

## Religious Language in the Risus Festival (Apul. *Met.* 3.1-3.11) and the First Reader

Discourse analysis of the Risus Festival sequence in Book 3 of Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* reveals that multivalent religious vocabulary in both the narration and dialogue alerts the reader to the "punch line" of the ritual; thanks to the language used, the twist does not come out of nowhere, and even Winkler's first reader may recognize the comico-religious nature of the scene before Lucius does.

The festival has been analyzed variously as a murder trial, a dramatic performance, or a community unification ceremony. Summers (1970) breaks down the legal details of the trial, concluding that it serves as an indictment of the Roman legal system, while La Bua (2013) sees a parody of a legal case, in which Greek and Roman law are jumbled together and the speakers misappropriate stasis theory. In his commentary on Book III, van der Paardt (1978) notes Ciceronian usages in the speeches and good legal arguments, as does Costantini (2021) in his own, who however finds many flaws in Lucius's speech. May (2007) notes theatrical elements. Habinek (1990) sees a scapegoat ritual, in which Lucius is excluded from the community, while McCreight (1993) goes one step further and analyzes ritualistic language and action during the scene, which seems to frame Lucius as a sacrificial victim.

In this paper, I argue that the religious and humorous elements dominate. I begin with a description of the purpose of the Risus Festival and attempt to reconcile the timeline of the events immediately prior. The goal of the festival is to elicit laughter (II 31; III 11). A significant amount of the humor in the scene must therefore be diegetic, that is, interpretable to the characters within the story. While Lucius remains ignorant throughout the mock trial, he and the reader are warned about it beforehand, and are already on the lookout for a prank. Byrrhena (II

31) warns Lucius that the festival of laughter is the next day, and Lucius himself notices the similarity of his arrest to an expiatory sacrifice (III 2). The combination of these remarks prepares the reader to detect numerous double meanings throughout the ensuing sections. I analyze the narration during Lucius's arrest, and the speeches of the prosecutor and Lucius at the mock trial (III 3-8). A close linguistic analysis reveals that both the dialogue and narration of the scene are rife with references to the religious nature of the proceedings (e.g., *praeco*, *conseptum*, *victima*, *publica ministeria*, *pax civitatis*, *sanctus*, *nefas*, *operor*, *providentia deum*, etc.); due to the nature of the festival, even jokes (such as references to Lucius the *utricida*) serve this purpose, in addition to typically religious language. For the Hypatan magistrates, these references are attempts to make the Hypatan audience laugh; but for the narrator, references to the rites being celebrated provide clues for the first reader as to the true nature of the scene. The presence of legal and theatrical language and imagery only highlights the multiple meaning of the ritual. I conclude that the first reader would be able to notice the same flags as the Hypatans and understand the humor of the scene before Lucius does.

This analysis argues that Apuleius's twists are not universally unpredictable for a Roman first reader, for whom a single word or group of words can conjure up associated concepts and actions; the first reader is not so "susceptible to the plot-twists and false prolepses with which book III is peppered" (Costantini 2021:15) as might be imagined. Searching for the presence of similar groups of polysemous words in the novel may reveal other instances of hints for the first reader.

## Bibliography

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