

Many modern readers of the Golden Ass refuse to take its ending seriously, arguing that Apuleius' treatment of his hero Lucius' conversion, initiations, and subsequent priesthood is satirical. They point out that Lucius has been an ass intellectually as well as physically for most of the novel, claim that the venal priests of Isis and Osiris have duped him into paying for expensive initiations, and conclude that Apuleius presents Lucius' religious experience as a sham. Renaissance interpreters—less cynical in matters of religion than their modern counterparts—saw matters very differently. It did not occur to them to separate the perceptions of Apuleius from those of his hero or to see an ironic distance between them. Because Lucius tells his story in the first person, they assumed that the hero and the author were the same person—Lucius Apuleius; and they took his story not as an ironic fiction but rather as a personal memoir of sin and redemption.

The story easily lends itself to a Christian reading: a young man experimenting with magic and sex is transformed into an ass, suffers greatly in his animal form, and regains his humanity by divine aid. One fourteenth-century allegory along these lines is preserved, and there were probably others now lost to us.

In this paper I will discuss the ways in which the religious allegory is developed by Filippo Beroaldo in his famous commentary on the Golden Ass, which was published in Bologna in 1500. Focusing on Beroaldo's commentary on book 11 ("the Isis book"), I will demonstrate that Beroaldo not only treats the details and rituals of Christian worship as deriving from paganism (and especially from the worship of Isis), but that he sees Lucius at the end of the novel as analogous to an ideal (Christian) priest. I will suggest that Beroaldo combines this interpretation with the allegory to create an elaborate metatext connecting the religious experience of Lucius with the spiritual lives of himself, his students, and especially his dedicatee, the learned Hungarian archbishop Peter Váradi, whose qualities as a perfect priest he depicts as mirroring those of the converted Lucius.