

# The unforeseen ramifications of curiosity



Throughout both Roman and Greek ancient literature, well-renowned writers ranging from Aeschylus to Thucydides have demonstrated the major character flaws of mortals and the effects of their failings on their life and well-being. Although the outcome of each protagonist is different in each of these works, the dangers of curiosity is highlighted in the stories of Lucius and Pentheus, who allow their eagerness to overcome them. Drawn to the mystery of magic, Lucius follows his desires blindly in *The Golden Ass*, exploring dark corners most others would avoid. In the *Bacchae*, there are no tales of magic; instead, Pentheus is engrossed in his interest for the city's crazed women and the god who made them that way, Dionysus. With deeper analysis, however, the similarities between Lucius and Pentheus' curiosity begins to dim, revealing that the most important aspect of these comparable texts is precisely in how they differ: their consequences.

Displayed through dialogue and the action of the narrative, the inquisitiveness of both characters takes center stage, exposing their true nature for all to see. From the beginning, Apuleius illustrates Lucius' naiveté as he begs to hear new stories and see unexplainable things, "thirsting as always for novelty" (*The Golden Ass*, 1. 2). As noted by Alexander Kirichenko, both Lucius and Pentheus are punished for their transgressions, proving that mortals are not meant to look into "forbidden religious knowledge" (Kirichenko). When given the opportunity to observe the *Bacchae* women, Pentheus jumps at the chance, exclaiming "Of course. I'd give a pot of money for that." (*Bacchae*, 812). Despite vague warnings from Dionysus, Pentheus continues on, far more intrigued by the mysteries of the women than his own livelihood. In this same way, Lucius is consumed by the magic

surrounding Pamphile, so transfixed with amazement simply by this extraordinary scene that I seemed to be anything rather than Lucius. I was completely out of my mind, unhinged with astonishment, not knowing if I was awake or dreaming. .... ' Please,' I said, ' while we have the opportunity, ... allow me to enjoy this great and unique proof of your love: give me a little of that ointment. (The Golden Ass, 3. 22) As Kirichenko emphasized, a particularly treacherous outcome ensues those who dig too deeply into religious matters, as seen by both Pentheus and Lucius' actions.

Disregarding the power of the gods, Pentheus bans the worship of Dionysus in Thebes and allows his curiosity for Dionysus' spells to cloud his judgment. Dionysus views Pentheus' actions as disrespectful to the gods and punishes him for his failure to recognize Dionysus' true identity and beg for forgiveness. Similarly, Lucius' transformation into an ass was a direct result of his blind inquisition into the secrets of magic. Mortal curiosity for the unknown workings of immortals and their actions can only lead these characters down a dangerous path in which they will eventually have to pay for their crimes.

In much the same way that characters are punished for searching into forbidden religious matters, Euripides and Apuleius seem to suggest that the questioning of socially accepted norms is yet another form of unacceptable curiosity that must be accounted for. Well-known to all regions of continental Greece, the city in which Lucius finds himself in Book 1, Thessaly, is brimming with magic, often regarded as being similar to Egypt in its mysterious " occult lore" (Kirichenko). However, when Lucius arrives, he neglects to use this knowledge as a warning for what might be to come,

deciding instead to learn all he can about the supernatural happenings of the city: Being in any case an all too eager student of the remarkable and miraculous, and remembering that I was now in the heart of Thessaly, renowned the whole world over as the cradle of magic arts and spells, and that it was in this very city that my friend Aristomenes' story had begun, I examined attentively everything I saw, on tenterhooks with keen anticipation. (The Golden Ass, 2. 1) Despite acknowledging the rumors surrounding the city, Lucius is drawn in by his emotions, caring only about quenching his thirst for knowledge. Breaking the accepted understanding that people should not inquire about the enchantments and witches of the city, Lucius dives into his childlike desires and is transformed into a farm animal as a result. Similarly, Pentheus breaks the socially accepted norms of the traditional male and female roles, slipping into clothes classic for women, " A dress. Full length. And a headband around [his] hair" purely so that he may get closer to the Bacchae women and observe their mysterious ways (Bacchae, 833). In ancient Greece, where men were regarded far more influential than their female counterparts, Pentheus' dressing as a woman went against all cultural norms of the time, especially due to his status as King of Thebes. Consequently, he paid for his transgressions with the ultimate price, his life. Both Lucius and Pentheus broke social understandings of their society, ignoring what their family and friends regarded as fact in a selfish attempt to delve into the unknown. Exemplifying the actions of the protagonists of their writings, Euripides and Apuleius suggest that we should all follow the accepted standards of our peers, providing exact cases of this sort of wrongdoing and the ramifications that result.

Though Lucius and Pentheus are both punished for two of the same forms of curiosity, it is crucial to take notice of the exact ways in which both characters pay for their actions. After covering himself in Pamphile's ointment, Lucius expected to be transformed into a bird just like Pamphile had, But no down or feathers appeared; instead my hair became coarse and shaggy, my soft skin hardened into hide, my fingers and toes lost their separate identity and coalesced into hooves, and from the end of my spine there protruded a long tail. My face became enormous and my mouth widened; my nostrils dilated and my lips hung down; and my ears became monstrously long and hairy. (The Golden Ass, 3. 24) Rather than shift into a beautiful creature of flight, Lucius metamorphosed into an ass, an animal notorious for its stupidity. Symbolic of Lucius' poor decisions, his transformation into a farm animal, though still unfavorable, was far pleasant than Pentheus' outcome. Falling from a fir tree, the women discovered his presence and attacked, " his mother... the first at the killing" (Bacchae, 1114). Receiving a far more gruesome punishment than Lucius, Pentheus was brutally murdered by the crazed Bacchae, who ripped him apart with their bare hands: Off went one with a forearm, another took his food - with its hunting boot. And his ribs were stripped, flesh torn away. They all had blood on their hands. They tossed Pentheus' meat like balls in a game of catch. (Bacchae, 1133-1136). Killed as a result of his actions, Pentheus endured a fate much different from Lucius, even in the form of an ass. Furthermore, Lucius was granted the opportunity to reconcile his errors, eventually resolving his curiosity by promising to worship the Egyptian goddess, Isis, for the remainder of his life. In this crucial variance between The Golden Ass and the Bacchae, the authors' opinions of curiosity and

<https://assignbuster.com/the-unforeseen-ramifications-of-curiosity/>

character flaws become more apparent, as Apuleius displays curiosity as a trait that can be overcome and forgiven, while Euripides offers no chance for Pentheus to make penance for his actions - instead, he is put to immediate and final death. This can be seen both as a difference of opinion between two writers, but also as a reflection of ancient Greek and Roman culture, which hold varying ideals about the gravity of character flaws. The *Bacchae* can be seen to represent Greek ethics that take the errors of characters very seriously, making sure that the person receives the fate they were destined to have as a result of their actions. In contrast, however, *The Golden Ass* suggests a Roman culture which is more understanding of the mistakes of mortals, allowing them to alter their ways and obtain forgiveness.

Through their exemplification of curiosity's various forms and the results that ensue, Apuleius and Euripides not only highlight the effects of major flaws of literary characters, but also teach us how to avoid the same fate. By displaying the inquisitive tendencies of Lucius and Pentheus and following their actions by their quick repercussions, the audience is taught that without proper management or evolution, curiosity can overpower your thinking, leading to consequences as dire as death. It is the writers' praiseworthy structure of cause and effect to convey subliminal messages that will have a lasting effect, ultimately discouraging people from their curious habits altogether.

## **Works Cited**

Kirichenko, Alexander. 2008. " Satire, Propaganda, and the Pleasure of Reading: Apuleius' Stories of Curiosity in Context." *Harvard Studies in*

Classical Philology 104: 339-371, [http://www.jstor.org/stable/27809344?](http://www.jstor.org/stable/27809344?seq=4#page_scan_tab_contents)

[seq= 4#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org/stable/27809344?seq=4#page_scan_tab_contents)