VI

CUPID AND PSYCHE *

Apuleius’ ‘Cupid and Psyche’ Märchen, so to call it for the present, has had a great impact on the world’s literature and art. The number of translations and free adaptations is very extensive. From France I need only mention Molière, Corneille, and La Fontaine, from England Spenser and William Morris, from Germany Wieland and Robert Hamerling. Since the Renaissance painters and sculptors have found rewarding themes there. Raphael used them for his frescoes in the Villa Farnesina, Thorvaldsen embossed several of them, and in the Louvre there is Canova’s famous Cupid and Psyche group, of which the Villa Carlotta, near Cadenabbia on Lake Como, possesses an excellent copy. It is therefore a text deserving special study both for its own sake and for the great number of questions it raises.

An account of Apuleius’ life and work and a summary of the content of the ‘Cupid and Psyche’ tale, well-known as they are, can both be omitted here. I only observe that the actual narrative of the Metamorphoses in which this tale occurs, and which itself was taken over by Apuleius from a Greek source, is repeatedly interrupted by very erotic and spicy interpolations. Short stories, or novellas, like these were widely popular in late Hellenistic times. They were called ‘Miletan tales’ (fabulae Milesiaceae) because Miletus or its neighbourhood was their original scene of events. The most important and least improper of the interpolations is the tale of ‘Cupid and Psyche’ itself. It is also much longer than the others. While the whole work comprises 11 books, ‘Cupid and Psyche’ takes up two of them, the last quarter of Book IV, the whole of Book V, and three quarters of Book VI.

It has been previously observed by others that the tale itself consists of different sections. At V 24 there seems to be a clear hiatus. Before it the goddess Venus does not know Psyche at all.

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After it Psyche is suddenly a runaway slave of Venus. A second piece of evidence has not been noticed by anyone. It concerns the scene of events. At the beginning, IV 29, we read that the fame of Psyche’s beauty had spread ‘over the neighbouring islands, a great part of the mainland, and several provinces’. This formulation in my opinion can only apply to the coast of Asia Minor. Furthermore, Psyche’s elder sisters live across the sea, for they can only visit her by ship. Perhaps they are thought of as resident in the Peloponnese, where Psyche, before later going to Taenarum, also visited the cities in which her sisters were queens. If I am met with the objection that it is methodically incorrect to look for geographical references in such a tale, then I refer to the passage V 24, on the dividing line between the first and second sections, where Apuleius makes Psyche hang on to Cupid’s leg in order to get away from the place. How did such a strange idea occur to him, rightly described by Purser in his Commentary (1910) as absurd and ridiculous? As if he could think of no other way of transporting Psyche where he wanted her to be. The real reason in my opinion was that Apuleius or his original model could not or would not cut themselves loose from their principal sources of which one had its scene of events in Asia Minor, the other in Greece.

Is it then a Märchen, an allegory, or a myth which we have here? All three views have enthusiastic supporters, and there is a lot to be said about each one of them. The opening alone seems to confirm that it is meant to be a Märchen. ‘Once upon a time there were a king and a queen who had three beautiful daughters...’ A still stronger argument is that from Norway to Sicily, from Iceland to India we find countless folk tales constructed in a similar form. Its detailed discussion must be postponed till later. I remark only that the girl usually has three tasks to perform before being reunited with her lost lover. In Apuleius there are four. But many have already assumed correctly that the third task (the fetching of water from the Styx) and the fourth (the fetching of the beauty ointment from the underworld) are duplicates. In both cases what was to be fetched was originally the water of life. A folk-tale of Indo-European origin, to judge from the version in Apuleius and some others, has been influenced from a hitherto unknown quarter.