

## *Vir Bonus* or Slave? Risky Rhetoric in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*

The early books of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* are marked by a contradiction. The reader perceives that the protagonist, Lucius, indulges in foolish, sophomoric, transgressive behavior through which he satisfies his quest for magic and sex with Photis, the slave of his host Milo. Despite these proclivities, Lucius is depicted during his sojourn in Hypata as a man marked by elite social status. He clings to a version of himself as a good and loyal guest, the type of man who typically might avoid a relationship with Photis, who, as a female slave, embodies the antithesis of the elite male company with whom Lucius might fraternize. Lucius' social identity, constructed largely through the spoken word, implodes at the mock trial scene, during which he is put on trial for murdering three Hypatan youths. Unbeknownst to Lucius, however, his trial is merely the highlight of the Festival of Risus, in which the townspeople of Hypata honor the god of Laughter by scapegoating the outsider, Lucius, who is left humiliated and speechless.

The residents of Hypata consider the Risus Festival to be good clean fun, an annual homage paid to the god Risus. Recent scholars take a range of approaches to the Festival: La Bua (2013) compares the mock trial to Cicero's *Pro Milone*; McCreight (1993) considers elements of sacrifice; the role of *hospitium* is prioritized by Vander Poppen (2008); Lateiner (2001) explores Lucius' humiliation; Slater (2003) examines Lucius' transformation from eager spectator to unwilling spectacle; for Habinek (1990), Lucius undergoes a rite of passage via "rituals of community identity," while Frangoulidis (2002) considers the Festival an agent of community integration.

In my paper, I propose that the Risus Festival exposes troubling aspects of human speech and the construction of identity for an elite male. Rather than consolidating social relationships and solidifying the social self through speech with other humans, the *Metamorphoses* reveals the

perilous and fragmenting potentials of the spoken word. I suggest that the Risus Festival is not simply a parody of the life of the elite man and of the rhetor. Rather, it is a deeply disturbing portrait of the hazards that can be caused by human-to-human speech. Lucius' traumatized reaction to the Risus Festival points to problems inherent in the maintenance of elite status through speech. His trauma stems from the dismantling of his façade as the *vir bonus*. Lucius has not only been humiliated as the butt of a mean-spirited joke that alienates him from everyone else: he is so traumatized because the social identity that he had been assiduously constructing for himself with the spoken word during his stay in Hypata crumbles and implodes.

In support of the claim that Lucius' social identity, as constructed and mediated through speech, has imploded, I will analyze a number of key textual examples. With reference to Summers (1970), DuBois (1991), and Halperin (1990), I examine how Lucius' testimony during the mock trial reveals him to be a fraud (3.5 and 3.9); how the magistrates presiding over the trial threaten Lucius with torture as if he, an elite male, were a slave, laying hands on Lucius in violation of normative codes (3.8); and how Lucius declines the magistrates' invitation to be reintegrated into social life (3.11-12)—a result, I argue, of the damage done to his social status and identity.

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