

## Rhetorical Sleight-of-Hand in Apuleius' *Apology*

In 158/9 CE, Apuleius, best known as the author of *The Golden Ass*, stood trial in Sabratha before the proconsul Claudius Maximus. The charge was magic, conviction of which could be punishable by death. Apuleius' self-defense is preserved in the text known as the *Apology* or *Pro se de Magia*. While the *Apology* has often been used to furnish details of Apuleius' biography - especially his marriage to the wealthy widow Pudentilla, whom the prosecution has accused him of seducing with sorcery -, its status as a speech that was actually delivered has been called into doubt, and even the historicity of the trial itself questioned (for an overview, see Hijmans 1994: 1715-19, Hunink 1997: 25-7; Bradley 2014 offers a recent historical approach). Regardless of whether or not the text represents an actual speech delivered in front of a real audience, it attests to Apuleius' methods as a speaker and writer in the environment of competitive scholarly display that is a prominent feature of the elite Greek- and Latin-speaking worlds of the second century CE. The technique examined in this paper is a rhetorical sleight-of-hand: throughout his speech, Apuleius transforms accusations into evidence of his innocence, demonstrating how each of the plaintiffs' charges are actually positive characteristics of a philosopher and beloved husband.

While Apuleius' rhetorical and educational displays in the *Apology* have been a focus of scholarly interest (Sallmann 1995; Hunink 2001; Harrison 2000: 39-88), the ways in which these are linked more broadly to expressions of power and knowledge have been less often examined. Apuleius' strategy relies not only upon reinterpreting the prosecution's charges, but also upon a carefully orchestrated presentation of superior knowledge that locates him within the same circle of the Roman elite as the presiding magistrate, while his detractors are ignorant, provincial

troublemakers. He begins by declaring that he speaks not only in defense of himself, but also of philosophy (*Apol.* 1, 3); the echoes of Plato's Socrates are clear. He then addresses each of the charges with the explicit goal not to deny them, but to explain how they prove he is not a magician, but a learned philosopher (*Apol.* 28). His interest in fish, for example, is not for their magical uses, but for an Aristotelian-style study of natural science (*Apol.* 29-41). The objects he keeps wrapped in linen in his household shrine are not a sorcerer's equipment, but mementos of his initiations into several Greek mystery cults; they attest to his elite status, religious piety, and a philosopher's pursuit of higher knowledge (*Apol.* 53-56).

The climax of Apuleius' speech is his transformation not only of his accusers' charges, but of their very words. Their key piece of evidence is an excerpt from a letter written by Pudentilla herself: "Apuleius is a magician, and I am bewitched by him and I love him," *Ἀπολείιος μάγος, καὶ ἐγὼ ὑπ' αὐτοῦ μεμάγευμαι καὶ ἐρῶ* (*Apol.* 82). Seemingly damning, but Apuleius has a copy of Pudentilla's letter. He demonstrates that it is in fact a rebuke of her son Pontianus, who first encouraged their marriage but later spoke against it. Pudentilla reminds Pontianus that he persuaded her to marry Apuleius, "But now, since these malicious accusers of ours are misleading you, suddenly Apuleius is a magician..." *νῦν δὲ ὡς κατηγοροὶ ἡμῶν κακοήθεις σε ἀναπείθουσιν, αἰφνίδιον ἐγένετο Ἀπολείιος μάγος...* (*Apol.* 83). Apuleius wins his case by displaying his knowledge of the full contents of the letter and dramatically revealing them to the audience. As he boasts: "You appealed to Pudentilla's letter, with the letter I win," *Ad litteras Pudentillae provocastis: litteris vinco* (*Apol.* 84).

In the *Apology*, Apuleius puts his superior knowledge on display along with a mastery of discourse in both Latin and Greek that gives him the power to transform his image by revealing the truth of the very facts used to accuse him. He demonstrates this technique one last time in the

finale, reducing the plaintiffs' accusations into short phrases, each of which he refutes using only two words (*Apol.* 103). Apuleius' rhetorical sleight-of-hand in the *Apology* reveals his ability to manipulate and control others not through magic, but words.

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