

Ciceronian Humor in Apuleius' *Apology*

In his *Apology*, Apuleius defends himself against charges of magic brought by a group of accusers whom he describes as ignorant, incompetent, immoral, and ugly. Apuleius achieves this negative portrait of his accusers in part by using humor to mock them. I argue that his techniques for creating this impression closely resemble those recommended by Cicero in his discussion of humor in *De Oratore*, specifically his advice that the orator should use humor to support spurious accusations against his opponent but should also preserve his own dignity by using humor with reserve and caution. Apuleius' use of humor and of Ciceronian tropes has already been noted (Rives 2008, 43-44; Harrison 2000, 244), but the direct connection between this speech and Cicero's advice on humor has not yet been drawn. Despite differences of time, place, and rhetorical style, the similarities between Cicero's advice and Apuleius' technique suggest commonalities in the handling of humor in the Roman rhetorical tradition.

Throughout the *Apology*, Apuleius treats the accusations against him as absurd. He frames the charges as unreasonable and changed at random (2.1-2) and later calls them "frivolous and self-contradictory" (*frivola et inter se repugnantia*, 25.1). When a witness is introduced to corroborate an accusation against him, Apuleius calls his evidence so sloppy that it is "like a game" (*quasi ludicrum*, 45). By insisting that his opponents are not taking the case seriously enough even to fabricate convincing lies, Apuleius both introduces and distances himself from non-serious discourse, allowing him to mock his opponents while simultaneously condemning them for frivolity. Thus, Apuleius presents a negative picture of his accusers but shields himself against the impression that he is treating a serious matter less seriously than it deserves: they, not he, are at fault for bringing a frivolous matter in front of the judge, and

therefore his use of humor against them is justified as part of his defense. Apuleius' strategy reflects Cicero's advice that the orator should not seem to be making jokes merely for the sake of making jokes, because that will make him seem to be courting a superficial laugh (*De Orat.* 2.246-7).

Apuleius also follows Cicero's suggestion that humor can divert scrutiny from unsupported implications (*De Orat.* 2.240). While he does sometimes openly insult them, Apuleius also disguises his criticisms of his accusers, notably when he implies that one, Aemilianus, murdered his relatives: "for it has not been long since numerous deaths of relatives gilded you with undeserved legacies, whence the name 'Charon' belongs to you more rightly than from that extremely repulsive face of yours" (*Neque enim diu est cum te crebrae mortes propinquorum immeritis hereditatibus fulserunt, unde tibi potius quam ob istam taeterrimam faciem Charon nomen est*, 23.7). The implication that Aemilianus murdered his relatives is not supported in context, but Apuleius obviates the need for other evidence by tying Aemilianus' murderousness to his repulsive face, which was presumably apparent to his audience. Aemilianus cannot defend himself against the charge of an ugly face because proving that his face was beautiful would still not refute implication of murder. Cicero implicitly recommends such a strategy when he demonstrates difficulty of dismissing criticism supported by one's personal appearance (*De Orat.* 2.262). The implication remains without Apuleius having to actively assert its truth, and the humorous insult conceals its outrageousness.

Finally, Apuleius follows Cicero's example in his decision not to evoke absurdity when laying out weighty accusations. Cicero recommends that the orator should use harsher techniques than humor when presenting his opponent as a serious criminal (*De Orat.* 2.237), and Apuleius follows this precept in his condemnation of Herennius Rufinus. Apuleius presents Rufinus as the

none-too-bright mastermind behind the accusers. Whereas his initial comments on Aemilianus and many of his supporting witnesses make them sound like buffoons, he introduces Rufinus as truly evil and supports this idea rhetorically with a series of weighty agent nouns (*instigator...auctor...conductor...coemptor*, 74.3-5). Only after he has worked through a list of crimes and come to the least serious one (lewd dancing) does Apuleius moderate his indignation with a witty suggestion that Rufinus was better at lewdness than dancing (74.7). In framing Rufinus as the true villain, Apuleius makes him threatening rather than clownish.

In conclusion, several of the strategies that Apuleius uses to mock his accusers reveal parallels to Cicero's writings on effective humor in oratory. The continuity between Apuleius and Cicero demonstrates at least some of these rhetorical techniques remained in use and continued to be effective in producing their desired witty effects.

Bibliography

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