Lying Eyes? Autopsy, credibility, and the senses in Apuleius, *Met*. 1.4

At the beginning of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, the picaresque hero Lucius encounters two fellow travelers, Aristomenes and an unnamed companion, on his way to Thessaly. After chastising the companion for his disbelief in Aristomenes' farfetched story, Lucius recounts two eyewitness accounts of swallowing to illustrate the credibility of the miraculous (*Met*. 1.4). While the predominance of visual words in Lucius' story seems to privilege visual sensory perception (*isto gemino obtutu…aspexi*, 1.4.2; *ecce*, 1.4.4), I argue that the use of gustatory and other non-visual imagery in *Met*. 1.4 actually prompts the *lector scrupulosus* to question the credibility of visual perception and with it, the entire novel to come.

Following Aristotle's hierarchy, which prioritizes vision (and often hearing), ancient and modern critics alike have tended to grant primacy to eyewitness accounts and the ocular sense (*De Anima* 418a-424b; Jütte 2005). However, this hierarchy was far from settled in antiquity, and recent scholarship has questioned the superiority of vision in antiquity, inspecting more closely the non-visual senses and instances of synaesthesia, the metaphorical use of one sensory impression to describe another, in ancient literature and material culture (Butler and Purves 2013; Betts 2015).

Continuing this challenge to vision's authority in the ancient world, this paper compares the role of the other, non-visual senses in *Met*. 1.4 with synaesthetic imagery in the prologue. The prologue emphasizes synaesthetic and "lower" sensory perception rather than visual means of communication, providing a blueprint for reading later passages such as *Met*. 1.4. The speaker makes two tactile and synaesthetic promises to his reader before mentioning sight (*conseram* and *aures…permulceam*, 1.1.1). The synaesthetic phrase *aures permulcere* encompasses not only

aural and tactile, but also gustatory perception. (*Per*)*mulcere* connotes a light stroking or tickling, and as an adjective means "honey-sweet" (e.g., *mulsa dicta*, Plaut. *Rud*. 364). Even the visual lexemes in the prologue (*inspicere*; *mireris*) do not necessarily inspire trust in the credibility of sight. Sight's capacity to marvel and amaze, suggested by *mireris*, simultaneously implies its parallel power to deceive (Squire 2015).

Befitting the prologue's emphasis on non-visual perception and the deceptive power of sight, the prominent gustatory imagery in *Met*. 1.4 calls into question the credibility of Lucius' autopsy. This passage, which functions as a programmatic guide to the *lector* for reading the rest of the novel, explicitly presents eyewitness accounts and visual perception as most credible. Implicitly, however, it hints at its own deception through gustatory imagery of cheese and sword swallowing (*polentae caseatae modico secus offulam*, 1.4.1; *circulatorem… equestrem spatham paeacutam mucrone infesto deuorasse*, 1.4.3). The swallowing of cheese, frequently connected in the rest of the novel with witchcraft and deception (Keulen 2000), is linked to the acceptance of smooth (but possibly deceptive) rhetoric by the subsequent tale of sword swallowing, a metaphor for the easy acceptance of speech (e.g, Plut. *Lycurg*. 19.2). The abundance of gustatory imagery and gluttonous behavior raise a red flag for the reader; any rhetoric driven by the *gaster* cannot be considered trustworthy (Pucci 1987).

Continuing concerns of *gaster*-driven rhetoric, Lucius also offers Aristomenes a meal as payment (*merces*, 1.4.6) for his story. Aristomenes is incentivized by the promise of compensation in exchange for his story; thus, he may be telling a falsehood more pleasurable than the truth in order to please his benefactor. The prologue likewise promises entertainment (*laetaberis*, 1.1.6), which is often opposed to truth (Halliwell 2011). The sensory experience provided by Lucius' two anecdotes may deliver on this promise of pleasure, but it does not

ensure the truth. Despite the touted credibility of personal experience and eyewitness accounts, the *lector* must beware swallowing Lucius' or Aristomenes' rhetoric too quickly. The gustatory imagery in this programmatic passage serves as a warning for the *lector scrupulosus* and a blueprint for reading the rest of the novel's incredible tales. While visual imagery may at first seem sufficiently credible, "lower" sensory impressions raise concerns that seeing is not, in fact, believing.

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