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TERTULLIAN'S CHRISTIAN CHAMELEON

ABSTRACT

It is argued that Tertullian's relatively lengthy description of a chameleon in his De pallio *serves as a metaphor not so much for the convert to a philosophical way of life in general but for the convert to Christianity in particular. The argument rests on the unusual emphases within this description which recall different features of Christianity or popular beliefs about the same.*

Keywords: Tertullian; chameleon; mantle; philosophy; Christianity; conversion; apologetics

At the purely literal level, Tertullian (d.*c*.220) seems to have composed his work *De pallio* in order to defend his change of dress from the Roman toga to the Greek pallium.[1] At the metaphorical level, however, this work is really about the conversion to the philosophical way of life, since the pallium was the form of dress traditionally favoured by philosophers.[2] Furthermore, there is a surprise at the end of a work that had seemed to be entirely secular in nature until that point when Tertullian suddenly declares that the better philosophy is Christianity (*Pall*. 6.2). Hence this apparently secular work is revealed at the end to have been a defence not so much of a conversion to philosophy as of a conversion to Christianity.

As part of his argument in defence of his change of clothing, Tertullian argues that it is entirely natural to change one's appearance, and he points to the behaviour of five different creatures to prove his point (*Pall*. 3.1–3), the peacock whose glistening feathers change colours as it moves, the snake that sheds its skin with age, the hyena that changes gender from one year to the next, the stag that can rejuvenate itself, and the chameleon that can change its colour to match its surroundings. However, his description of the chameleon is long and elaborate (*Pall*. 3.3), longer even than the descriptions of the four other creatures taken together (*Pall*. 3.1–2), so that it becomes clear that he is not merely reinforcing the logic of his argument here, but is also pursuing some other literary aim. Accordingly, Leyerle has recently argued that this description 'operates simultaneously on two levels. Drawing on material collected by the natural historians, it paints a partial yet realistic picture of the small lizard. At the same time, it skews the description of these features to depict the philosopher.'[3] However, I wish to argue here that there is a third level also, and that the reader who reflects once more over

[1] For text, translation and commentary, see V. Hunink, *Tertullian De pallio: A Commentary* (Amsterdam, 2005); M. Turcan, *Tertullien. Le Manteau (De Pallio)* (*Sources Chrétiennes* 513) (Paris, 2007). More generally on Tertullian, see T.D. Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford, 1971). In what follows, I quote the Latin text from Turcan's edition.

[2] A.P. Urbano, 'Sizing up the philosopher's cloak: Christian verbal and visual representations of the *tribōn*', in K. Upson-Saia, C. Daniel-Hughes and A.J. Batten (edd.), *Dressing Judaeans and Christians in Antiquity* (Farnham, 2014), 175–94.

[3] B. Leyerle, 'Tertullian's chameleon', *JRS* 109 (2019), 275–89, at 276. In what follows, I quote her translation of Turcan's text.

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what he or she has just read following the final revelation that Tertullian is defending the conversion not to philosophy in general but to Christianity in particular will realize in hindsight that his description of a chameleon conceals a description not merely of a philosopher but of a Christian also.

In support of her argument that the description of a chameleon conceals the description of a philosopher, Leyerle focusses on two key elements within this passage. She focusses first on the description of the chameleon's movement (*Pall.* 3.3):

hebes, fessus, uix a terra suspendit, molitur incessum stupens et promouet; gradum magis demonstrat quam explicat.

Sluggish, tired, scarcely holding itself above the ground, it struggles to walk; dazed, it advances: it more gestures towards a step, than takes one.

Leyerle interprets the final part of this sentence describing the opposition between physical demonstration and verbal explanation as an allusion to Diogenes the Cynic, 'who once refuted the Eleatic assertion that there was no such thing as motion by simply getting up and walking away'.[4] However, the depiction of a slow, tired creature that can barely move also suggests old age. This is important because it points towards the proper interpretation of the immediately preceding sentence describing the eyes of the chameleon (*Pall.* 3.3):

itaque durum reflecti, sed circumspectum emissicii ocelli, immo luminis puncta uertiginant.

Turning in the opposite direction is thus difficult; but, in order to look around, its protruding little eyes—or rather pinpricks of light—spin dizzily.

As Leyerle and Hunink recognize, this sentence alludes to a line in a comedy by Plautus (*Aul*. 41), where the miser Euclio berates his old slave woman Staphyla by calling her *circumspectatrix cum oculis emissiciis*, 'a snooping woman with prying eyes', but neither can explain the significance of this allusion.[5] The implication of this allusion, I suggest, is that a chameleon is like an old woman, which interpretation is reinforced by the next revelation that it could barely move. But why imply that a chameleon is like an old woman? The answer to this may lie in the fact that old women were generally regarded as extremely superstitious and that non-Christians generally regarded Christianity at this point as a form of *superstitio*, the sort of religion that one might associate with an old woman.[6] Hence Tertullian humorously hints at the identity of the chameleon as a Christian by appealing to the common pagan denigration of Christianity as the sort of superstition one might expect of an old woman.

[4] Leyerle (n. 3), 280 following Turcan (n. 1), 125. On this incident, see Diog. Laert. 6.2.39.

[5] Leyerle (n. 3), 279; Hunink (n. 1), 151.

[6] On the concept of *anilis superstitio* 'the superstition of an old woman', see Cic. *Dom*. 105; *Nat. D*. 2.7, 3.92; *Div*. 1.7, 2.125. On negative stereotypes concerning old women more generally, see V. Rosivach, '*Anus*: some older women in Latin literature', *CW* 88 (1994), 107–17. On Christianity as *superstitio*, see L.F. Janssen, '*Superstitio* and the persecution of the Christians', *VChr* 33 (1979), 131–59. The fact that women do seem to have been more inclined than men to convert to Christianity probably encouraged the depiction of the chameleon as an old woman. See J. Bremmer, 'Why did early Christianity attract upper-class women?', in A.A.R. Bastiaensen, A. Hilhorst and C.H. Kneepkens (edd.), *Fructus centesimus: Mélanges offerts à Gerard J.M. Bartelink à l'occasion de son soixante-cinquième anniversaire* (Steenbrugge, 1989), 37–47.

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The second element to which Leyerle draws special attention is the description of the feeding habits of the chameleon that follows immediately upon the description of its movement (*Pall.* 3.3):

ieiunus scilicet semper et indefectus, oscitans uescitur, follicans ruminat, de uento cibus.

Always fasting, to be sure, and yet not exhausted; by yawning it feasts; by inflating itself it feeds: its food is from the wind.[7]

Leyerle draws attention to the fact that the poet Cercidas of Megalopolis refers to Diogenes the Cynic as αἰθεριβόσκας, which could be translated as 'fed on air', to detect a second allusion to him in the final claim that the chameleon takes its food from the wind.[8] However, one can also detect an allusion to Christianity once more. First, the claim that the chameleon was always fasting may allude to the fact that Christians engaged in regular fasting.[9] Indeed, Tertullian was a strong believer in the need for regular fasting as indicated by his composition of a work devoted to the defence of it, his *De ieiunio* 'On Fasting'. Second, the reference to the wind could also conceal an allusion to the third person in the Christian Trinity, the Holy Spirit, normally referred as τὸ Πνεῦμα in Greek, or as *Spiritus* in Latin, literally meaning 'wind' or 'breath of air' in either case.[10] This is relevant here because of the Christian belief that the Spirit sustained or nourished Christians. For example, Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons (d.*c*.200) specifically describes the Spirit as βρῶμα ζωῆς, or *esca uitae*, 'food of life'.[11]

It is arguable, therefore, that the two sentences describing both the movement and the feeding habits of the chameleon could be interpreted equally well in reference to a Christian as to a traditional philosopher in the manner of Diogenes the Cynic. But what about the rest of the description of the chameleon? Leyerle also detects a reference to a philosopher in the opening comment about the nature of the chameleon's name (*Pall.* 3.3):[12]

at cum offenderis apud uineam ferme et sub pampino totum, ridebis illico audaciam et Graeci iam nominis.

But if you come across one in a vineyard, almost completely hidden under a vine, you will immediately laugh at the audacity of its name, which is Greek moreover.

[7] This repeats the traditional Graeco-Roman misunderstanding of the feeding habits of the chameleon. See e.g. Ov. *Met.* 15.411; Plin. *HN* 8.122. In reality, the chameleon feeds on insects caught by the ballistic projection of the tongue.

[8] Leyerle (n. 3), 281. For this poem, see Diog. Laert. 6.76–7.

[9] Some Christians fasted twice a week, on Wednesdays and Fridays. See *Didache* 8.1. In general, see V. Grimm, *From Feasting to Fasting: The Evolution of a Sin. Attitudes to Food in Late Antiquity* (London, 2004).

[10] LSJ s.v. πνεῦμα; *OLD*^{2} s.v. *spiritus*. One notes that Tertullian never uses the term *uentus* to describe the spirit, preferring *spiritus* or *flatus* instead. However, the semantic overlap between these terms means that one evokes the others. Tertullian creates an analogy at *Adv. Marc.* 2.9.2–3 between breeze and wind (*aura*, *uentus*), on the one hand, and breath and spirit (*afflatus*, *spiritus*), on the other, so confirming the close association of the terms.

[11] *Aduersus haereses* 4.38.2. For a contemporary comparison of God the Father nourishing Christians with the Holy Spirit to a woman breastfeeding her child, see D. LaValle, 'Divine breastfeeding: milk, blood, and *pneuma* in Clement of Alexandria's *Paedagogus*', *JLA* 8 (2015), 322–36.

[12] Leyerle (n. 3), 282.

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As she highlights, the Latin term for a philosopher (*philosophus*) does indeed derive from the Greek term for philosophy (φιλοσοφία). However, the same is equally true of the Latin term for a Christian (*Christianus*), which ultimately derives from the Greek term meaning 'anointed' (χριστός). Furthermore, while the term φιλοσοφία is obviously grandiose in the sense that it literally means 'the love of wisdom', the term χριστός is equally grandiose in that it denotes someone who has been specially chosen. Therefore, the comment on the name of the chameleon, namely that it is both audacious and Greek, applies equally well also to a Christian as to a philosopher. Next, the claim that the reader will laugh at the name of the chameleon is obviously true in the case of this creature, whose name literally means 'lion-on-the-ground', and probably true if one considers that this passage refers at another level to Cynic philosophers in particular, since the name of their school of philosophy (Κυνικός) literally meant 'dog-like'. However, it may also have been intended as an allusion to the general contemporary contempt for Christianity that had often resulted in its active persecution.[13] Finally, there is another element here that further encourages the reader to detect a hidden allusion to a Christian rather than to a traditional philosopher.

Tertullian assumes that the reader or listener is more likely to stumble across a chameleon in a vineyard rather than in an olive grove or in another type of orchard or in any garden or field with the odd tree or two. But why does he assume this? Yes, the Mediterranean chameleon enjoys an arboreal habitat, but it is not restricted to vineyards. Leyerle does not attach any special significance to this emphasis upon the vineyard in particular as the proper habitat of the chameleon, but it is surely relevant that the Christian bible contains a great deal of imagery related to viticulture. Various texts in the Old Testament promote the identification of Israel as the vineyard of God, and the synoptic gospels attribute a parable to Christ whereby he identifies the whole world as the vineyard of God.[14] More importantly here, the evangelist Matthew (20:1–16) preserves another parable in which Christ compares his followers to labourers in a vineyard. Hence when Tertullian chooses to depict the chameleon in a vineyard, he may be alluding once more to a Christian in his or her guise as a labourer in the vineyard of God.

Before concluding, one should note that, while the implicit comparison of a Christian to a chameleon is humorous, and was deliberately intended as such, there is also a more serious side to this comparison. It makes two important points in its own subtle way. The first is that, like the chameleon, Christians were entirely harmless creatures that posed no threat whatsoever to any other group in society despite the strange rumours that sometimes circulated about them.[15] The second is that, like the chameleon, Christians were capable of blending into their surroundings, that is, of integrating within their surrounding society. A conversion to Christianity did not entail a rejection of the Roman civilization as a whole. In its own way, therefore, the comparison of a Christian

[13] See e.g. A.R. Birley, 'Persecutors and martyrs in Tertullian's Africa', in D.F. Clark, M.M. Roxan and J.J. Wilkes (edd.), *The Later Roman Empire Today: Papers Given in Honour of Professor John Mann* (London, 1993), 37–68.

[14] Psalm 80:9–17; Isaiah 5:1–7; Jeremiah 2:21, 12:10; Matthew 21:33–46; Mark 12:1–12; Luke 20:9–19.

[15] Rumours of Christian participation in ritual murder, cannibalism and incest seem to have been rife throughout the second and early third centuries A.D. See e.g. A. McGowan, 'Eating people: accusations of cannibalism against Christians in the second century', *JECS* 2 (1994), 413–42; B. Wagemakers, 'Incest, infanticide, and cannibalism: anti-Christian imputations in the Roman empire', *G&R* 57 (2010), 337–54.

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to a chameleon argues for the toleration of Christianity at a time when Christians faced the constant threat of persecution. Indeed, Tertullian may well refer to this threat in the conclusion to his description of the chameleon:

hoc soli chamaeleonti datum, quod uulgo dictum est, de corio suo ludere.

Only to the chameleon is it given—as the popular saying goes—to play with its own skin.

At the surface level, this sentence seems to conclude the immediately preceding description of how the chameleon is able to change the colour of its skin. However, the phrase *de corio suo ludere* can also mean, as in modern English too, 'to risk one's skin', that is, to risk one's life.[16] At a deeper level, therefore, Tertullian seems to be suggesting that the person symbolized by the chameleon risks his or her life. While this was not necessarily true of philosophers, it was true of Christians who risked execution not for anything that they had done but for the very name of being Christian.[17]

In conclusion, Tertullian performs the same trick in miniature in his description of the chameleon as he does within the work as a whole. Just as he pretends that his literal description of a change of clothing from the toga to the pallium in the work as a whole conceals an allusion to a conversion to philosophy, so too he pretends that his literal description of a chameleon in that section conceals an allusion to a philosopher. However, just as the apparent allusion to a conversion to philosophy really conceals an allusion to a conversion to Christianity instead, so the apparent allusion to a philosopher in the more general sense really conceals an allusion to a Christian instead. Hence the chameleon is a Christian or, rather, the Christian is a chameleon.

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[16] See Mart. 3.16.4–5. Hunink (n. 1), 153 favours the allusion to Martial rather than to other sources using similar phrases. Leyerle (n. 3), 280 n. 27 detects an allusion to the fact that the chameleon could endanger its life if it changed its skin to the wrong colour.
[17] Plin. *Ep*. 97.1–2; Tert. *Apol*. 8.2.

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