Epistolary Paradox in Apuleius's *Apology*

Apuleius quotes or references at least eight letters in his *Apology* as he attempts to refute the charge of magic and related suspicions about his marriage to Pudentilla, a wealthy widow. Although letters are typical evidence in a Roman courtroom, Apuleius's use of letters goes beyond the strictly evidentiary or ethical spheres (Meyer 2016) and the discussion of letters occupies much of his speech (6, 28, 30, 69–71, 78–87, 94–97). Scholars have analyzed other aspects of Apuleius's forensic rhetoric (*e.g.,* Harrison 2000, Helm 1955, Mollea 2021, Rives 2008), but not his embedded letters.

Apuleius takes full advantage of epistolary form by playing with an inherent paradox of letters: they can be truthful documents or deceitful fictions (Altman 1982, Jenkins 2006, Rosenmeyer 1992, Trapp 2003). I argue that Apuleius exploits this paradox to make each letter mean exactly what he needs it to mean at any given time, showcasing his rhetorical genius and benefitting his legal case. Apuleius's treatment of letters encompasses the full spectrum of epistolary truth and deception, with a straightforwardly truthful letter, an intentionally misrepresented letter, and an entirely deceitful forged letter.

My first case study is a previous letter written to Apuleius's wife Pudentilla from Aemilianus, Pudentilla's brother-in-law, advising her to remarry after the death of her first husband. The earlier letter contradicts Aemilianus's current testimony, which Apuleius belabors by pointing out "how much his tongue disagrees with his hand" (*quantum lingua eius manu discrepet*, 69.8). Apuleius goes on to elevate the written letter over Aemilianus's spoken claims in court as proof of Aemilianus's true opinion (70). Apuleius here takes the letter as plain fact and entirely truthful, not requiring any additional qualification or interpretation.

In my next case study, the prosecution claims that a letter written by Pudentilla accuses her husband of magic while Apuleius claims that it exonerates him. Apuleius raises the possibility that the letter could be the deceitful fiction of a Phaedra-like, lying woman (79.1), but ultimately focuses on epistolary interpretation. Gone is Apuleius's straightforward portrayal of letters as truthful corrective to deceitful speech; he now allows for deceit in the (mis)interpretation of letters. Where his opponents have excerpted only the damning "Apuleius is a magician" ('Απολέϊος μάγος, 82.2), Apuleius provides the fuller context of Pudentilla writing that "suddenly Apuleius became a magician" (αἰφνίδιον ἐγένετο 'Απολέϊος μάγος) in people's opinions once slanderers (κακήγοροι) accused him (83.1). Apuleius's lengthy discussion of this misrepresentation (78–86) reveals the interpretive pitfalls of using letters as evidence. He shows that even truthful letters can be deceitfully misrepresented.

In my final case study, Apuleius discusses a forged letter brought forward as evidence against him (87). This discussion follows an earlier reference to Palamedes (81.3), the victim of Odysseus's forged letter plot, and Apuelius's arguments refuting the letter as a forgery parallel arguments from Gorgias's *Defense of Palamedes*. For example, both Apuleius (87.3) and Palamedes (6, 11) question what sort of messenger would have been used for the epistolary communication in question. When Apuleius defines a letter as actually deceitful (not simply misrepresented), he does so to his utmost advantage, portraying himself as the innocent victim of the deceit.

Rather than having to accept or discount letters wholesale as legal or character evidence, Apuleius finds a way to do both at different times, utilizing whichever approach best suits his individual arguments. He can make use of letters whether they are truthful or deceitful and he explicitly plays with this dichotomy in using them to support his arguments. Examining

Apuleius's epistolary manipulation not only illuminates a unique aspect of his rhetorical strategy, but also invites further consideration of the function of embedded letters in a rhetorical context.

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