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From Mockery to Respect: The Housekeeper's Suicide in Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*

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Apuleius' The Golden Ass is one of the few surviving Roman novels, told from the unique first-person perspective of Lucius, a man who has turned into a donkey and is trapped in abusive servitude. The novel is peppered with a variety of colorful minor characters. This paper explores the shifting relationship between Lucius and one such minor character, the nameless housekeeper of his captors. When Lucius first encounters the housekeeper, he mocks her weakness and subservience, but his contempt changes into respect after two simultaneous events: Lucius' failed escape and the housekeeper's suicide. This paper will argue that Lucius' changing perspective on the nameless housekeeper reflects his changing view of himself. While his previously confident attitude allowed him to mock the old woman, Lucius' failed attempt at escaping his captors forces him to face his own captivity and respect certain subtly rebellious elements of the housekeeper's suicide. Thus, Lucius learns the power of humility, a principle to which he will adhere more fully at the end of the novel as a devotee to the goddess Isis.

In Apuleius' novel *The Golden Ass (Metamorphoses)*, Lucius's changing impressions of other characters, fluctuating between friendly companionship and bitter enmity, color his first-person narrative. One such character in *The Golden Ass* is the nameless old woman, a submissive and exploited housekeeper of the thieves who have stolen Lucius. When the thieves first capture Lucius, he looks down upon the old woman and mocks her subservience to the robbers, believing himself to be on some level defiant and capable of escape. He constantly refers to her with insulting language such as "a delirious and drunken old hag"¹ ("*delira et temulenta illa... anicula*"²), or "crafty old woman" ("*astutulae anus*"³). However, after attempting a dramatic escape and failing, Lucius realizes that he, like the housekeeper, is property of the thieves, and, like the housekeeper, cannot openly defy his masters. He thus comes to respect the old woman's suicide, which, though submissive, contains subtle and

¹ All translations are my own. They are as literal as possible in order to facilitate analysis of the original syntax.

² Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 6.25

³ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 6.27

paradoxical traces of defiance. Lucius's shift between contempt and respect for the old woman's obedience parallels his sense of loss of free will: after his failed attempt at escape, Lucius realizes that he, no more independent than the old woman, is incapable of conspicuous subversion and must find dignity in obedience.

The old woman makes her first appearance in *The Golden Ass* when "thus the hostile men admonished a certain old woman bent with heavy aging, to whom alone the health and care of such a group seemed to have been relegated" ("*...anum quandam curvatam gravi senio, cui soli salus atque tutela tot numero commissa videbatur, sic infesti compellant*"⁴). First of all, Lucius contemptuously refers to the woman as "anus," a humorously degrading word which means "hag" or "old maid." Lucius's mockery of the old woman stems principally from her obedience and lack of agency. The housekeeper first appears in the accusative, the object of the harsh verb "compellant," which, though it literally means "chided" or "rebuked," has as its root the verb "pello," which means "beat," "push," or "drive out." Thus, Apuleius immediately presents her in a syntactically and semantically vulnerable position. She is also "bent with heavy aging" ("*curvatam gravi senio*") the passivity of the participle "curvatam" and the physical weakness implied by this image suggest a lack of agency. In the relative clause that follows, the old woman, "to whom alone the health and care of such a group seemed to have been relegated" ("*cui soli salus atque tutela tot numero commissa videbatur*") appears in an oblique case for the second time, the passivity of the participle "commissa" implying that she has had no choice as to whether or not to work for the thieves.

The band of thieves proceeds to insult the woman, calling her "you corpse of the tomb and dishonor to life and first and only annoyance to hell" ("*busti cadaver extremum et vitae dedecus primum et Orci fastidium solum*"⁵). Despite this abuse, the old woman's response is submissive. When she finally speaks for the first time, she does so as a "trembling at this and terrified, with a shrill voice, old woman"

⁴ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 4.7

⁵ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 4.7

(*"tremens ad haec et stridenti vocula pavida sic anus"*⁶). The word order in this sentence, with the submissive, frightened epithets "tremens" and "pavida" preceding the noun "anus," which refers to the old woman herself, suggests that, to Lucius, the old woman's submission overtakes her identity. The housekeeper's actual response is even more submissive: she addresses the thieves, "most brave and most faithful young men hosting me, an entire meal at hand of pleasant taste has been cooked, and copious bread and wine poured flowingly into polished goblets" (*"fortissimi fidelissimique mei hospitatores iuvenes adfatim cuncta suavi sapore percocta pulmenta praesto sunt, panis numerosus vinum probe calicibus ecfriticatis affluenter immisum"*⁷). The double superlatives and lavish praise which the old woman bestows upon her masters ironically contrasts their obviously rude and lawless character. Through the exaggeratedly lavish, regal character of this dinner for criminals, Lucius pokes fun at the old woman's subservience. Much to Lucius's contempt, the thieves' housekeeper seems to pander to the brutish and wicked men who have enslaved both her and Lucius.

Lucius, on the other hand, although his confidence is waning, continues to see himself as an openly defiant rebel against his captors. He has recently defecated on a group of villagers determined to beat him to death, relishing the graphic description of,

"my stomach, contracted, overflowing with those raw vegetables and filthy with a watery stream, dung having been cast out in a pipe-like manner, sent away some [of my attackers] with a spray of liquid from my rear, and others with the stench of the stinking fume from my now shaking haunches"

(*"aluus artata crudisque illis oleribus abundans et lubrico fluxu saucia fimo fistulatim excusso quosdam extremi liquoris aspergine, alios putore nidoris faetidi a meis iam quassis scapulis abegisset"*⁸).

Lucius, unlike the appeasing and submissive old woman, has performed an act of violent, overt contempt towards his attackers. He revels in this moment of agency and rebellion, coloring it with similes like "fistulatim," "in a pipe-like manner," and using vivid sensory images such as "faetidi," or

⁶ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 4.7

⁷ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 4.7

⁸ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 4.3

“stinking.” His body, contrasted with the old woman’s “bent” one, has an almost majestic role in his act of rebellion: Lucius mentions the active roles of specific body parts such as “aluus,” “stomach,” “extremi,” “rear,” and “scapulis,” “haunches” and describes them using prideful words such as “abundans,” meaning “overflowing” or “abundant.” Immediately following this scene, Lucius concocts a plan to escape from the thieves: he will pretend to be incapable of moving further until the band of men decides to leave him behind, thus setting him free. When describing this plan, Lucius refers to himself as “resolute” (“*obstinatus*”⁹), a word connoting bravery and defiance. He is proud of his subversive plan, which he sees as “such a good plan of mine” (“*tam bellum consilium meum*”¹⁰), foiled only by the randomness of “luck” (*sors*¹¹). Lucius’s idea that bad luck alone causes his failure implies confidence in his own power to deceive and defy his captors. Lucius glorifies his acts of defiance: his perception of himself as a brave rebel gives fuel to his mockery of the old woman’s submission.

Lucius’s clear sense of agency compared to the submissiveness of the housekeeper becomes particularly evident when he temporarily escapes from the thieves’ den, physically fighting her. This scene, in which Lucius graphically and almost enjoyably describes his defeat of the obedient old woman, symbolizes his perceived defeat of obedience itself. Lucius begins to recount the scene by describing the way he “with a push I broke the leather strap by which I was tied down and tore myself away with a four-legged run” (“*nisu lorum, quo fueram destinatus, abrumpo meque quadripedi cursu proripio*”¹²). Lucius emphasizes the glory of his act of rebellion, ending each clause with a violent verb and emphasizing the oppressive nature of the leather strap which he broke, reminding his readers that “I was tied down” (“*fueram destinatus*”) by said leather strap. However, when the old woman engages in combat with him, Lucius portrays her not as rebelling or attacking of her own initiative, but simply as working as a obedient cog within the system of the thieves. Lucius recounts that “and I, mindful of the

⁹ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 4.4

¹⁰ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 4.4

¹¹ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 4.4

¹² Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 6.27

fatal plan of the thieves [to kill me], was not moved by any pity, but, with kicks of my hind feet having been stricken against her, I immediately dashed her to the ground" (*"nec tamen ego, memor exitiabilis propositi latronum, pietate ulla commoveor, sed incussis in eam posteriorum pedum calcibus protinus adplodo terrae"*¹³). Lucius emphasizes that he does not pity the old woman because he is "mindful of the fatal plan of the thieves," implying that his shameless violence against her springs from the fact that he holds her accountable for the actions of the thieves.

Furthermore, Lucius uses language of submission when describing the old woman's attacks, suggesting that she has no initiative. The old woman grabs onto Lucius' reins "so that for some time she with her dragging followed me running away" (*"ut me procurrentem aliquantisper tractu sui sequeretur"*¹⁴). Lucius describes grasping onto him, a tactic that objectively could be perceived as tenacious and brave, as the dependent act of "follow[ing]" and emphasizes her lack of dignity through the word "dragging" (*tractu*). Thus, in physically attacking the old woman, Lucius perceives himself as squelching submission and obedience itself and proceeds to rebel by running away.

When Lucius's escape plan fails, his perception of himself as a rebel, which has set him apart from the submissive housewife, fades. Lucius' helplessness first arises when, aware that his rider, Charite, is unknowingly leading him into the hands of his captors, he cannot save himself. Unable to speak human language, "thus in my mind silently I remonstrated: 'what are you doing, unhappy girl? What are you enacting? Why are you hurrying to Hades? What are you trying to do with my feet?" (*"sic in animo meo tacitus expostulabam: 'quid facis, infelix puella? Quid agis? Cur festinas ad Orcum? Quid meis pedibus facere contendis?"*¹⁵). Lucius uses two modifiers, the prepositional phrase "in my mind" (*in animo meo*) and the adjective "silent" (*tacitus*) to emphasize his silence, and he places these two modifiers before the verb, his silence overtaking his remonstrating. Furthermore, the desperate,

¹³ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 6.27

¹⁴ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 6.27

¹⁵ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 6.29

repeated questions further emphasize Lucius's vulnerability. In this passage, Lucius's impotence contrasts and impedes his defiance: although he has the knowledge necessary to defy his captors and escape, his non-human status and inability to speak render him completely helpless.

When the band of thieves inevitably finds Lucius and Charite, they further crush Lucius's rebellion by mocking him for the first time. Upon seizing Lucius and Charite, "they greeted us with a spiteful laugh, and one out of the group called: 'in what direction with hurrying footsteps do you accomplish this path and not fear the ghosts and evil spirits of the stormy night?'" ("*risu maligno salutant, et unum e numero sic appellat: 'quorsum istam festinanti vestigio lucubrativam viam nec noctis intempestae Manes Larvasque formidatis?'*"¹⁶). The thieves' laughter and implication that Lucius would be childish enough to fear ghosts humiliate and degrade Lucius in a more personal way than the beatings he has received thus far, especially because Lucius's alleged fear directly contradicts his image of himself as a brave rebel. Lucius emphasizes the impression this mockery has made on him by placing the "spiteful laughter" ("*risu maligno*") in an emphatic position before the verb. Furthermore, the casual connotations of the joking and the quotidian verb "greeted" ("*salutant*") imply that the thieves do not see Lucius as a formidable opponent and do not perceive his rebellion attempt as a threat. Lucius's perception of himself as a rebel is crushed. As the thieves lead him back, Lucius recounts, "I became mindful again of the pain of my hoofs and I began to limp, with my head wavering" ("*reminiscor doloris ungulae et occipio nutanti capite claudicare*"¹⁷). As one of the thieves tells him, "you stagger and totter" ("*titubas et vaccillas*"¹⁸). Lucius's posture becomes submissive and vulnerable. The emphasis on words that signify "waver" and "totter," implying vacillation, contrast the resolute decision-making present in Lucius's fight scene against the old woman. Lucius's idea that he, unlike the old woman as he perceives her, is capable of rebellion vanishes.

¹⁶ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 6.29-30

¹⁷ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 6.30

¹⁸ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 6.30

When Lucius, Charite, and the band of thieves return to the lodging, they come upon an astonishing scene. As Lucius describes it, “and, lo, that old woman hung from a certain branch of a tall cypress wearing a noose. They tossed her, after immediately being taken down, attached to her noose, headfirst off a cliff, and, with the girl tied up in chains, they fell with spirits like wild animals upon the dinner that the unhappy old woman had prepared with a final diligence” (“*et ecce de quodam ramo procerae cupressus induta laqueum anus illa pendebat. quam quidem detractam protinus cum suo sibi funiculo devinctam dedere praecipitem puellaque statim distenta vinculis cenam, quam postuma diligentia praeparaverat infelix anicula, ferinis invadunt animis*”¹⁹). The old woman present in this scene is a far cry from the “drunken old hag” in previous scenes. Through her suicide, she morphs from a comedic character to a tragic character. Lucius is struck by the sight of the dead housekeeper, as indicated by the dramatic word “lo” (*ecce*) which draws the readers in and points to the importance of the passage. Paradoxically, though until this moment Lucius has always felt contempt towards the old woman’s obedience, he now has respect for her after she performs a twofold act of supreme obedience. Firstly, she commits suicide because she has not been able to fulfill her duty to the thieves. Strikingly, she even leaves a dinner for the thieves in a final act of subservience. For the first time, Lucius praises the old woman’s obedient character, referring to the very act of subservience for which he mocks her when he first meets her in Book IV, as “diligence” (*diligentia*). Why has Lucius’s attitude towards the old woman changed so drastically?

First of all, Lucius’s change in attitude towards the old woman directly follows his realization that he, like the old woman, is inescapably subservient to the band of thieves. He himself having submitted to the thieves, Lucius can no longer criticize the old woman’s subservience. In this passage, for the first time, Lucius draws parallels between himself and the old woman. The thieves toss the old woman’s body off of a cliff, an apparently commonplace act of cruelty of the thieves against their

¹⁹ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 6.30

property. When Lucius's fellow donkey becomes exhausted and refuses to budge any further, the thieves "threw him, having been drawn back a bit from the road, still breathing, through a very tall edge of an abyss into the neighboring valley" ("*paululum a via retractum per altissimum praeceps in vallem proximam etiam nunc spirantem praecipitant*"²⁰). When Lucius later slows down, one of the thieves declares, "I will immediately throw him headlong, about to be a most welcome morsel for vultures" ("*protinus eum vulturiis gratissimum pabulum futurum praecipitabo*"²¹). Lucius's vocabulary when describing the old woman's plunge off of a cliff overlaps heavily with the vocabulary in these two passages, with forms of either the verb "praecipito" or its corresponding adjective "praeceps" occurring at least once in each of the three passages, and the adverb "protinus" occurring in two of them. These similarities in vocabulary draw a connection between the old woman and the donkeys, implying that they share the same disposable status in the eyes of the thieves. The woman and the two donkeys are all also the accusative direct objects of the sentences in which they are either thrown off cliffs or threatened with this possibility: they are all passive objects of the thieves' actions. Thus, Lucius's sudden respect for the old woman stems partially from a new understanding of solidarity.

Furthermore, although the old woman has remained overtly very subservient to the band of thieves in ways which Lucius mocks, her outward submission ultimately contains elements of rebellion. Firstly, the old woman is the property of the band of thieves; by destroying herself, she destroys her captors' property. In dying, she ends a life of subservience, choosing extinction over the beatings and reproach she would inevitably receive for allowing Lucius to escape. The old woman's suicide and preparation of dinner also indirectly belittle her masters by turning them into the beings they claim to dominate: beasts with "spirits like wild animals" (*animis ferinis*). The old woman's actions, while outwardly serving her masters, indirectly insult them as well, causing them to act in a manner that invites a slight mockery from Lucius. Thus, the old woman demonstrates to Lucius that, though as slaves

²⁰ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 4.5

²¹ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 6.26

they cannot participate in overt, conspicuous forms of rebellion, they can turn their obedience into rebellion.

In the next chapter, although Lucius's rambunctiously rebellious character has been squelched, he does manage to escape from the thieves' grasp, using the tactic of the old woman: obedience. Lucius takes a passive role in this escape plan. He recounts, "and, by Hercules, he gave me the suspicion that he had mixed into the vessels a sort of soporific poison. For all of the men, every one of them, lay overcome by wine, all as if they were dead. Then with no pain, with the robbers having been hindered by crafty binds and constrained at his judgment, with the girl having been placed on my back, he led an escape to his homeland" (*"Et hercules suspicionem mihi fecit quasi soporiferum quoddam venenum cantharis immisceret illis. Cuncti denique, sed prorsus omnes vino sepulti iacebant, omnes pariter mortui. Tunc nullo negotio artissimis vinculis impeditis ac pro arbitrio suo constrictis illis, imposita dorso meo puella, dirigit gressum ad suam patriam"*²²). Lucius devotes the vast majority of this account to emphasizing Tlepolemus's accomplishments. Lucius himself has had almost no role in this story: he mentions himself only once, as an adjective in an oblique case tucked away within an ablative absolute and between the two far more grammatically important ablatives. He also only exists within this plan as "my back" (*dorso meo*): he does not refer to his identity or his character, but merely a body part. Lucius does not take an active role in the escape plan, but only when he obeys Tlepolemus and Charite, this escape plan succeeds. Much like the old woman, when Lucius is obedient, he manages to rebel against the band of thieves.

Throughout Apuleius's novel *The Golden Ass*, the protagonist Lucius undergoes an enormous physical change, morphing from human to donkey. This physical change spurs various psychological and emotional changes, one of which is reflected in Lucius's attitude towards his captors' housekeeper. When Lucius believes himself to be capable of defiance and rebellion, he mocks the old woman's

²² Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 7.12

subservience. However, once he understands that, as an ass, he cannot openly rebel against his powerful masters, he comes to recognize and respect the subtle elements of rebellion to be found in obedience. In fact, Lucius's only successful escape plan occurs when he obeys Tlepolemus and Charite. In learning to obey, a formerly self-aggrandizing Lucius learns the power of humility, a principle by which he will later live his life as a devotee to the goddess Isis.