

*Pythias me inuadit: Perilous Interpellation in Apuleius' Metamorphoses*

In the first book of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, the central character Lucius, upon arriving in Hypata after an arduous journey, is offered meager hospitality by his misanthropic host Milo. In an effort to take matters into his own hands, Lucius heads to the Marketplace of Desire to purchase provisions, including raw fish that he hopes will become the dinner his host has failed to provide. When leaving the market, Lucius encounters Pythias, a former schoolmate who now serves as magistrate of provisions in Hypata. In a scene that has baffled critics as well as Lucius, Pythias upbraids the fishmonger for charging Lucius too much money for the fish and, as punishment, orders his assistant to trample the fish into pieces. Demonstrating a peculiar logic, Pythias urges Lucius to go on his way by stating, "*sufficit mihi, o Luci, seniculi tanta haec contumelia*" ("It's good enough for me, Lucius, to punish this little old man with such abuse" [1.25]). That Lucius is the person deprived not only of his money, but also his fish, and hence his dinner, appears not to bother the overly zealous magistrate.

The evident absurdity of this scene, in which Lucius, not the fishmonger, appears to be the one who ends up punished, has been characterized by critics in a range of ways. To Winkler (1985), this episode in the novel is "rather pointless." Nimis (2000) finds this to be a "peculiar incident" that seems "to go nowhere." Auerbach (1968) finds the actions of Pythias "silly" and also "strangely unpleasant." To Scobie (1975) the scene is part of a Roman tradition that satirizes "the pretentious airs and graces of municipal magistrates," and Lateiner (2001) focuses on the critical representation of "government protection." For Plaza (2006), the scene "gains meaning when regarded as a veiled allusion to the Egyptian religious ceremony which entailed a priest ritually trampling fishes in a public sacred place."

While acknowledging the absurd elements in this scene, I propose in my paper that much graver consequences arise from the interaction between Lucius and his former schoolmate Pythias. In this scene, Pythias calls out Lucius by name, not incidentally, I suggest, in the very first mention of Lucius' name in Apuleius' novel. Pythias subordinates Lucius to the authority of a magistrate and deprives Lucius of much-needed resources in a misapplication of quasi-legal power. But Lucius is not merely caught up in an errant manifestation of the Law, he is also debased and rendered mute (*his actis consternatus ac prorsus obstupidus* [1.25]) in an exchange that exposes the fragility of his subjectivity. His encounter with Pythias leaves Lucius passive, punished, confused, and silenced.

My reading of this scene draws upon a theory of interpellation (Althusser [1971], Butler [1997a; 1997b], Gunderson [2003]), according to which Lucius, named by his erstwhile schoolmate, is fixed in a social identity that endangers him. Indeed, Lucius states when they meet in the marketplace, *Pythias...me...inuadit* (1.24), using a verb (*inuadit*) that critics have attempted to euphemize, but that means to assault, attack, and invade. Not simply excited to see a former acquaintance, Pythias renders Lucius into a subject who becomes immobilized, guilty, and silenced in a manner that demonstrates the susceptibility of the very construction of the self to interference from another person. Much more than just a bizarre, inexplicable scene, this episode between Lucius and Pythias chillingly instantiates the entanglement of human identity in language that is controlled by someone else.

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