

Apuleius, *Apology*

Introduction to the Reading

Apuleius was born in Madaura in North Africa. He was educated in North Africa and Athens and also travelled to Rome. He is famous for writing a novel known as *The Golden Ass* or *The Metamorphoses*, about a man who gets a little too excited about magic and turns himself into a donkey. He is only rescued when the goddess Isis intervenes and he leaves magic behind and embraces a life of being a member of the cult of Isis.

This reading comes from the speech Apuleius wrote for his trial on charges of witchcraft. He was prosecuted by the grown sons of his wife Pudentilla and other family members. Pudentilla was the widowed mother of one of his friends when they met. When Pudentilla and Apuleius decided to marry she was approaching 40 and he was probably 15 or so years younger. Her sons (and especially the father-in-law of one son) resented that Apuleius might direct money they had expected to flow toward her sons and their families toward himself.

The family prosecuted Apuleius for being a magus, a magician. The trial was held in 158 BCE at Sabathra (near modern Tripoli). The family were suspicious that he is from a distant part of North Africa, away from the Romanized cities. At the same time as they suggest he may be too wild, they are also suspicious that he reads and writes Greek as well as Latin and that he studies philosophy, a pursuit which considered all aspects of human life, death, and the cosmos. He also seems to be a little too interested in fish -- was he using fish to cast spells? No, Apuleius says, he was merely trying to study the natural world, like Aristotle did. As for Pudentilla, she comes from an extremely wealthy family. When her husband died, his father tried to get her to marry his other son to keep all the money in the family. She kept putting this off for 14 years -- in a way that sounds kind of like Penelope's rejection of the suitors -- until the father-in-law died. By then Pudentilla was diagnosed with 'wandering womb', a morbid condition in which the uterus wanders around the body causing problems because the woman has not been having sex: she needed to marry to restore her health. Perhaps the medical narrative was a cover or alibi for her own desires?

Apuleius happened to fall ill while traveling and ended up staying with Pudentilla for about a year. At first her son, Pontianus, Apuleius' friend and roommate while they both were studying at Athens, encouraged the match, but when Pontianus got married himself he changed his mind and tried to prevent Apuleius and Pudentilla from getting together. At some point, Pudentilla evidently wrote a letter in which she joked about him bewitching her. Perhaps a magic narrative could function like the medical narrative and be an alibi or cover for desires that weren't proper for a woman to express? In any event, that word magus was enough for the family, including Aemilianus, yet another brother of Pudentilla's dead husband, to bring its case against Apuleius. The magic charge is serious because if Apuleius is convicted he would be executed.

Because the *Apology* doesn't mention the novel, scholars think that Apuleius wrote it after the trial - the idea being that if he had already written the novel, the prosecution would surely have mentioned it and he surely would have had to talk about it in the *Apology*.

In the first excerpt from the Apology below, Apuleius talks about his background and heritage in North Africa. Note especially his striking and brisk rejection of environmental determinism, the Hippocratic idea that environment determines character.

Apuleius Reading

Text cited from Christopher P. Jones, Apuleius, *Apologia, Florida, de deo Socratis*. Loeb Classical Library. Harvard University Press 2017.

24. Now as for my native city: it lies on the very border of Numidia and Gaetulia, as you showed from a work of mine, a speech delivered in public before the right honorable Lollianus Avitus, in which I called myself half Numidian and half Gaetulian. Well, I do not see what I have to regret about that, any more than the elder Cyrus had to regret that he was of mixed birth, half Median and half Persian. What we must consider in a person is not his birthplace but his character, not in which land but on what principle he began the course of life. We rightly allow the greengrocer and the innkeeper to recommend their produce or their wine by the excellence of the soil, wine from Thasos or vegetables from Phlious, let us say; such articles, the products of the earth, get a superior taste with the help of a fertile region, a rainy climate, a gentle wind, warm sun, and moist soil. By contrast, a man's soul comes from without and lodges in the body as a guest, and how can such factors cause him to be more or less good or bad? Has it not always been true that every nation has produced different degrees of intelligence, though some nations seem to be more striking for stupidity or astuteness? The philosopher Anacharsis was born among the doltish Scythians, the buffoon Meletides among the clever Athenians. I do not say this because I am ashamed of my native place, even were it still the home town of Syphax. Still, after his defeat we passed by gift of the Roman people to king Massinissa, and thereafter, newly refounded with veteran soldiers, we became a most distinguished colony, in which colony my father had the position of mayor in the emperor's place, when he had held every office. I have maintained his position in that city from when I first began to be a member of the city council, not at all unworthily of him and, I hope, with equal honor and repute. Why then have I brought all this up? So that you will be less angry with me in future, Aemilianus, or rather that you will pardon me for my mistake in not choosing your Attic Zarath to be born in.

...

68. I will now briefly set out the sequence of events, ...

2 Aemilia Pudentilla, who is now my wife, had two sons, Pontianus and Pudens, by a certain Sicinius Amicus, her previous husband. When they were left as minors under the guardianship of their paternal grandfather (Amicus having died when his own father was still alive), for about fourteen years she raised them carefully and with extraordinary devotion, though reluctant to be so long a widow when she herself was in her prime. But the boys' grandfather was eager to marry her off against her will to his own son, Sicinius Clarus, and so he frightened other suitors off. Moreover, he threatened that if she married outside the family, he would leave her sons nothing from their ancestral property in his will. Seeing how obstinately he pressed the match, that sagacious and exceptionally devoted woman, not wanting to disadvantage her sons on that

account, signed a nuptial agreement with Sicinius Clarus, as she had been bidden, but nevertheless, by various evasions she put off the wedding until the boy's grandfather had breathed his last; he had designated her sons as his heirs on condition that the elder one, Pontianus, would be his brother's guardian.

69. Once relieved of that concern, and because men of the upper class were eager to marry her, she determined to remain a widow no longer, for though she could endure the tedium of loneliness, she could not bear her physical illness. She was a woman of impeccable chastity, so many years a widow without fault or rumor, but she was lethargic from lack of conjugal intercourse and ill from her womb's long inactivity, so that her inner uterus became infected, and the resulting pains often exhausted her till her life was in danger. The doctors and the midwives agreed that she had contracted her illness from deprivation of conjugal life, that the danger was increasing with every day and her pains getting more acute; while life was still left to her, she should counteract her illness by marriage. Everyone approved the plan and especially Aemilianus here, even though not long ago he lied in his teeth and said that Pudentilla had had no thought of marriage before I had forced her into it by malignant magic, and that only I had ventured to deflower her virgin widowhood, so to speak, by means of spells and poisons. As I have often heard, not for nothing do they say a liar should have a good memory, but it has slipped your mind, Aemilianus, that before I came to Oea you had even written a letter to her son Pontianus, who was then an adult living in Rome, urging that she marry.

(To a clerk of the court:) Here, bring the letter, or rather give it to Aemilianus himself: let him read it and refute himself in his own voice and in his own words. Is this your letter? Why have you turned pale? Blushing is certainly not in your power. Is this your signature? (To the clerk:) Read it out very clearly, please, so that everyone can see how his tongue is at variance with his hand, and how much less he disagrees with me than with himself. (The letter is read out.)

70. Did you write the words read out, Aemilianus? "I know that she wants to marry and that she ought, but I don't know whom she will choose." You're quite right, you didn't know, since Pudentilla being fully aware of your hateful malice talked only about her situation itself, but said nothing about her suitor. You, however, believing even then that she was going to marry your brother Clarus, were led on by false hopes and urged her son Pontianus to give his consent too. So if she had married Clarus, a clod broken down with age, you would be saying that she had long wanted to marry unprompted and without any magic; but because she married someone you call a young man, you say she was forced, and otherwise had always abhorred marriage. You scoundrel, you didn't know that your letter on the subject was extant, you didn't know that you were to be convicted by your very own testimony. That letter, however, the witness and the proof of your agreement, Pudentilla chose to retain rather than to send, knowing that you were as shallow and changeable as you were untruthful and shameless.

She herself, though, wrote to her son Pontianus in Rome on the subject, and also set out in full the reasons for her decision. She told that whole story of her illness; there was no further reason for her to hold out any longer; by her long widowhood and by neglecting her own health she had obtained his grandfather's inheritance, and had added to it by her own great efforts; now by the kindness of the gods he for his part was of an age to marry, and his brother to take the toga of manhood; at long last they must also allow her to remedy her loneliness and illness; 8but in the matter of her affection and her final dispositions they need fear nothing; as a married woman she

would be the same person she had been to them as a widow. I shall order a copy of this letter that she sent to her son to be read out. (The clerk reads the letter.)

71. From all this I think anyone can clearly see that no spells of mine drove Pudentilla from her long-maintained widowhood; no, having been for a long time not disinclined to marry, she perhaps preferred me to others. Why this choice on the part of so respectable a woman should be counted against me as a crime rather than as a compliment I do not see: I merely wonder why Aemilianus and Rufinus resent the lady's choice, while those who sought Pudentilla's hand in marriage are resigned to her preferring me to them. In fact, in so doing she obeyed her son rather than her inclination, as not even Aemilianus can deny. For when Pontianus received his mother's letter, he immediately dashed from Rome to Oea, fearing that she might choose some avaricious man, and (as often happens) might transfer everything to her husband's estate. That concern gave him no slight anxiety, since his and his brother's hopes of wealth depended entirely on his mother's property. His grandfather had left a modest sum, his mother possessed four million sesterces; from that she owed her sons a certain amount, certainly, though the loan was not documented but made simply on faith, as was right and proper. He kept this fear of his unspoken, and did not dare to object openly in case he seemed to distrust her.

72. So matters stood between the mother's marital prospects and her son's fears, when by chance or by destiny I arrived on my way to Alexandria. So help me, I would have said, "if only that had never happened," if consideration for my wife did not restrain me. It was the winter season. I had arrived after an exhausting journey, and was laid up for a good number of days at the house of my friends here, the Appii, whom I name to show my esteem and affection. There Pontianus came to see me, since not long before he had made my acquaintance at Athens through certain mutual friends, and thereafter we had shared lodgings together and become closely attached. In all he did he showed deference to my position, concern for my health, shrewdness with regard to my affections; for, you see, he thought he had found the perfect husband for his mother, one in whose hands he could without any risk place the family's whole property. At first, indeed, he tested my inclination by speaking indirectly, since he saw that I was eager to set out, and was averse to the married state, and he begged me to stay at least for a while; he wanted to leave with me, but because of the heat and the creatures in the Syrtes we should wait until the next winter, since my illness ruled out the present one. By much entreaty, too, he got my friends the Appii to agree that I should be transferred to him at his mother's house; it would be a healthier place for me to stay, and furthermore I would be better placed to see the sea from there, which is one of my greatest pleasures.

73. By pressing all these points so insistently he convinced me, and entrusted his mother and the boy here, his brother, to me. I helped them considerably in our joint studies, and our intimacy greatly increased. Meanwhile I recovered, and gave a public speech at the request of my friends. The audience filled the town hall, where the lecture took place, in large numbers, and among other compliments gave a unanimous shout of "Bravo," begging me to stay and to become a citizen of Oea. Later, when the audience had left, Pontianus made this his cue to influence me, interpreting the unanimous public opinion as a sign from heaven, and revealed that he had a scheme, if I had no objection, to marry me to his mother, for whom many men were lying in wait; since, so he said, I was the only person whom he could trust and believe in every respect. If

I did not take on this burden, since the prospect was not a pretty young ward but a homely mother of children—if with that consideration in mind I was readying myself for another proposal in the hope of beauty and wealth, I would be acting neither as a friend nor as a philosopher.

It will take too long if I try to recount what I said in reply, our long and frequent conversations, the many different pleas he urged on me, not ending until he had finally made me yield. Certainly, I had not failed to observe Pudentilla closely in a full year of constant intimacy, and had tested the excellences by which she was adorned, but being eager for foreign travel, I had for some time avoided being tied down by marriage. Soon, however, my desire for so excellent a woman was no less keen than if I had sought her hand myself. Pontianus had also persuaded his own mother to make me her first choice, and was extraordinarily eager to settle the business as soon as possible. With difficulty we got his consent to a short delay, until he himself could take a wife and his brother could celebrate his taking of the man's toga; only then should the two of us be united.

74. If only, by heaven, I could pass over what I must say next without very much weakening my case; I forgave Pontianus wholeheartedly when he asked my pardon for his error, and do not wish to seem to fault him now for irresponsibility. For I admit something that has been alleged against me: that after he had taken a wife, he broke the terms of our agreement and, suddenly changing his mind, began to prevent with no less pertinacity what he had previously urged with great energy; in short, that he would have been ready to undergo or do anything to prevent the consummation of our marriage. And yet all this shameful change of mind, and the quarrel he began with his mother, should not be blamed on him, but rather on his father-in-law here, Herennius Rufinus, . . .

But not to stray too far from the subject: Pudentilla, seeing to her surprise that her son had been tricked into contradicting his own advice, set off for the country and wrote that celebrated letter of reproach in which she admitted, so those people alleged, that my magic had caused her to fall madly in love. ⁶But I transcribed that letter two days ago, with Pontianus' secretary present and with Aemilianus making his own copy, as you ordered, Maximus, and before witnesses; everything in it will prove to be in my favor and contrary to what they asserted.

79. And yet, even had she frankly called me a magician, one might think that she preferred to allege compulsion on my part when excusing herself to her son, rather than consent on hers. Is Phaedra the only woman to have contrived a false love letter? Is this not the usual trick that all women play, once they begin to want something like this, to prefer to seem compelled to do so? Yet even if she had believed in her heart that I was a magician, am I to be thought one for that reason—Pudentilla's having said so in writing? You with all your proofs, all your witnesses, all your speeches cannot prove I am a magician, and was she to prove it by a mere word? And yet how much more serious should one consider what is formally written in an indictment than what is written in a letter. Why don't you convict me by my own deeds, not by another's words? Moreover, on that principle many people will be charged as defendants for any crime at all, if

something that someone puts in a letter out of love or hate for another is to be thought an established fact. “Pudentilla wrote that you were a magician, and therefore you are one.” Suppose she had written that I was consul, would I be consul? Or suppose she written that I was an artist, a doctor, or if it comes to that, an innocent man? Would you believe any such thing just on her say-so? Of course not. And yet it is the height of injustice to believe her in an unfavorable sense when you would not in a favorable one—for her letter to be able to ruin a man and not to keep him safe. “Ah, but she was not in her right mind, she loved you passionately.” I grant that for the moment. But surely not all those who inspire love are magicians if their lover happens to say so in writing? I believe now that Pudentilla did not love me at the time, if she really wrote something for the eyes of others that was to do me harm in public.

80. Finally, what is it that you are alleging—that she was sane or insane when she wrote? “Sane,” will you say? Then she was not influenced by magic arts. “Insane,” will you reply? Then she did not know what she wrote and therefore cannot be believed: or rather, if she had been insane she would not have known that she was so. For just as it is absurd for someone to say that he is not speaking, because merely to say he is not speaking means he is speaking, and his very assertion disproves his assertion, in the same way or even more so, “I am insane” is self-refuting: it is not true unless said consciously. Furthermore, a person is sane if he knows what insanity is, because insanity cannot know itself any more than blindness can see itself; hence Pudentilla was of sound mind if she thought herself not of sound mind. I could say more if I chose, but this is enough logic chopping. I will read the actual letter, which loudly proclaims something quite different, and has been almost been deliberately prepared and adapted for use in this suit. (To a servant of the court:) Here you, take it and read until I interrupt you. (The letter is read.)

Stop before you read the rest, since we have come to the heart of the matter. For up to this point, Maximus, as far as I noticed, the lady nowhere mentioned sorcery, but went over the same course of events as I did just now, about her long widowhood, about curing her illness, about her desire to marry, about the praises of myself that she had heard from Pontianus, about his own urging that she should marry me and not someone else.

84. You appealed to Pudentilla’s letter: with this letter I win my case, and if you want to hear the very last sentence as well, I will not object. (To a servant of the court:) You, read out the words with which the lady closed her letter when she was bewitched, maddened, raving, doting. “I have neither been bewitched nor am I in love. One cannot escape fate.” Isn’t that enough? Pudentilla cries out against you all, she practically issues a proclamation to assert her sanity against your false charges. But she ascribes her reason or, if you like, her need for marriage to fate, which is a very far thing from magic, or rather is totally unconnected with it. What power can spells and potions still have, if the destiny of everything is like the most violent torrent, which one can neither hold back nor hurry forward? Thus by her very own statement Pudentilla not only denied that I was a magician, but that magic existed at all. It is a lucky thing that Pontianus habitually kept complete copies of his mother’s letters;

At any rate, in answer to what you have alleged, count to see if two words are enough for my reply. “You polish your teeth.” Excusable cleanliness. “You examine mirrors.” Philosophic duty.

“You write poetry.” Allowable activity. “You study fish.” Aristotelian doctrine. “You consecrate wood.” Platonic precept. “You marry a wife.” Legal requirement. “She was older than you.” Nothing unusual. “You were after profit.” Take the document, recall the gift, read the will.

If I have sufficiently demolished all these charges, if I have refuted all their false accusations; if after all their charges, and likewise all their insults, I am safe from the charge of magic; if I have in no way lessened the dignity of Philosophy, which I value more than my own preservation, but rather upheld it on all points and with flying colors: if this is so, I repeat, I can respect your judgment with more confidence than I fear your authority. For a proconsul’s guilty verdict is less grave or dreadful, I think, than the disapproval of a man so virtuous and so upright.

I have finished.