

Apuleius' *Golden Ass* survived the Middle Ages in a single manuscript preserved in the great monastic library of Monte Cassino. Sometime around the end of the thirteenth century a copy made its way out of the monastery, and by the middle of the fourteenth century, several manuscripts were available, mostly in central or northern Italy. The *Golden Ass* had entered the Renaissance, but it had done so unheralded, virtually unknown, and with only Fulgentius' allegory of the story of Psyche and a few words from Augustine as guides to its interpretation.

In this paper I will suggest that the illuminations in two nearly contemporary manuscripts from the middle of the fourteenth century constitute the earliest Renaissance interpretations of Apuleius and his novel. The manuscripts are now in the Vatican Library and carry the shelf marks Vat. lat. 2193 and Vat. lat. 2194. Petrarch owned the first and was annotating it by 1343. The second is dated 1345.

Petrarch's manuscript contains both the literary and philosophical works of Apuleius (brought together for the first time since their separation in late antiquity). Each of its four illuminations portrays the author in a character appropriate to one or more of his works: he is shown as a philosopher for the philosophical works, as a scholar or possibly magician for the *Apology*, as a writer for the *Florida*, and as both man and ass for the *Golden Ass*. The illuminations in the second manuscript (Vat. lat. 2194) are more important: they are more numerous and more detailed, and they are true illustrations rather than author portraits. Both the scribe and the owner of Vat. lat. 2194 favored moral and religious works, and the presentation and iconography of the elaborately decorated first folio are those of a moral treatise. The page shows the scribe, his patron, and the opening chapters of the *Golden Ass* surrounded by depictions of the seven virtues. Each of the other ten books of the novel has an illuminated initial that illustrates its opening chapter or chapters. The illuminations follow the story very closely, sometimes almost reflecting Apuleius' exact words. The images often present similar themes and either show or imply supernatural intervention in events. They stand alone, each exploring the implications of a particular episode. But they are also related to each other; taken together, they tell a story of their own in a visual text parallel to Apuleius' verbal text. This visual text is a complex pictorial reading of the novel as a whole—a remarkable achievement that interprets—and illuminates—the *Golden Ass*.

