ‘Crowley and Wicca’, in *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism*, ed. by Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 285–306.

[68] The link between the two is acknowledged in Sorita D’Este and David Rankine, *Wicca: Magickal Beginnings*, 2nd edn

(London: Avalonia, 2008), p. 142, and Sorita d'Este, 'The Charge of the Goddess: Listen to the Words of Leland and Crowley' (1 January 2012), http://www.witchvox.com/va/dt_va.html?a=ukgb2&c=words&id=14895 [accessed 18 December 2019].

[69] And Mélusine, a mediaeval supernatural character whom Gardner would have met in Aleister Crowley's *The Law of Liberty* (1919).

[70] See Serith, 'The Sources of the Charge of the Goddess'.

[71] Gerald B. Gardner, *Witchcraft Today* (New York: Citadel, 2004), p. 42.