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Apuleius and the Social Life of Outlaws

It has long been recognized that the world within which Apuleius situates his tale of Lucius' transformations reflects in important ways life realities of the second century Roman world. I wish to probe one of those realities: the social life of outlaws. I will show that it is indeed possible through the use of comparative material to retrieve a bandit's social perspective, despite the denial of this possibility by scholars (e.g., Brent Shaw, "The Bandits," in A. Giardina, *The Romans* [1993]).

To understand outlaws in the Roman world two obvious facts must first be kept in mind. First, the vast majority of the population was poor, by which I mean living a hand-to-mouth existence, and powerless. Second, the political and social power was held by an elite which was small in number but entrenched both through practical ability to enforce its will and by its traditional, ascriptional position. The dominant paradigm was one of submission to authority and the status quo. However, within this world existed an alternate reality. In a world which was heavily hierarchical and authoritarian, outlawry offered another paradigm. In Apuleius' account of Lucius' experience with bandits (esp. *Met.* 3.28-4.27; 6.25-7.13), this paradigm is given life.

One of the most thoroughly studied outlaw groups is pirates. In Marcus Rediker's path-breaking exploration of the hay-day of piracy in the Americas, 1716-1726, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, he draws out a complete and coherent picture of pirate society using first hand documents from the pirates themselves. The basic foundations of this society are two: an all-male population and social equality. There are no women in the pirate's immediate world; few, if any, were married, and women were not allowed aboard ships, except as hostages to be ransomed. All pirates are equal; all are bound by explicit agreement to cooperate and honor the rule of the majority; there is a very strong "consciousness of kind" among them. The social goal of pirates is a just order among themselves; they have become pirates because of the injustices of the world they have left. They establish this social order out of the reach of "normal" society. Further, every leader is elected (and can be deposed); all economic return is shared in a pre-determined and fair manner based upon individual contributions to the common goals; all decisions are arrived at by group consensus; solidarity is maintained with other pirates; their 'imagined community' includes a common flag.

Apuleius' bandits conform to an amazing degree to this picture. The male nature of the group is emphasized by their nakedness in relaxation and by their horseplay, uproarious songs, and smutty jokes when at ease. The only female active among Apuleius' bandits is the old crone, who is asexual; the other female is a hostage waiting to be ransomed. The bandits exist in a social equality which is evidenced by the use of lots to determine tasks, and the rotation among the men of such jobs as waiting tables. They are bound to the group with an oath which, among other things, involved promising to save a comrade in trouble, and they willingly die to protect each other. Decisions are made by consensus, including the election of a leader and the decisions about what place to raid. They share

booty. They are driven to outlawry by the injustices of the "inlaw" social order. Their own community lives beyond the pale of that society, in a cave.

Like Rediker's pirates, Apuleius' bandits live in egalitarianism and democracy, which stands in stark contrast to the structure of the mainstream social world. Although not all elements of either the pirates' or the bandits' life were readily exportable to that social world (I think of the gendered nature of the bands, in particular), in many ways these outlaws offer a (perhaps the only) alternative social structure in the Roman world, and so it is a powerful, radical critique of that world. While the "spin" put on this critique by the elites has deceived scholars into thinking it is a cultural illusion, Rediker's pirates give strong indication that it was a real critique in the eyes of the poor, oppressed, silent, and the bandits themselves.