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TWO MYSTICAL SIMILES OF APULEIUS AND ACHILLES TATIUS

This paper will analyze two similes in which the ancient novelists Apuleius and Achilles Tatius play with mythological and religious imagery for both humorous effect and dramatic foreshadowing. The combination of violence and religious fervor in the similes is reminiscent of flogging scenes in the frescoes at the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii and the mithraeum at Capua; but the comic context for the corresponding scenes in the novels suggests a non-cultic meaning for the similes. This paper will argue that the similes are designed to operate on at least three levels: one which represents the mythological background of Orphic, Dionysiac and possibly Isiac and Mithraic mystery cults; another which acts as a literary device to hint at future twists in the novels' plots; and a third which solicits laughter from the reader by the juxtaposition of tragic and comic, sacred and profane. The line of argument will support the statements made by Bartsch (*Decoding the Ancient Novel*, 1989, p. 177) and Beck ("Mystery Religions, Aretalogy and the Ancient Novel," 1996, p. 136) that the ancient novels are literary and artistic constructs rather than sacral constructs.

In *Metamorphoses* II.26 and *Leukippe and Kleitophon* V.23.6, a character describes being beaten without knowing the reason for his injury until after the fact. The first character is Thelyphron, the noseless and earless dinner guest of Byrrhaena, who uses mythological exempla to color his story: *sic in modum superbi iuvenis A[d]oni vel Musici vatis Piplei[is] laceratus atque discerptus proturbor* (I was cast out, tortured and mangled, like the arrogant Aonian youth Pentheus or the Muse-born bard of Pimpla, Orpheus). The second character is Kleitophon, the protagonist of Achilles Tatius' novel, who compares his experience to that of an initiand, "But I, like someone in a mystery ritual, knew nothing, neither who this person was nor why he was beating me". Both similes contain textual problems which will be reviewed briefly in the paper.

Anderson (*Eros Sophistes*, 1982, pp. 32, 77-78), Winkler (*Auctor and Actor*, 1985, pp. 111-113, 245) and Merkelbach (*Isis Regina - Zeus Sarapis*, 1995, pp. 383-384, 432) briefly discuss these passages with conclusions differing widely according to each of their interpretations of the novels as a whole: Anderson finds that the novelists' enjoy sardonic laughter at the expense of the characters; Winkler sees an astonishing lack of reflective irony in Thelyphron's narrative and a metaphor for the reader's awareness in Kleitophon's beating; Merkelbach contends that Osiris also undergoes the same type of torture as Pentheus and Orpheus and he interprets each character involved in the beating scenes as a figure from Egyptian myth.

In the first simile, Apuleius specifically calls up imagery from Dionysiac/Orphic myth and ritual with the dismemberment of Pentheus and Orpheus, producing a mystical resonance through the novel which culminates in Lucius' initiations into the mysteries of Isis and Osiris. But more nearsightedly, the simile foreshadows the dismemberment of Thelyphron, who is, after all, telling this part of the story. Like his mythological counterparts, Thelyphron realizes the reason for his pummeling too late – but he agrees with his attackers that he deserved even worse – and so, he is like an

initiate who experiences enlightenment after *pathos*. Unlike the beheaded Pentheus and Orpheus, Thelyphron survives the attack and later discovers that he has unwittingly lost his nose and ears to witches. Exaggeration of mythical proportions is not unique to Apuleius: Plautus invokes the name of Pentheus for a laugh at *Mercator* 469 and *Vidularia* 17b. The simile transforms a religious theme into a mock-tragic trick.

In the second simile, Achilles Tatius puts Kleitophon in a mystery-like situation of violence and bafflement to which the same mythological exempla used by Apuleius may be applied. But the mystery of this scene immediately leads to another: nowhere in any extant ancient novel is mystical language more concentrated than in the scene in which Kleitophon finally consummates his marriage to the accidentally bigamous Melite, whose first husband has just beaten and imprisoned him (V.25-27). The mystical simile prompts the repeated use of the variations of *mueo* and *mysterion*, which has a comic effect due to the incongruous nature of context and vocabulary. Aristophanes employs a similar device, linking illicit sex to mysteries, in *Acharnians* 747 and 764 with references to “mystical porkers.” The simile works as an example of Achilles Tatius’ artistic sophistication: the language cued by the simile extends for several pages, thus magnifying the joke.