

## Gender Transgression and the Politics of Representation in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*

In Book 8 of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, the ass Lucius is sold to a band of priests of the Syrian Goddess. Such figures were infamous among the Romans for their ecstatic rituals, transvestitism, self-castration, and suspect sexuality. Through descriptions of the priests' physical appearance, dress, and speech, Apuleius characterizes them as *cinaedi*, Roman scare-figures of gender and sexual deviance. They, however, do not refer to themselves by this derogatory term. Instead, they call themselves "girls," *puellae* (*Met.* 8.26), and refer to themselves using feminine grammatical forms. I argue that the priests self-identify as feminine - a transgender, alternative community on the fringes of Roman society. The narrator Lucius, representing the dominant Roman culture, labels them *cinaedi*: effeminate or defective men. The primary locus of the priests' contested identity is speech, including the words they use, the sound of their voices, and their intensions in speaking.

Previous studies have focused on how "realistic" Apuleius' depiction of the priests is. Taylor (1997), for example, contends that it reveals an ancient subculture of homosexual men. His argument fits into a broader discussion of whether *cinaedi* actually existed and whether the term indicated sexual or gender deviance or both (Richlin 1993, Williams 2010). Apuleius' priests do provide some evidence for ancient transgender communities, but I focus here on the role gendered discourse plays in Roman politics of representation. The priests' intended self-presentation through speech is fundamentally misinterpreted by Lucius. Winkler (1985) and Selden (1994) have emphasized the multiple interpretive possibilities of discourse in Apuleius - a sort of doublespeak. Departing from their literary approaches, I draw on Bourdieu's (1991) examination of language and social power and Silverstein and Urban's (1996) theories of entextualization - the representation of another's discourse within one's own - to examine how

interpretations of the priests' speech are politicized. Through Lucius' discourse as the narrator of the novel, the priests' verbal assertions of feminine gender identity are redefined within the structures of the dominant culture.

I begin with the priests' self-identification. When Philebus buys Lucius, he explains how upset he would be if the ass should turn out to be wild: "I would be compelled to dash about like a *poor girl* pulling out her hair..." (8.25), using the feminine adjective *misera*. Later, he uses the feminine participial form *mercata* for himself and calls his fellow priests *puellae* (8.26). They tease Philebus that he has bought not a slave, but a husband (*maritum illum...sibi*), reinforcing his words. With one exception, the priests use only feminine grammatical forms, constructing a feminine - or, in modern terms, transgender - group identity.

Lucius rejects the priests' self-fashioning. He applies a feminine form to them only once, and then only for the sake of grammatical agreement (8.26). Otherwise, he uses *only* masculine grammatical forms. He describes the priests not as women, but as defective men. Their voices are equally defective: they are "discordant (*absonos*)," "broken (*fracta*)," "hoarse (*rauca*)," and "effeminate (*effeminata*)" (8.26, 8.27). They use their voices in the wrong way: during a ritual, one of the priests whips himself and "shouting prophetically, began to attack and accuse *himself* with a fabricated lie about how he had perpetrated something against the law of his holy religion" (8.28). The priests do not defend themselves physically and verbally as an elite Roman man would. Through their self-attacks, they mark themselves to a Roman audience as effeminate and of the lower and enslaved classes legally subject to corporal punishment (Edwards 1993, Walters 1997).

Although the priests use speech to identify themselves as feminine, Lucius redefines them as effeminate, even calling them "half-men (*semiviris*)" (8.28). The dissonance between the

priests' linguistic production and Lucius' reception is used for the humorous stock characterization of the priests as lascivious *cinaedi*. Yet it also highlights ancient intersections of class and gender, revealing the role of speech in the politics of gender representation in second century C.E. Roman culture.

### Bibliography

Bourdieu, P. 1991. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge, MA.

Edwards, C. 1993. *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome*. Cambridge.

Richlin, A. 1993. "Not before Homosexuality: The Materiality of the Cinaedus and the Roman Law against Love between Men." *JHSex* 3, 523-573.

Selden, D. L. 1994. "Genre of Genre," in *The Search for the Ancient Novel*. : Tatum, J., ed. Baltimore: 39-64.

Silverstein, M. & Urban, G., eds. 1996. *Natural Histories of Discourse*. Chicago.

Taylor, R. 1997. "Two Pathic Subcultures in Ancient Rome." *JHSex* 7, 319-371.

Walters, J. 1997. "Invading the Roman Body: Manliness and Impenetrability in Roman Thought." in *Roman Sexualities*. Hallett, J. P. & Skinner, M. B., eds. Princeton: 29-43.

Williams, C. A. 2010. *Roman Homosexuality*. Second edition. Oxford.

Winkler, J. J. 1985. *Auctor & Actor: A Narratological Reading of Apuleius' The Golden Ass*. Berkeley.