

APULEIUS, TACITUS, AND CHRISTIANS

Collation of Apuleius, *Met.* IX 14 with Tacitus, *Ann.* XV 44 strongly suggests that the former is deliberately echoing the latter, thus furnishing evidence that Tacitus was read soon after his death, despite the usual contrary statements. Furthermore, Apuleius can clearly be seen to be alluding to Christians rather than Jews, a disclosure that may settle that perennial dispute amongst Apuleian scholars as to whom the novelist is satirising.

At *Met.* IX 14, Apuleius introduces that repository of evil, the baker's wife. Having catalogued her fleshly sins, he appends a condemnation of the creature's depraved monotheism:

tunc spretis atque calcatis diuinis numinibus in uicem certae religionis mentita sacrilega praesumptione dei, quem praedicaret unicum, confictis obseruationibus uacuis fallens omnes homines et miserum maritum decipiens matutino mero et continuo stupro corpus manciparat.

There has been much debate over the years as to whether Apuleius intends criticism of Jews or Christians¹. One of his most recent and influential commentators, J. G. Griffiths², leaves the matter largely open, albeit tilting (in his words) slightly in favour of the Christians. This hesitant preference is due to the suggestion of Marcel Simon³ that the register of the woman's vices corresponds closely to that compiled by the Apostle Paul in his attack on pseudo-Christians in 1 *Cor.* 5, 11. However, in view of the notorious pagan reluctance to read the New

¹ A full bibliography of this issue is not intended here; cf. the references in subsequent notes to Griffiths, Herrmann, Simon, and Walsh, all of whom provide copious accounts of the literature.

² Both in his Commentary on Book XI of the *Metamorphoses*, Leiden 1975, pp. 345, 359, and his subsequent «Isis in the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius», in *Aspects of Apuleius' Golden Ass*, Groningen 1978, p. 153.

³ «Apulée et le christianisme», *Mélanges d'histoire des religions offerts à Henri-Charles Puech*, Paris 1974, pp. 299-305.

Testament⁴, this seems an improbable notion, certainly not one on which to base any conclusions.

It is to the cognate secular sources that we should go for evidence to support the view that Christianity is what Apuleius has in mind. The behaviour of the baker's wife is a burlesque of that attributed to the sect by the younger Pliny and Fronto⁵. She is *ebriosa*, drunk *matutino mero*; according to Fronto, Christians *ad epulas solemnium die coeunt*, whereupon their *conuiuium caluit* with resultant *ebrietas feruor*. In the more sober version of Pliny, members of the sect are *soliti stato die ante lucem conuenire... rursusque coeundi ad capiendum cibum*. The baker's wife is a *hostis pudicitiae* who debases herself *continuo stupro*; Fronto accuses the Christians *incestae libidinis* and *infandae cupiditatis*, practised under the concealment of *impudentibus tenebris*.

The correspondence between Apuleius and Fronto is more one of substance than language. The argument of this paper does not depend upon establishing any formal debt owed by either author to the other. What is striking is the similarity of treatment in these two contemporary African observers.

Now the famous description in Tacitus, *Ann.* XV 44. Long ago, L. Herrmann⁶ noticed some affinity of language between this and the Apuleian sequence. However, with a caution uncharacteristic of that scholar⁷, he merely pointed to a couple of words shared by both authors and moved on to other matters. Here are the relevant parts of the two passages, with identical, similar, or comparable words and phrases shown up by underlining:

TACITUS: ...adfecit quos per *flagitia* inuisos uulgus Christianos appellabat... repressaque in praesens *exitiabilis* superstitione rursus erumpebat, *non modo* per Iudaeam, *originem eius mali*, *sed per urbem etiam quo cuncta* undique *atrocita* aut *puerenda* confluunt celebranturque.

APULEIUS: *Nec enim* uel unum *uitium nequissimae* illi feminae deerat, *sed omnia prorsus*, ut in quandam caenosam latrinam, *in eius animum flagitia confluxerant*: *saena*, *scaeuia*, *uirosa*, *ebriosa*, *peruicax*, *pertinax*, *in rapinis turpibus auara*, *in sumptibus foedis profusa*, *inimica fidei*, *hostis pudicitiae*.

⁴ E. Norden, *Die Antike Kunstprosa*, II, Berlin 1909, p. 517, is fundamental on this; cf. Alan Cameron, «Palladas and Christian Polemic», *JRS* 55, 1965, p. 17, for further discussion and bibliography.

⁵ Pliny, *Ep.* X 96, 7-8; Fronto, *Frag.* 10 (Van Den Hout = Haines 2, p. 282).

⁶ «L'Âne d'or et le christianisme», *Latomus* 12, 1953, pp. 188-191.

⁷ Had he been in more typical and adventurous mood, Herrmann might have pointed to the words *tacitus ingemescerem*, with which Lucius prefaces his description of the baker's wife, as a deliberate clue to his source planted by Apuleius.

Linguistic parallels are sempiternally hazardous as a way of proving dependence or imitation⁸. Had it been merely of two historians describing the same thing, their shared language might well be dismissed as the inevitable process of a common theme producing a common vocabulary. Yet in the present case, the accumulation of parallels between an historian and a novelist writing in and for different generations is, to say the least, suggestive.

Thanks to its growing strength in Africa, Apuleius was bound to become aware of Christianity⁹. In seeking both to learn more about it and to attack it, he might very well have had recourse to Tacitus. It is well known that Tertullian exploited the pagan historian, something that may help the notion that Apuleius did likewise¹⁰. Furthermore, it is to be remembered that the novelist's catholic tastes¹¹ ran to historiography; Priscian¹² mentions his *Epitome Historiarum*, preserving a few words from it.

On all counts, then, there is a case for seeing a deliberate Tacitean echo¹³. And even if this be denied, the present investigation has produced stronger grounds than hitherto for believing that the baker's wife is meant to be understood as a Christian, thus perhaps doing something towards ending this particular dispute among Apuleian scholars.

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⁸ Albeit, there might be parody of content as well. For easy instance, Tacitus says that the Christians were treated with mocking cruelty like animals, thanks to Nero's *quaesitissimis poenis*. Lucius complains that *illa mulier miro me persequebatur odio* (the Tacitean *odio humani generis*, in the context of the sect's punishment, will be recalled), exposing him to condign unpleasantness. He is a victim of her *saeuitia*, just as the Christians were finally pitied as victims who were being sacrificed *in saeuitiam unius*.

⁹ See P. G. Walsh, «Lucius Madaurensis», *Phoenix* 22, 1968, pp. 151-157, restated in his *The Roman Novel*, Cambridge 1970, pp. 186-187; cf. the reservations of Griffiths, *Commentary*, pp. 5-6.

¹⁰ Cf. F. Haverfield, «Tacitus During the Late Roman Period and the Middle Ages», *JRS*, 1916, p. 198. I am writing elsewhere on a possible allusion to Tacitus by Aulus Gellius.

¹¹ For which, cf. Apuleius' own testimony in *Apol.* 36-38; *Florida* 20.

¹² Keil, *GL* II, p. 250; III, p. 482. In his Budé edition of the *Apology* and *Florida* (p. xvii), Vallette takes *Historiarum* as alluding to the *Erotikos* mentioned by John Lydus (*De Mag.* III 64). However, the words and phrases preserved by Priscian —*gens Aeneanica, cuspis, semissis*— suggest some sort of history proper. And in *Florida* 20, Xenophon's works are called *historias*.

¹³ Without implying that it proves anything, one might note that *Laurentianus* 68, 2, the authority for Apuleius' text, also contains Tacitus, *Ann.* XI-XVI; cf. Vallette, p. xxxiii.