

CHAPTER XXXX

The Golden Ass

Apuleius

As well as being concerned with the conflicts arising from inside an individual, The Golden Ass always treats the conflicts which occur between individuals, or between an individual and a larger group of persons. It holds a mirror to Apuleius's society, being the earliest book (at least in the West) to show society as a whole. Not only does it illustrate the heroes, senators and other magnates of Roman power, but also simple shepherds and rustic farmers, cooks and scullions, artisans, slaves and beggars, and the dacoits and thieves of the underworld. When Lucius, as an ass, is forced to work in a flour-mill, Apuleius's pitiless description of the conditions of the slaves toiling there--comparing the human and animal in a single breath--shows his keen observations of unacceptable conditions in the Empire and is a plea for reform:

'Good Gods! what a tribe of mannikins I saw. Their skin was striped all over with livid scourge-scars; their wealed backs were crusted rather than clothed with their patchwork rags; some had no more covering than a bit of dangled apron; and every shirt was so tattered that the body was visible through the rents. Their brows were branded; their heads were half-shaved; irons clanked on their feet; their faces were sallow and ugly; the smoky gloom of the reeking overheated room had bleared and dulled their smarting eyes; and (like boxers who fight befouled with the dust of the arena) their faces were wanly smeared with the dirtied flour. But how shall I describe the beast, my comrades? What superannuated mules and enervated geldings! They drooped their heads around the manger as they munched the heaps of straw; their necks were frosted with bleeding and putrefying sores; they coughed continuously and wheezed through their feeble nostrils; their chests were raw from the rubbing of the rush-ropes; their sides were split by the ceaseless cudgelling till their rib-bones showed; their hooves were crushed out broad and flat by their never-ending tramp in the mill-round; and their hides were scarified all over with mange and emaciation'

(Lindsay trans. 274-275).

<http://www.jnanam.net/golden-ass/>