



10-1-1964

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Recommended Citation

Brown, Thomas H. (1964) "The Relationship Between *Partonopeus de Blois* and the Cupid and Psyche Tradition," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 3 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol5/iss3/7>

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The Relationship Between Partonopeus de Blois and the Cupid and Psyche Tradition

THOMAS H. BROWN*

One of the obscure problems of French medieval literary research has to do with the origins of the anonymous Old French romance *Partonopeus de Blois*. The author of this poem fused many sources into his lengthy work. It is not our purpose to study all of the source material used by him, as others have written on this subject. We are interested in the link which seems to exist between *Partonopeus* and the ancient fable of Cupid and Psyche.

That a relationship exists between the Cupid and Psyche tradition and *Partonopeus de Blois* can scarcely be doubted, as a cursory comparison of the two stories will show. The most famous of all Cupid and Psyche stories, the tale of Apuleius in the *Metamorphoses*, may be summarized as follows:

A king had three daughters. Psyche, the youngest, was so beautiful that the populace revered and adored her as a goddess and neglected their duties to the usual gods. Venus became incensed when people no longer came to her temples and ordered her son Cupid to afflict Psyche with love for the vilest and most loathsome of living creatures. In due time Psyche's sisters were married; but because of her divine loveliness, no suitor dared approach Psyche. Deeply concerned, the king went to Apollo's oracle at Miletus in order to learn the fate of the unfortunate girl. It was decreed that Psyche was to be brought to a lonely crag, there to be taken in marriage by a monster. Psyche's family received the news with great sorrow; but, nevertheless, the will of the gods had to be obeyed. Psyche was dressed and prepared for a marriage of death. When everything was ready, she was led by a funeral procession to the rock mentioned by the oracle. Left alone on the hill, Psyche wept, for

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she feared the coming events. Soon, however, a gentle west wind wafted her away to a peaceful valley where she discovered a magnificent palace. In the palace invisible servants attended her. As night came, she was visited by a mysterious lover who made her his wife and departed before dawn. Psyche was admonished by her husband not to communicate with her sisters. She was urged further not to question him concerning his appearance and bodily form. Poor Psyche violated all the wishes of her lover. Her sisters came to visit her, made inquiries concerning the nature of her husband, and finally convinced the unwitting Psyche that her husband was a horrible snake. Armed with lamp and dagger, Psyche set out to kill her husband. She was stopped in the act, however, for the lamp revealed to her astonished eyes the gentlest and sweetest of creatures, Cupid, the beautiful Lovegod himself. Burned by a drop of oil from the lamp which Psyche carried, Cupid awakened, realized he had been disobeyed, and fled from Psyche.

The rest of the story deals with Psyche's search for Cupid. When Venus was apprised of the affair that her son had had with her earthly rival, she was furious. She reprimanded her wayward son and confined him to his room as if he were a wilful, mischievous child. After much wandering, Psyche finally arrived at Venus' palace. The goddess' anger knew no bounds. In her attempt to appease Venus, Psyche was obliged to carry out four very difficult tasks, wherein Venus hoped she would be destroyed. At length, having overcome all obstacles, Psyche was reunited with Cupid, became immortalized, and was received by the gods into the Olympic circle. In due time, she gave birth to a daughter whom the parents named Pleasure.

We give now an account of the anonymous Old French romance, *Partonopeus de Blois*:

Hunting one day, Partonopeus was separated from his companions and became lost. After some wandering, he came to a bay in which a ship was lying. He embarked on the ship and was transported to the fairy castle of Chief d'Oire. He entered the castle, drank, ate, and finally went to bed. After retiring, he reflected upon the strangeness of the day's happenings.

Atant une arme vint al lit,
 Pas por pas, petit et petit;
 Mais il ne set que ce puet estre:
 Or volsist miols qu'il fust à nestre.

A une part se traist del lit,
 Defors soi en laisse petit.
 Il crient que ce ne soit maufés,
 Et dist que mal eure fu nés;
 Mais ce est une damoisele,
 Quels qu'ele soit, u laide, u bele:
 Le covertor sosliève atant,
 Si va gesir joste l'enfant;
 Mais el ne set mot que i soit:
 Car el nel ot ne ne li voit.¹

His visitor was the fairy Melior who granted the hero her love on the condition that he would not attempt to gaze upon her until they were married.

Beaus dols amis, la dame dit,
 De moi ferés vostre delit,
 Cascune nuit, tot à loisir,
 Me porés avoir et sentir;
 Mais ne volroie estre véue
 Desci que l'eure soit venue
 Que j'ai mise à cels de m'onor
 De prendre par lor los segnor,
 Et n'a que deux ans et demi
 Trosqu'à cele eure que vos di.²

During a stay in France, Partonopeus told his mother about his fairy lover. Suspecting that her son was under the spell of a wicked enchantress, she advised him to look upon his lady by means of a magic lantern which she would give him. Partonopeus returned to Chief d'Oire, lit his lantern and entered Melior's chamber:

Quant Partonopeus l'a sentue,
 Et seit qu'ele est trestote nue,
 Le covertor a lonc jeté,
 Si l'a véue od la clarté
 De la lanterne qu'il tenoit:
 A descovert nue le voit,
 Mirer le puet et véoir bien

¹*Partonopeus de Blois*, publié pour la première fois d'après le manuscrit de la Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, ed. G. A. Crapelet and A. C. M. Robert, 2 vols. (Paris, 1834), I, 39. The passages in Old French have been paraphrased in English for the convenience of the reader: Suddenly someone approached Partonopeus' bed and got in with him. Since it was dark, he could not see who it was, and at first our hero was frightened.

²*Partonopeus*, I, 50. Melior told Partonopeus that he could have her love each night on condition that he refrain from looking upon her until they be married.

Qu'ainc ne vit mais tant bele rien.
 Cele se pasme et cil entent
 Qu'il a ovré moult folement.³

Melior, who was the daughter of the Emperor of Constantinople, banished Partonopeus from her presence forever. He returned to France where he upbraided his mother for having given him such foolish counsel. Grief-stricken, he left his home and wandered in the woods of the Ardennes. After many adventures, he arrived at a tournament where knights were competing for Melior's hand. Partonopeus was champion on three successive days and won his lady's favor again.

Many similarities in the stories just related have undoubtedly been noticed, of which the most obvious, perhaps, are the following: Psyche is carried to a magnificent palace by Zephyr; Partonopeus is transported by a magic ship to Melior's sumptuous castle; both are visited by mysterious lovers; Cupid enjoins a command upon Psyche to refrain from beholding his person, as does the fairy Melior upon Partonopeus; unwise counsel is given from outsiders who persuade Psyche and Partonopeus to look on their lovers by means of a lamp. When the promises are broken, swift separation ensues; trials are then required of Psyche and Partonopeus who, at length, overcome all obstacles and are finally joined again to their partners.

At first glance it would seem that Apuleius' "Cupid and Psyche" furnished the source material for the central episode of *Partonopeus*. This was the view of John Colin Dunlop who noted the similarities between the two stories and indicated that the author of *Partonopeus* merely inverted the roles of the lovers.⁴ Kawczynski felt that a host of tales (among them *Partonopeus*, *Huon de Bordeaux*, *Floire et Blancheflor*, *Berthe aus grans piés*, *Le Chevalier au Cygne*, *Cligés*) had elements which were more or less influenced by the "Cupid and Psyche" of Apuleius.⁵

This idea of a wholesale borrowing of Apuleius by medieval French writers was seriously challenged by Gédéon Huet who indicated that Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* was unknown in

³*Partonopeus*, I, 154. When Melior came to bed, Partonopeus threw back the blankets and at the same time uncovered his lantern so that he was able to see Melior who was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Melior fainted and Partonopeus sensed that he had behaved foolishly.

⁴*History of Prose Fiction*, 2 vols. (London, 1911), II, 409.

⁵"Ist Apuleius im Mittelalter bekannt gewesen?" *Bausteine zur romanischen Philologie, Festgabe für ad. Mussafia* (Halle, 1908), pp. 193-210.

France at the time when the French poems, supposedly based on the Latin writer's story, were written. Huet showed that the only Old French romance with close parallels to "Cupid and Psyche" is *Partonopeus*. He added that there is no mention of Apuleius' novel by early French writers, not even by the learned Jean de Meun. Vincent de Beauvais, in the middle of the thirteenth century was the first to mention the *Metamorphoses*, but Richart de Fournival, a contemporary of Vincent, who possessed a remarkable knowledge of the classics, mentioned several works of Apuleius, but did not cite the *Metamorphoses* at all. The study of manuscripts shows the same gap. We have in France no manuscript of the *Golden Ass* before the end of the fourteenth century. In place of the Apuleius theory, Huet suggested that folk tale tradition (folk stories similar in some respects to "Cupid and Psyche" cover the whole of both hemispheres) gave rise to the material used by the poet of *Partonopeus*. Huet felt also that *Partonopeus* had some relationship to the Celtic fairy tales which inspired the lays of Marie de France.⁶

S. P. Uri has recently cast aside the Celtic theory of Huet.⁷ He argues that Huet based much of his argument on his belief that Denis Piramus was the author of *Partonopeus*. Denis knew Marie de France, and Huet maintained that Marie may have furnished Denis with the Celtic material supposedly used for the writing of *Partonopeus*. Uri shows that Denis was not the original poet of *Partonopeus* (he refers to the opening lines of Denis' *Seint Edmunt le rei* in which it would seem that Denis is speaking of *Partonopeus* as the work of another); he concludes that this fact "explodes the old Celtic theory." Now this finding alone does not disprove Huet's theory, because our unknown poet could have known Marie. Surely Denis Piramus was not her only acquaintance. It could be argued further that Marie de France was not the only link between Celtic material and Old French literature. However, there are stronger arguments than Uri's against the Celtic theory of Huet. It should be remembered that we have no manuscript, nor do we have any record of any Celtic source which might have fostered the parts of *Partonopeus* which are similar to Cupid and Psyche lore. Fur-

⁶"Le Roman d'Apulée était-il connu au Moyen-Age?" *Le Moyen Age*, XIII, Serie 2 (1909), pp. 23-28.

⁷"Some Remarks on *Partonopeus de Blois*," *Neophilologus* (April 1953), pp. 83-98. All of our quotations by Mr. Uri come from this article.

thermore, Huet bases his argument on the assumption that Apuleius' "Cupid and Psyche" was unknown in France during the twelfth century. It seems very likely that the *Metamorphoses* was little known; however, the same is not true of Apuleius' "Cupid and Psyche," and we intend to demonstrate below that the central episodes of *Partonopeus* did not come from Celtic material, but from Fulgentius Planciades who presented Apuleius' "Cupid and Psyche" to Frenchmen of the Middle Ages.

Mr. Uri has his own theory concerning the immediate source used by the author of *Partonopeus*. He indicates the influence of Byzantine matter on French medieval writers and shows the important role which Eléonore d'Aquitaine played in the development of Old French literature. She had followed her husband to Byzantium and the East and thus provides a link between Byzantine material and Old French literature. He mentions her loose morals and concludes that "it was quite like her to favor a fantastic love story like that of *Partonopeus*." He alludes to Marie de Champagne's daughter, Alix, and her brilliant court of the second half of the twelfth century where many poets lived and wrote. "Perhaps this Alix," says Uri, "gave our unknown poet a manuscript in which he found the *matière de Bysance* for his *Partonopeus*." Examples are then given by Uri to show that the *trobadors* often composed a work upon the request of a lady; the *trobadors*, adds Uri, sometimes used Latin translations of Greek material. Uri argues further that *Partonopeus* is similar in some respects to Byzantine *Florimont* and *Floire et Blancheflor*, and his conclusion from all this is that it is "almost certain that the author of *Partonopeus* borrowed his material from some Byzantine romance which he read in some Latin Adaptation." Now, the only argument of Uri which is not based upon supposition is his reference to *Florimont* and *Floire et Blancheflor*. *Floire et Blancheflor* seems to be only vaguely related, if at all, to Cupid and Psyche stories. Reinhold's study of the relationship between this Old French romance and Apuleius' story seems greatly exaggerated.⁸ What is most important is that the forbidden privilege motif, the very heart of Cupid and Psyche stories, is absent in *Floire et Blancheflor*. *Florimont*, on the other hand, does offer some close parallels to Cupid and Psyche tradition. Like Psyche,

⁸M. Joachim Reinhold, *Floire et Blancheflor; étude de littérature comparée* (Paris, 1906), pp. 151-152.

Florimont is not supposed to behold his lover. When he disobeys, he is reprimanded by his *damoiselle fée* and loses her love. This fact, however, hardly justifies Uri's assertion that "it is almost certain" that Byzantine matter furnished the source for the poet of *Partonopeus*. Actually, it is not completely certain that *Florimont* was influenced by Byzantine matter. Furthermore, this romance, written in 1188, appeared later than *Partonopeus* and could have drawn its Cupid and Psyche motifs from this source.

Uri next tries to show that the poet of *Partonopeus* and Apuleius both drew from the same material in order to write their stories. Apuleius, says Uri, used a Milesian tale of Aristides of Miletus. Aristides' stories gave birth to new Greek love romances which flourished again at Byzantium, especially at the court of emperor Manuel I in the twelfth century; from there they were supposedly brought to France by the crusaders. "So," says Uri, "the Roman author Apuleius and the French poet of *Partonopeus* who lived a thousand years apart, drew their story from the same inexhaustible source: the old and new Greek literature."

Our objections to this theory are many. First of all, the source for Apuleius' "Cupid and Psyche" is unknown. There are many theories concerning its origin, but all that can be said for sure is that Apuleius' "Cupid and Psyche" belongs to the long tradition of tales of the forbidden privilege type. The tale used by Apuleius in writing "Cupid and Psyche" may have been a Milesian tale (this is Adolf Zinzow's theory⁹), but this is not certain. Furthermore, there is no evidence that a Milesian tale of Cupid-Psyche tradition existed at Manuel's court, and supposing that this had been the case, there is no proof that crusaders brought such a story from there to France. It seems unlikely that Byzantine material furnished the source material for *Partonopeus de Blois*; at best, the evidence for such a belief is scanty.

There is, I believe, a better explanation for the relationship which exists between *Partonopeus* and Cupid and Psyche lore, and it is to be found, not in Celtic nor Byzantine matter, but in the writings of Fulgentius Planciades,¹⁰ the Bishop of Carthage, who lived in the sixth century after Christ. Like other

⁹*Psyche und Eros, ein milesisches Märchen* (Halle, 1881).

¹⁰*Hyginus mythographer*, ed. J. Micyllus (London, 1578).

Catholic writers, before and after his time, Fulgentius sought to render pagan myths and stories acceptable to the Church by interpreting this material in terms of Christian dogma. One of his explanations has to do with the myth of Cupid and Psyche. To be sure, his version is very different from *Partonopeus de Blois*, for he has reworked Apuleius' story into a Christian allegory in which one finds the following symbols: The city in which Psyche dwells is the world; the king and queen are God and matter; Psyche is the soul; her sisters are flesh and free will. Venus (lust) envied Psyche and sent Cupid (desire) to destroy her; he persuaded her not to behold his face, that is, not to learn of the joys of desire. Urged by her sisters, Psyche took her lamp from under the bushel, that is, she made manifest the passion of desire hidden until then in her heart. When Psyche saw Cupid, this passion within her was quickened, and she loved this desire when she realized how delightful it could be. Cupid was burned by the oil of the lamp because the more one loves a desire, the more ardent it becomes; besides, any desire leaves its mark of sin on the skin. Psyche's trials and sufferings can be compared to Adam's misfortunes. Their situation is similar because both transgressed higher law.

Fulgentius' interpretation is not what interests us most; what is important is the résumé of Apuleius' story which Fulgentius gives as a preface to his explanation. He not only indicates the broad outline of Apuleius' tale, but gives some detail as well. It is also to be noted that what is given by Fulgentius is sufficient to supply or suggest at least the scenes and descriptions of *Partonopeus* which are similar to Apuleius' "Cupid and Psyche." The poet of *Partonopeus* dwells on the magnificence of Melior's castle; Fulgentius comments on the splendor of Cupid's golden palace, a place so luxurious, says he, that one cannot sufficiently praise it. The relationship which exists between Partonopeus and Melior is suggested by Fulgentius, for Cupid, says Fulgentius, made love to Psyche only in the dark of night, coming invisibly in the shadows of evening and departing unseen before the gray dawn. Reference is made by Fulgentius to the ban placed upon Psyche and to her elder sisters who persuade Psyche that her husband is a serpent. Following her sisters' counsel, Psyche determined to kill Cupid, and to that end, says Fulgentius, she hid a knife under the bed and a lamp under a bushel. When her husband had made an end of making love, she armed herself with knife and lamp and removed the

lamp from the bushel. At once she recognized Cupid and was so shaken by a great surge of affection that she burned him with the spitting of the shining oil from the lamp. Cupid fled, scolding the girl greatly for her curiosity. He subsequently banished her from his house and abandoned her. It is to be noted that the outline and details from these grand scenes, as told by Fulgentius, are almost identical to the corresponding ones of *Partonopeus de Blois*. Fulgentius then gives reference to Psyche's trials and her final reunion with Cupid. To be sure, Partonopeus' tasks in order to win back Melior differ from Psyche's. We expect this, for *Partonopeus* is a *roman courtois*, and it is natural that he should regain his lady's love through knightly deeds.

What conclusions can we draw from this exposé? First of all, the Celtic and Byzantine theories concerning the source material for *Partonopeus de Blois* are, at best, weak and inconclusive. It should be noted that scholars brought forth these theories as substitutes for the logical source, i.e., Apuleius' "Cupid and Psyche," only after it was assumed that the Latin writer's story was unknown to Frenchmen of the Middle Ages. We have found that Apuleius' "Cupid and Psyche" was in fact well known in France before and after the writing of *Partonopeus de Blois*. It was Fulgentius Planciades who preserved the ancient legend in France with his résumé of the story. The manuscripts in France of Fulgentius' writings begin in the seventh century and continue through the sixteenth, and almost all the catalogs of medieval libraries mention him and his interpretation of "Cupid and Psyche."¹¹ This fact suggests two possibilities concerning the poet's use of the ancient legend when writing his romance. He may have used Fulgentius' résumé of Apuleius. We have noted that Fulgentius' account gives a sufficient outline and some detail to suggest the principal scenes of *Partonopeus de Blois*. On the other hand, the author of the French romance may have used the original itself because Fulgentius refers to Apuleius and his "Cupid and Psyche" at the beginning and at the end of his résumé, and from this reference our unknown poet may have been directed to the Latin author's work. I am inclined to believe that the unknown poet of *Partonopeus de Blois* had the original by Apuleius in his possession when writing his romance. Some details appear in Apu-

¹¹H. Lemaître, *Essai sur le mythe de Psyché dans la littérature française des origines à 1890* (Paris, 194-), p. 31.

leius' "Cupid and Psyche" and *Partonopeus*, but not in Fulgentius' résumé.¹² At any rate, it can no longer be maintained, as Huet held, that the loves of Cupid and Psyche were unknown in France during the Middle Ages, and it therefore seems likely that Apuleius' fanciful tale in the original, or via the résumé of Fulgentius, did indeed, as early scholars maintained, supply the principal source material for the Old French romance, *Partonopeus de Blois*.

¹²Apuleius describes a sumptuous banquet prepared for Psyche upon her arrival at Cupid's palace. Invisible servants attend to her needs and wishes during her stay. The poet of *Partonopeus* gives a careful account of a dinner prepared for Partonopeus at Chief d'Oire, and he also makes frequent reference to the invisible servants who care for Partonopeus.