

Apuleius, Carl Jung, and Robert Graves: Robertson Davies' *The Golden Ass*

On April 13, 1999, the Canadian Opera Company premiered *The Golden Ass*, with music by Randolph Peters and libretto by famed Canadian novelist Robertson Davies (1913–1995). Davies presents a distinctively 20th-century Apuleius, uniting his own ideas about storytelling with those of Carl Jung and Robert Graves, who in addition to writing about mythology also translated *The Golden Ass*.

The libretto was the last piece of drama Davies wrote and the culmination of a lifelong interest in Apuleius. He first mentions reading *The Golden Ass* in 1935 while at Oxford, and then had the production of an opera based on Apuleius' novel be a central part of his own novel *A Mixture of Frailties* (1958), the book in which “the impact of Jung's thinking on Davies beg[a]n to make itself felt” (Grant p. 353).

The libretto is, in some sense, the culmination of these Jungian threads in Davies' works, which ultimately became a defining feature of his corpus (e.g. *Monk*). Davies' Lucius learns about himself through confronting various aspects of his *anima*, the inner feminine side that, according to Jung, every man has and which he must confront in order to be psychically whole as well as emotionally and religiously developed. In Davies' libretto, the *anima* appears as the Triple Goddess, who delivers Lucius from his asinine imprisonment. In the opera's climax, Fotis reappears with the “perfect rose” Lucius requires for his anamorphosis, and she is the “Woman Goddess,” while Charis—the girl abducted by bandits—reappears as the “Virgin Goddess,” and Antiope—the old woman who takes care of the bandits and tells the story of Cupid and Psyche—as the “Hag Goddess.” Part of the final lesson is that these goddesses are part of Lucius; as they say to him (in unison), “I have known you / For I am you / And you are me.”

Davies connects the Jungian idea of the *anima* with the notion of the Triple Goddess based on his reading of Robert Graves, who developed it in *The White Goddess*. But Graves also refers to the idea in his introduction to his influential translation of *The Golden Ass* (Sabnis); in explaining why Apuleius refers to family connections with Corinth, Hymettus, and Taenarus, Graves claims, “These places are chosen as ancient cult-centres of the Triple Goddess whom he adored in her successive aspects as the sovereign of Life, Love and Death” (xix). This remark and others—as well as Davies’ demonstrated familiarity with Graves’ work elsewhere—make it certain that Davies wrote his libretto by drawing on Graves’ translation.

Davies’ use of Jung and Graves is an attempt to understand the nature of the ending of *The Golden Ass*, which is a major point of scholarly contention. While Lucius’ conversion upon his deliverance had traditionally been read as sincere (and often even autobiographical), since Winkler’s *Auctor & Actor* (1985), the satiric reading of this ending has gained in prominence. It is therefore worth reading Davies as offering yet another attempt to grapple with the difficulties of the novel’s ending, as well as with other scholarly arguments about *The Golden Ass*, including the difficulty of finding a rose, the name of the novel, and the identity of its narrator.

It is no slight or backhanded compliment to say that Robertson Davies’ libretto for the opera *The Golden Ass* is in many ways exactly what readers familiar with his work would expect. But the libretto also provides an excellent example of reception, since the version of the story offered by Davies is mediated both through his own interests and the views of a popular and influential translator. I will show those interested in Davies how this work fits within his corpus and reflects many of his longstanding concerns, while also showing those interested in Apuleius’ Roman novel, on which the opera is based, the interpretation offered by a sensitive reader and writer. In recent years, Apuleius’ novel has received renewed and sophisticated

attention, and it is worth adding one more voice to that discussion about how we can read the *Asinus Aureus*, especially its ending.

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