



SHORTER NOTE

AN OVIDIAN TECHNIQUE IN APULEIUS' *CUPID AND PSYCHE* ORACLE (*MET.* 4.33.1)*

ABSTRACT

This note argues that the second line of the oracle in Apuleius' Cupid and Psyche (Met. 4.33.1) alludes to Ovid's Am. 1.1.2. Like its Ovidian model, Apuleius' line marks a shift in genre, and offers a further hint of the role Cupid will play in the rest of the story.

Keywords: Apuleius; Ovid; allusion; poetic technique; genre; elegy; Roman novel

Scholars have long recognized that the oracle Psyche's father receives about what to do with his beautiful daughter gives numerous heavy-handed hints that she will marry Cupid.¹ They have likewise noted that some of these hints use Ovidian language and allude to his depictions of Cupid and his power.² But one Ovidian element seems to have gone unnoticed, likely because it is not intertextual in terms of word choice but rather in technique.

This Ovidian effect occurs in the second line of the oracle (*Met.* 4.33.1):³

‘montis in excelsi scopulo, rex, siste puellam
ornatam mundo funerei thalami.’

‘On the crag of a lofty mountain, o king, set the girl,
Adorned in the dress of a funeral marriage bedchamber.’

Although other metres were used for the prophecies from oracles, dactylic hexameter was the normal, expected metre, especially for this particular oracle.⁴ The shift in the second line to the unexpected pentameter recalls the beginning of Ovid's *Amores* (1.1.1–4):

Arma graui numero uiolentaque bella parabam
edere, materia conueniente modis.
par erat inferior uersus; risisse Cupido
dicitur atque unum surripuisse pedem.

* I thank David Kutzko for providing comments on a draft of this and also the journal's editor and readers for providing useful feedback.

¹ E.g. E.J. Kenney, *Apuleius. Cupid & Psyche* (Cambridge, 1990), 132 says of the seventh and penultimate line: ‘Oracular ambiguity wears thin here, for love was the only power in the mythological universe of which this [description] was true.’

² E.g. Kenney (n. 1), 131–2; M. Zimmerman et al., *Apuleius Madaurensis Metamorphoses, Books IV 28–35, V and VI 1–24. Cupid and Psyche. Text, Introduction and Commentary* (Groningen, 2004), 86–9. For the influence of love poetry in *Cupid and Psyche* more generally, see S. Mattiacci, ‘Neoteric and elegiac echoes in the tale of Cupid and Psyche by Apuleius’, in M. Zimmerman et al. (edd.), *Aspects of Apuleius' Golden Ass II: Cupid and Psyche* (Groningen, 1998), 127–49, at 136–43 for this prophecy; S. Parke and P. Murgatroyd, ‘Love poetry and Apuleius' *Cupid and Psyche*’, *CQ* 52 (2002), 400–4.

³ I quote from M. Zimmerman's Oxford Classical Text (Oxford, 2012). All translations are my own.

⁴ Discussion and parallels in Zimmerman et al. (n. 2), 86 and B.L. Hijmans, ‘Apollo's sn(e)aky tongue(s)’, in W.H. Keulen, R.R. Nauta, S. Panayotakis (edd.), *Lectiones Scrupulosae: Essays on the Text and Interpretation of Apuleius' Metamorphoses in Honour of Maaike Zimmerman (Ancient Narrative Supplementum 6)* (Groningen, 2006), 15–27, at 19–20.

I was preparing to produce arms and violent wars in a weighty metre,
 With the subject matter matching the metrical forms.
 The lower verse was equal; Cupid is said to have laughed
 And snatched away one foot.

Ovid famously plays with genre here, declaring in a hexameter line beginning with *arma* that he is going to write an epic poem in the Virgilian mode, only to have Cupid snatch away a foot and thereby force him to write elegy.⁵ In a similar way, Apuleius foreshadows the shift from the expected story of divine punishment to his love story.

Other details support the notion that Apuleius is employing this Ovidian technique here.⁶ First, in Ovid's poem, it is only when we reach the second line and the word *conueniente* ('fitting') with its second, short syllable that we know that the metre has shifted from hexameter to elegiacs. Ovid puckishly chooses the ironic *conueniente* to show that the initial topic and new metre no longer fit together.⁷

Apuleius has chosen the word for revealing his own switch to the unexpected metre with similar care: *funerei* recalls the common etymology of *elegia* from various Greek words and phrases associated with funerals and mourning. For instance, Porphyry explains Horace's *neu miserabilis | decantes elegos* (*Carm.* 1.33.2–3) by saying *Proprie elegiorum uersus aptissimi sunt fletibus, quos ideo miserabiles dixit. nam et nomen ipsum elegiorum παρὰ τὸ ἔῃ, quae uox est lamentantium, dictum putant* ('In particular, elegiac verses are most fitting for lamenting, and he therefore calls them *miserabiles*. For they think that even the very name of elegiacs comes παρὰ τὸ ἔῃ [from woe! woe!], which is the cry of those lamenting').⁸ Etymological wordplay juxtaposing poetry and music with mourning and death are common in the elegiac poets, so it makes sense that Apuleius would choose a word that announces the switch to elegy not just in its metre but also in its programmatic meaning.⁹

The word is doubly fitting here, with the focus on Psyche's supposed imminent death and on the love story that follows; it thereby encompasses both elegy's supposed origins and its later development as love poetry. The 'remarkable oxymoron' *funerei thalami* has no parallel elsewhere, but neatly encompasses both aspects of elegy, and its inclusion in such a phrase makes *funerei* all the more striking.¹⁰ And because Ovid explicitly blames his metrical alteration on Cupid, Apuleius' adoption of the technique itself is a further, more recondite clue to the identity of Psyche's promised partner.

Secondly, the difference in vocabulary between Apuleius' first two lines recalls Ovid's post-Virgilian playful take on *recusatio*. Apuleius' first line, with its (emended) address to the king, may recall the use of *reges et proelia* ('kings and battles') as the subject of heroic epic, as in Virgil's own *recusatio* in *Ecl.* 6.3–5.¹¹ By contrast, the second

⁵ J. McKeown, *Ovid: Amores. Text, Prolegomena and Commentary* (Leeds, 1989), 2.7–14 provides a detailed discussion of these two couplets and Ovid's models.

⁶ For additional proof of the deliberate care in these lines, see the acrostic *MONS* in the first four lines noted by J. Gore and A. Kershaw, 'An unnoticed acrostic in Apuleius *Metamorphoses* and Cicero *De Diuinatione* 2.111–12', *CQ* 58 (2008), 393–4.

⁷ For the programmatic importance of this word and its likely allusion to Propertius 2.1.41–2, see A.M. Keith, 'Amores 1.1: Propertius and the Ovidian programme', in C. Deroux (ed.), *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History VI* (Leuven, 1992), 327–44, at 337–8.

⁸ For additional references to this and related etymologies, see R. Maltby, *A Lexicon of Ancient Latin Etymologies* (Leeds, 1991), 201–2.

⁹ E.g. Ov. *Am.* 3.9.3–4 *flebilis indignos, Elegia, solue capillos: | a, nimis ex uero nunc tibi nomen erit* ('unbind your unworthy hair, mournful Elegy: ah, now your name will be especially true').

¹⁰ Zimmerman et al. (n. 2), 87.

¹¹ For the textual issues in the first lines of Apuleius' oracle, see Zimmerman et al. (n. 2), 87.

line, with references to female dress and the marriage chamber, is more suitable to love elegy.

Finally, both Ovid and Apuleius announce this change in a four-word line. Such lines are relatively rare in Ovid; Catull. 66, for instance, has more (10) than the entire first book of the *Amores* (9). On its own, this similarity does not carry much weight, in part because the issue of what does or does not count as a word in such matters is always contentious.¹² But, when paired with the other factors, this correspondence suggests that it is also part of Apuleius' allusion.¹³

One other factor outside of these lines supports the argument that Apuleius is alluding to this Ovidian play with genre, the infamous introduction of the oracle (4.32.6):

sic infortunatissimae filiae miserrimus pater . . . dei Milesii uetustissimum percontatur oraculum
 . . . sed Apollo, quamquam Graecus et Ionicus, propter Milesiae conditorem sic Latina sorte
 respondit . . .

Thus the exceptionally miserable father of the exceptionally unfortunate daughter . . . thoroughly questions the most ancient oracle of the Milesian god . . . But Apollo, although Greek and Ionian, on account of the author of the Milesian tale responded with a Latin prophecy as follows . . .

As many have noted, Apollo's Greek oracles never spoke in Latin, and hence the need for Apuleius' playful reference to translation here. And it is unnecessary to get into all of the issues of language and identity in this passage to observe that right before we hear these two lines of the prophecy we are meant to think consciously of language and the particular words being used, and their position within (or at least relative to) a certain genre.¹⁴ This introduction foregrounds the issue of genre, and prepares us for the sleight-of-hand to come.

This Ovidian technique with its allusion to Cupid is the first of many hints that he will be Psyche's husband. It prepares us for how to read the rest of the prophecy and to some extent the rest of the *Cupid and Psyche* story, which is Ovidian in so many ways.¹⁵

Louisiana State University

K.F.B. FLETCHER 

kfletc8@lsu.edu

doi:[10.1017/S0009838824000636](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838824000636)

¹² In this case, I count prepositions and conjunctions (but not the enclitic *-que*) as separate words.

¹³ Ovid's choice to use a four-word line may have been influenced by Prop. 1.1.2, which also has four words and ends with *cupidinibus*.

¹⁴ For a useful overview of the issues here, see Hijmans (n. 4).

¹⁵ On the Ovidian nature of *Cupid and Psyche*, see K.F.B. Fletcher, *The Ass of the Gods: Apuleius' Golden Ass, the Onos Attributed to Lucian, and Graeco-Roman Metamorphosis Literature* (Leiden, 2023), 129–60, *passim*.