

We may consider this episode as a period of purgation. It is an established step in any initiation process, and precedes the next stage of initiation, which is a desert or wilderness journey.

This journey is brought about, in the story, by the steward and his wife deciding to abscond with all the goods and chattels on hearing of the death of Tlepolemus and Charitë. Thus Lucius finds himself once again in the hands of thieves, but with the slight improvement that these are amateur rather than professional thieves.

The initiatory character of the wilderness journey (in this instance, through a forest) is shown by its having three crisis points within it. The first is their fear that they will be attacked by wolves. In fact they are attacked by the mastiff dogs of the village where they seek refuge. The villagers also throw stones at them in the belief that they are bandits. There are two interesting aspects to this. First the principle that what one fears does not generally happen in the way that one expects. Secondly, that although they are not the bandits the villagers fear, they are certainly thieves, and thus not undeserving of the treatment they receive. So divine justice (or karma) acts through ordinary levels of causation in a seemingly arbitrary but, at root, just fashion.

The second crisis is where they are duped by an old man who allegedly seeks help to rescue a child. In fact he is custodian of a dreadful snake monster who lures unwary travelers to their death. Again this reflects themselves as betrayers of trust.

The third crisis is their confrontation with the fate of a false bailiff (as they themselves are), who because he betrayed his wife and child (a particular sin against Isis) is sentenced to be tied to a fig tree smeared with honey where he is eaten alive by ants. The ants we have met before in the story of Cupid and Psyche; and figs and honey are both sacred to the Mysteries of the Goddess.

In the normal sequence of events, after the Mystery journey through the wilderness, the candidate for initiation would come upon a temple. We are enacting, however, in the story of Lucius, a distorted shadow of the true Mysteries. This is partly to warn of the consequences of their desecration; partly as a convenient "blind" for Apuleius not to reveal too much to the "profane." Consequently we have a distorted portrayal of an initiate's reception into a band of devoted brothers. Lucius, the ass, finds himself purchased by a wandering group of holy men. These are described as eunuch-priests (as indeed many priests of the Goddess were) but in fact they are homosexuals of a most predatory kind, who make their living by performing ecstatic dances of self-flagellation and collect-