

The Overwhelming Importance Of Community In Apuleius's The Golden Ass

by Michael Bryant

Reading Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* one might quickly conclude the work provides little evidences of insight, development, or substance. Apuleius often initially comes across as shallow and inconsistent providing an entertaining story for a disregarding audience. *The Golden Ass* seldom appears to offer a tale entirely devoid of sexual debacle, lowbrow humor, perverse double-entendre, or unseemly characters. However, these unrefined elements of fiction rarely fail to grasp the reader's attention. For instance, one might read entirely Vergil's accounts of hell and possibly purgatory never bothering to gloss over Beatrice's account of heaven in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Traditionally boorish literature has been discounted as having no literary merit or value, and even today there is a tendency to approach anything remotely brutish with the same attitude. While blatantly pornographic literature exudes a sort of arrant eroticism many works of literary fiction once considered such are salvaged as classics after censure several hundred years before. One wonders what separates trivial trash and literary genius, and often the answer lies within authorial intent and substance; if one may prove creative execution and substantial insight the vulgar nature of the text is deemed clever.

Asserting *The Golden Ass* dully lacks wit is much harder than proposing it lacks tact. Apuleius proves to have a knack for humor with his consistent use of double-entendre as well as Lucius's inability to repress certain biological needs while in ass form. The humor of these situations is furthered by Lucius's inability to express horror at his new leaky features with anything more than a boisterous bray. While these situations are jocular and arguably clever there is still little evidence of substance. However, amidst these accounts of frightened ejective flight and inopportune micturating is quite possibly the single most shocking, unconnected tale in the novel: *The Tale of the Bailiff*.

Although The Tale of the Bailiff may seem exceedingly brief, abruptly ending in the most terrifying manner, it still manages to encompass the entire theme of the work. Easily rejected as extraneous, possessing little more than shock value, the tale proves incredibly significant once analyzed. This ability of a singular tale marked by brevity to embody an entire work and also appear to be pointless speaks highly of Apuleius's capabilities not only as a narrator, but also as an author. The fact that The Tale of the Bailiff perfectly describes the purpose of The Golden Ass (an argument against curiositas and the unnatural) while passing under the reader's eye unnoticed arguably salvages any work no matter how vulgar or trite. If for nothing more than its structural genius The Golden Ass is still undeniably great literature.

In The Tale of the Bailiff a servant "entrusted by his master with full control of the estate," by means of breaching the precepts of marriage loses wife, child, and life. The bailiff's infidelity itself, the wife jumping into a well with baby in tow via rope, the ants slowly chewing the flesh from the bailiff, and the bailiff's bones left hanging from the tree intact are all apocalyptic in tone. Couple this with it contextually offered as a bedtime story and it instantly sticks out like a sore thumb in the entirety of the text. This highlighting proves the story's importance and after analyzing the three-paragraph anecdote the meaning becomes apparent.

Through the use of a semiotic square, placing the ants at the positive axis (S1), the bailiff on the opposing axis (S2), the master inversely relational to the bailiff (-S2), and Lucius placed conversely (-S1) to the ants one begins to see the relationship these characters all have to one another and consequently the pertinence of the report.

With the relationships of the characters involved in the text outlined the daunting task of teasing information from the text becomes simple. Throughout the story, the ants are the only characters that carry through with their intended purpose (killing the bailiff). The bailiff fails to oversee the estate without aggravation causing him to be disloyal, no matter how passively, to the master.

As a result the master covers his body with honey allowing ants in a rotten fig tree to devour him. Already the importance of the ants' loyalty to the master by carrying through with the execution of the man shines through. If the ants refused killing the bailiff he could free himself and kill the ants. Instantly the importance of loyalty to a master and intended purpose is illuminated.

While accusing the bailiff of disloyalty to the master is unreasonable, accusing the bailiff of treating his wife with disloyalty is obvious. Due to this infidelity the bailiff is killed, but more important than the infidelity is the nature of it. The bailiff marries "one of his fellow-servants," (178) and falls into "guilty intercourse with a free-woman of the outer world" (178). Interestingly a notion of community introduced by the use of the words "fellow-servant," and "outer world," appears as the otherness of the free-woman causes the familial unit to crumble leaving self-destruction and death. A second look at the introduction of the tale gives an initial description of the community in question. The estate the bailiff is entrusted to as an "extensive farming-property." The community is already being outlined in the first sentence in which we also realize that the master is agrarian. It is no mistake the community in question is horticulturally bound. Vegetation is subject to the waxing and waning of seasons yet remains alive through the sharing of a communal root system so that the proper nutrients may efficiently be attained.

This sense of community is further illustrated in that the master is "extremely annoyed," by the woman's death and strangely not the burning of the bailiff's financial record. Plainly the wife's servile station attributes her with monetary value to the master, but the wholly unmentioned burned account books prove that money is not the issue. Without the account books the master has no record of his expenses or any concept of the contextual worth of the woman, but remains angered solely by the death in the community. In fact, so angered is the master by the wife's death that he troubles himself to search out the "servant who had provoked his wife to such unseemly conduct," (178) and not only hold him publicly accountable to the offence, but also strip him, smear him with honey, and tie him to a tree left at the ants' disposal.

The severity, finality, and elaborateness of the bailiff's sentence prove how important the community is to the master. Interestingly the bailiff is not only tied to a fig tree, but also eaten by ants. The fig tree is often a symbol of growth and industry but the tree the bailiff tied to is rotten. This decay symbolizes the temporal nature of the bailiff's efficiency. After all, how did the bailiff have time to carry on an affair if we are to assume he was perpetually possessed by the endless work of a large farming community? And what was the bailiff doing outside of this community? Ironically, a community of ants housed in this decomposing symbol of industry devours the bailiff. This shows the impervious nature of community and its invulnerability to degradation.

The ability of the bailiff's infidelity to render the lasting state of community transitory speaks powerfully of the infidelity itself. However, the infidelity's power is derived from its execution rather than its nature. The opening of the vacuum-sealed community is what ultimately leads to the bailiff's death. Apparently not only the strength of the community, but its undisrupted autonomy is paramount to the success and longevity of community. In this tale the outer world encompasses a realm of uncertainty that is brought into the community by the bailiff's affair and results in the decay of social structure. Due to the inclusion of the outside world the ideals of *comitatus* crumble making way for the wife's suicide, death of the bailiff's child, the burning of account books, and the bailiff's death. Essentially it is the *curiositas* of the bailiff that causes this all to happen.

Arguably the bailiff never intends to destroy his life and community but the second sentence of the tale proves the bailiff's finite knowledge of such transgression. The intercourse with the outside world is described as guilty displaying the bailiff's understanding of effectual repercussions at least in his life. What follows is an emotional explosion of the wife causing social order to deflate.

With the importance of independence and industry in place the role of the master in

relation to the ants comes to light. While the ants work in a perfect community with no textual presented interdependence or even influence the master's community crumbles under breach. The ants dwell within the rotten trunk of a fig tree symbolic of destroyed industry managing to maintain their current state. This uninterrupted flow of social structure facilitated by perfect independence shows the master is capable of shaping his community in a likewise manner, but only at the cost of his own pleasure. The delegation of responsibility to the bailiff is most likely in response to the master's desire to be acquitted of the irksome responsibilities of farm life to attain the luxury of freedom. If the bailiff has "full control of the estate," (178) the master has the ability to live as he pleases. While the master is not disloyal his relationship to the man lay within his desire for escape from his estate and the responsibilities of management. Again *curiositas* causes all social stability to wane. Were the master present to manage the estate the bailiff would have no time for infidelity and all would go as planned.

Not only is community important but also the purity and exclusive nature of community as well. At this point Lucius may learn from the lesson presented deciding to heed his current masters ceasing to cause anyone linked to him any trouble. While pain and suffering is retribution for Lucius his masters are still subject to problems he may cause. There is no recompense for anyone in this tale simply because they deserve it or have not actively embarked upon the ill-fated path of *curiositas*.

The striking power of community conversely allows total ruin. Though no other character in *The Tale of the Bailiff* break from the perpetual maintenance of *comitatus* all peoples of the community are incapable of purging it of the iniquities brought in by outside influence. It is imperative that no outside forces be allowed to cross the line community and otherness lest it give way to chaos. A woman jumping into a well with a baby tied around her waist after having burned the contents of a master's storeroom shows the undiscerning nature of the chaos described. Marriage, family, finance, and life all cease to exist in this state of chaos bringing the entire society to halt and stripping it of all security.

While Lucius's *curiositas* does not explicitly create chaos it does implicitly allow chaotic chain reactions to take place. What starts as Lucius's curiosity about magic ends in the entire destruction of his host's home, and were Lucius to deny his *curiositas* in man form he could defend Milo's home from intruders. Even Lucius's presence in Milo's home based upon false recommendation breaks *xenia*, which arguably is the origin of community's dissolve. The baby tied around the waist of the bailiff's wife proves that chaos's chain reaction is unstoppable and cyclical. The baby is merciless to the self-destructive inner-entropy of the wife, which ultimately pulls the baby into abysmal death. Chaos seeks no root source squelched only by the entire destruction of an entire lineage or community as a whole. Essentially the man's *curiositas* detonates the emotional powder keg of a wife clearing the path of emotion to annihilate order.

In the entirety of *The Golden Ass* Lucius faces his limitations to extinguish chaotic cycle quickly and effortlessly. It is not until Isis, a deity, steps in to disrupt the flow on entropy that any order is restored to the diegetic world of the text. Even then the reader is left with tense insecurities in the divinely ordained order after Isis implements and controls the diegetic world for a brief moment. In fact, the reader awaits Lucius's ignorant *curiositas* to muddle things up again.

Interestingly the tale's dark end opens up the possibility of mortal absolution. The ants dwell within rotting plant matter and remain whole. It is not the ants' setting but their attitude that keeps their community in balance. Unlike the master or the bailiff they possess no *curiositas* imbruing their society with autonomy and life. More importantly the ants slowly "pincered out all [the bailiff's] flesh and entrails," (178) leaving nothing of the bailiff behind. This action not only symbolizes the slow progression and struggle to shield community from rupture, but also the importance of destroying any evidence of possible aperture. The white bones are necessarily left behind showing the power of industry to cleanse and purify radical causes of decay.

Lucius is clearly presented with necessary means to improve his condition, but lacks patience to slowly complete any refining process. In fact, Lucius does not

even recognize the need of deliverance past his physical state. The praise of the physical keeps him from learning from The Tale of the Bailiff and conclusively leads to constant ruin. The bailiff falls prey to physicality through coitus painting Lucius's painstakingly sought out cure blatantly outlined from the mouth of a fugitive slave.

Again the disorderly cycle left in the wake of devastated community flows out in concentric circles throughout the text. Servants fearing the loss of a master flee to certain death and self-imposed exile dragging Lucius along like the baby into the well. The entire cause and effect system of chaos brought about by curiositas and its antidote is clearly presented. However, not only Lucius but also nearly every other character in the work fall prey to the base appeal of curiositas, which consistently leads to their absolute insolvency.

The Tale of the Bailiff proves significant to the entire meaning of the text and comes at the climax of Lucius's exile and a minor turning point for his behavior in ass form. What appeared on the surface as horrific vulgar proved incredibly insightful and graceful. The ability of Apuleius to allow three paragraphs of sub-narrative to embody the theme of the text, as well as the profundity of the importance of community and xenia expressed, indicate a particularly deft, subtle, and genius creator. Apuleius's spinning of an epic tale as well as his capabilities of a narrator to weave the diegetic world of the text in and out of itself underscore his conscious structural intent and thematic awareness. No matter how vulgar, any text as complexly systematic as The Golden Ass may by no means be considered accidental or flimsily sensational.