




August 2021

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Alexander Christensen

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Christensen, Alexander. "Mendacia in Minucius Felix: The Charged Rhetoric of a Latin Apologist." *Studia Antiqua* 20, no. 1 (2021): 9-22. <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studiaantiqua/vol20/iss1/2>

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MENDACIA IN MINUCIUS FELIX

THE CHARGED RHETORIC OF A LATIN APOLOGIST

ALEXANDER CHRISTENSEN

Alexander Christensen is earning a BA in English Language (Linguistics) with a minor in Classical Latin from Brigham Young University. He will be pursuing an MA and then a PhD in Classics after he graduates in April 2022.

Abstract: Most scholars agree that Minucius Felix's Latin Christian *Octavius* offers a sympathetic view toward Greco-Roman tradition. This consensus has been reached largely from work on the setting, date, and sources of the text, but no one has substantially investigated its rhetorical features and what they might reveal about Minucius's view of Greco-Roman tradition. This paper sets out to do this work. After pointing out why previous conclusions are unsatisfactory, I look at rhetorically charged words and phrases from the text and how they behave elsewhere in the corpus of Latin literature. When investigated, these expressions give a clearer picture of Minucius's rather negative view of Greco-Roman tradition. Such investigation is helpful for understanding Minucius in his historical context, but it also deepens our understanding of how the minority Christian culture attempted to define itself against an unmarked majority and develop a unique identity.

Marcus Minucius Felix probably wrote the *Octavius* either just before or just after Tertullian's *Apology*, near the end of the second century or in the beginning of the third.¹ The narrator of the story, Minucius, presents himself as a well-educated Roman lawyer, displaying his education through his conversance with classical literature. He and his two colleagues, Octavius and Caecilius, take a

1. It remains undecided whether Minucius wrote before Tertullian and the latter drew on the former, or whether Minucius wrote after Tertullian. The connection between the two has been clearly established either way. Cyprian is also thought to have been involved either as dependent on the *Octavius* or as source for it. Clarke asserts that Tertullian's *Ad Nationes* (c. 197 CE) was composed first, followed by the *Octavius*, followed by Cyprian's works (248 CE ff.). See G. W. Clarke, "The Historical Setting of the *Octavius* of Minucius Felix," in *Literature of the Early Church*, ed. Everett Ferguson, Studies in Early Christianity 2 (New York: Garland, 1993), 145–64, here 147–8. This conclusion has been generally followed by subsequent scholars.

vacation to Ostia, the bathing resort not far from Rome, where Minucius listens to the other two discuss religion and tradition by the waves of the Mediterranean. The text survives in only one manuscript, which was transcribed by “a very illiterate copyist” and rediscovered in 1543;² consequently, a large majority of the existing scholarship has had to do with editorial emendations.³

Octavius has most often been seen as an apologetic text. That is, Minucius presents the reader with his now-passed friend, Octavius, who defends Christianity against the Roman position laid out by Caecilius. However, it is important to remember that categories of genre are often more fluid than we want them to be. “Genre should not be seen as a mechanical recipe-book for the production of texts.”⁴ In other words, not all apologies are the same, and not all apologists have the same motivations or rhetorical strategies. Where one apology may address a ruler and plea for redress of wrongs,⁵ another might be written to a specific or general intellectual opponent of Christianity,⁶ and yet another might be written by Christians for Christians as a way of building community and structuring their own belief system.⁷ “Genre is thus best seen as a way of talking about the strategies of writers . . . in different cultural traditions.”⁸ Setting aside for a moment the question of motivation and rhetorical strategy, two distinct and more obvious elements distinguish *Octavius* (and by extension, Minucius’s motives) from most other

2. Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, trans. Gerald H. Rendall, LCL 250 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 304–439, here 313.

3. As Rendall put it, the *Octavius* text “has been a favourite playground for editorial corrections and emendations.” See Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, trans. Gerald H. Rendall, LCL 250 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 304–439, here 313. All translations of *Octavius* in this essay are from this Loeb translation unless otherwise noted. Translations of other Latin primary sources are done by the author. For further introduction to the text of *Octavius* and its setting, see the Introduction in G. W. Clarke, *The Octavius of Marcus Minucius Felix*, ACW 39 (New York: Newman, 1974), 5–48.

4. Mark Edwards et al., “Introduction: Apologetics in the Roman World,” in *Apologetics in the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews, and Christians*, eds. Mark Edwards, Martin Goodman, and Simon Price (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 1–14, here 2.

5. Aristides, *Apol.*; Justin, *1 Apol.* and *2 Apol.*; Melito, *Apol. to Marcus Aurelius*; and Athenagoras, *Legatio pro Christianis* all could fit into this category.

6. Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos*; Origen, *Contra Celsum*; and Tertullian, *Ad nationes* and *Apologeticus* all could fit into this category.

7. It is the contention of this paper that *Octavius* is such a text. In addition, some apologies from the above categories could also fit this description. In fact, it is not uncommon for scholars to assert that many apologies were intended as much, or more, for Christians as for non-Christians. For example, in his notes on Justin’s *First Apology*, Barnard writes, “No doubt, *1 Apol.* was also intended for Christian converts and would serve as a kind of shorter Bible. It is likely that apologies such as Justin’s were read more by Christians than by those to whom they were addressed.” *St. Justin Martyr: The First and Second Apologies*, trans. Leslie William Barnard, ACW 56 (New York: Newman, 1966), 45 nt. 223.

8. Edwards, et al., “Introduction,” 2.

Christian apologies. First, it is written in a classical structure. As Albrecht points out, referring not only to the structure but also to the style of *Octavius*, “Christian apologetic writing in a dignified literary form was something new, and it made its appearance in Latin literature first.”⁹ Second, many other early apologies are alike in that “each begins with the plea that it is unjust to persecute Christians, and proceeds to describe the beliefs of Christians in order to show their value”; however, “in Minucius Felix’s *Octavius*, neither of these things is done.”¹⁰ Instead, scholars have found that Minucius draws heavily on classical sources—Plato, Cicero, and other Greek and Roman authors—while his text “contains nothing about the Bible, the Trinity, or redemption, and hardly anything about Jesus himself.”¹¹ These two details—classical structure and style and Greco-Roman source material in place of Christian doctrine and sources—have led scholars to the conclusion that Minucius is attempting to reach, appease, and convert an educated Roman audience, “address[ing] only those issues of interest to a pagan readership”¹² while “avoid[ing] those matters which might be offensive to his pagan reader.”¹³ Thus, the broad

9. Michael von. Albrecht, “M. Minucius Felix as a Christian Humanist,” *Illinois Classical Studies* 12 (1987): 157–68, here 159. This might seem to be a curious comment, considering the fact that Justin had already used the classical form of the dialogue in his *Dialogue with Trypho*. I think Albrecht uses “apology” here to refer specifically to encounters with Greco-Roman culture, rather than encounters with Judaism. While Justin’s *Dialogue with Trypho* is in a classical structure, his *1 Apol.* and *2. Apol.* (addressed to Roman rulers) are somewhat formless. Additionally, as Clarke points out, the Latin west generally placed a higher emphasis on rhetorical and stylistic sophistication, whereas “in the East Christianity spoke and wrote in largely contemporary idiom.” While Greek apologists consistently traced their own conversions to their readings of the Bible, the Latin apologists and writers consistently expressed self-consciousness over the lack of sophistication in the Latin Bible. G. W. Clarke, “The Literary Setting of the *Octavius* of Minucius Felix,” in *Literature of the Early Church*, ed. Everett Ferguson, *Studies in Early Christianity* 2 (New York: Garland, 1993): 127–143, here 133–5. Drobner agrees with Albrecht in that there is something unique and special about the literary sophistication of *Octavius*: “*Octavius*, perfectly worked out rhetorically and stylistically to the last detail, presents perhaps the finest witness of early Christian apologetics by establishing Christianity exclusively on the basis of reason (neither citing the Bible nor mentioning the name of Christ) and by defending it against the untenable rumors about the crimes committed by Christians.” Hubertus R. Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church: A Comprehensive Introduction*, trans. Siegfried S. Schatzmann (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 165.

10. Francis Firth, “Octavius, an Apologia in Classical Style,” *The Canadian Catholic Review* 10 (1992): 34–36, here 34.

11. Firth, “Octavius,” 34. Obviously, Minucius Felix is not unique in using classical sources. Clement of Alexandria in his *Protrepticus* uses many more classical sources than Minucius does in *Octavius*. The important point here is that Minucius does not balance those classical sources with Christian sources, or even with much Christian doctrine.

12. Simon Price, “Latin Christian Apologetics: Minucius Felix, Tertullian, and Cyprian,” in *Apologetics in the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews, and Christians*, eds. Mark Edwards, Martin Goodman, and Simon Price (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 105–29, here 123.

13. Firth, “Octavius,” 34. See also, Albrecht, “Minucius Felix,” 159. He points out that the *Octavius* achieves status as a “classical” work of art, and, as he puts it, “Anyone who knows the

consensus of scholarship on the *Octavius* is that its author, like Justin Martyr and unlike Tertullian, Cyprian, and other Latin apologists, was attempting a synthesis of Christian and Roman tradition.

These conclusions are traceable, at least in Anglophone scholarship, to Clarke's important essay for Minucius studies, "The Literary Setting of the *Octavius* of Minucius Felix," in which Clarke first argued that Minucius was targeting educated pagan readers as his audience, and for this reason only mentions topics that would be of interest to them.¹⁴ In that essay, Clarke mentions, as a given premise, that "the tone of the *Octavius* is noticeably non-belligerent."¹⁵ Some version of this unproven premise is repeated again and again by subsequent scholars in making similar conclusions about Minucius's audience being educated Romans. For example, Rizzi argues that Minucius used the prologue of his dialogue to establish common ground between Christians and Romans, and then writes in passing, much as Clarke had, that "Likewise, the climate of particular *urbanitas*, cordiality, which emerges from the foreword (as, more generally, from the entire dialogue) has generally been noted."¹⁶ Similarly, Abad, in passing, describes its tone as "eirenic."¹⁷ Most scholars thus take it for granted that Minucius has a favorable tone and attitude toward Greco-Roman culture,¹⁸ despite the fact that the assertion of this favorable tone was never formally proven or explored in the first place. One of Clarke's more forceful assertions in this regard is the idea that Minucius's writing came early enough in Christianity that he could be respectful toward Roman tradition in a way impossible (or at least uncommon) for later Latin Christians. In a note on a passage analyzed later in this paper, he writes:

innate sensitivity of the Latin race in matters of language and their idolatry of formal perfection will understand that there were only very few educated Romans who voluntarily submitted themselves to the linguistic torture of reading the Bible in the raw Latin of Jerome's forerunners. It is obvious, consequently, that a book like the *Octavius* was in great demand *as a means for converting the educated*" (emphasis mine). Neither Firth nor Price (in the previous note) are original in these assertions. This strand of interpretation of Minucius goes all the way back to Clarke, "Literary Setting," 138.

14. See Clarke, "The Literary Setting," 137–8, for his concluding thoughts to this effect.

15. Clarke, "The Literary Setting," 135.

16. "Si è in genere rilevato, a questo proposito, il clima di particolare *urbanitas*, cordialità, che traspare dal proemio (come, pili in generale, dall'intero dialogo)." Marco Rizzi, "Amicitia e veritas: il prologo dell'*Octavius* di Minucio Felice," *Aevum Antiquum* 3 (1990): 245–68, here 251. The translation of the Italian is mine.

17. John Abad, "The Octavius of Minucius Felix: Apologetics and Dialogue," *Academia.edu*, 4, https://www.academia.edu/9636318/The_Octavius_of_Minucius_Felix_Apologetics_and_Dialogue.

18. Another example is Wiesen, who takes Clarke's argument for granted and uses it as his starting point that Minucius is attempting to speak to educated Romans: "*Addressing his work to a cultivated, pagan, Roman audience*, Minucius, it will be argued, employs Virgil as a proof-text" (emphasis mine). David S. Wiesen, "Virgil, Minucius Felix and the Bible," *Hermes* 99 (1971): 70–91, here 72.

To attack the fables of antiquity was an accepted procedure. But to attack the value of tradition generally was less in favor, and accordingly (unlike many other Apologists in their attacks on traditional errors) Minucius Felix carefully invokes the testimony of pagan philosophical tradition itself for this refutation of the “ignorant generations of the past” . . . the retention of respect for the past is typical of the general attitude of the *Octavius*.¹⁹

It is of note that, in this statement about tone and attitude, Clarke still only references Minucius’s choice of sources, rather than his word choice or rhetoric, which are probably better measures of tone. This paper explores the problems of this common approach to the tone of the *Octavius*, and then focuses on understanding Minucius’s attitude towards Greco-Roman tradition, not through analyses of structure, content, or source material, but through philological analysis. After all, attitude is established more through how an author deploys certain words than through how he or she handles structure, selects content, or draws on sources. Minucius’s rather negative view of Greco-Roman tradition emerges more clearly in philological analysis than it has in previous studies of other features of the text.

STRUCTURE

As mentioned above, Minucius’s organization of his text in a classical dialogue draws most scholars toward seeing the text as sympathetic with philosophical tradition and Greco-Roman tradition in general.²⁰ The style of debate harkens to Cicero’s dialogues, well known in the Roman world, and Plato’s dialogues before him.²¹ However, viewing this cultural appropriation as *cultural appreciation* is a misunderstanding of the classical structure. The classical structure is itself defined by a dichotomy of “their position” vs. “our position,” the two debaters fundamentally at odds with one another—unless one should be converted by the other.

In the tradition of dialogue that Minucius draws on, such conversion is extremely rare. As Jonathan Powell points out, “In the majority of Cicero’s extant dialogues, although it is usual to imply that the arguments on one side are stronger than those on the other, the integrity of the interlocutors’ positions is generally

19. Clarke, *Octavius*, 273. Clarke refers here to Minucius’s phrase, *antiquitas imperitorum*, at *Octavius*, 20.3.

20. An additional (and especially respected) source to those we have already mentioned in this vein is Clarke, “Literary Setting,” 138. He asserts that Minucius “will discuss only those aspects which are also of current interest for his pagan audience, which are also in the Roman philosophical tradition. And he wants to show a Christian can deal with them in an elegant and refined way, with scholarly dignity and grace. Christians are true philosophers.”

21. It is widely accepted by scholars that Minucius Felix’s *Octavius* is in fact closely based on the structure and content of Cicero’s dialogue *De natura deorum*. For an introduction to the use of classical dialogues by early Christians, see Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church*, 82–83.

respected and conversion is a rare event.”²² Yet Minucius’s dialogue ends with the conversion of Caecilius and the “impartial” arbiter (Minucius himself) rejoices at the triumph of Octavius. This points to an important qualifier on Minucius’s use of tradition: while he is tapping into the classical and philosophical traditions for his structure, he is (1) using the structure to set Greco-Roman tradition up against Christianity, the two as opposing forces, and (2) using the structure in a different way than previously used, emphasizing discussion *as a means for conversion* instead of discussion for discussion’s sake.

Furthermore, as Powell hints in the above quote, it is hard to see Minucius’s construction of the two arguments as fair-minded. In his essay on the subject, Powell investigates Minucius’s lack of fairness toward the Roman position on the rhetorical level by comparing the text to Cicero’s techniques in *Hortensius*. In this and one or two other dialogues, Cicero gives an impression of impartiality, but actually maintains strong bias for one side of the argument, instead of a fair representation of both sides as is usually the case in the genre. Powell concludes that the classical style and structure of the *Octavius* has been largely misread. While conceding that they may work towards an appeal “to a presumed audience of pagan *litterati* . . . these literary techniques are also a way of giving an impression of fairness and impartiality in philosophical debate which, when one examines the actual positions . . . turns out to be quite unjustified.”²³ This lack of fairness pointed out by Powell begins to overturn the conclusion made by so many scholars that Minucius’s use of a classical dialogue is itself evidence of his appreciation and respect for Roman tradition. In fact, an author’s use of structure or form does not necessarily determine that author’s views toward his or her subject matter. For example, only a couple centuries prior to Minucius’s composition, the Roman poet Lucretius could follow Livius and other Latin poets in appropriating the Homeric structure of epic poetry, even as the content of Lucretius’s poem repudiated many of the stories of the gods put forth by Homer and other users of the structure. An author’s views and attitudes are communicated through words and rhetoric more than through structure.

A CHRISTIAN TEXT, OR A ROMAN ONE?

As mentioned in the introduction, another claim supports the idea that Minucius maintains a “respectful” or “eirenic” tone toward Roman tradition: he does not avail himself of the exposition of Christian doctrine in his defense of

22. Jonathan G. F. Powell, “Unfair to Caecilius?: Ciceronian dialogue techniques in Minucius Felix,” in *Severan Culture*, eds. Simon C. R. Swain, Stephen J. Harrison, and J. Elsner (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 177–89, here 182.

23. Powell, “Unfair to Caecilius,” 180.

Christianity but instead continuously references Greco-Roman tradition. Setting aside for a moment the same problem of *non sequitur* that was seen in the discussion of structure, these claims themselves are not without their problems.

But Victor Santacruz in his analysis of the text finds more theology than most scholars. After conceding the lack of explicit mention of Christian elements—like biblical texts, Christ, or the Holy Ghost—he points out that Minucius still does seem to have a theological project focusing on two emerging elements in Christianity that would become increasingly important: truth and grace.²⁴ Truth is mentioned throughout the text, referring to a lack of it in Caecilius and Roman tradition generally and an abundance of it in Octavius and Christianity. Santacruz argues that Minucius’s use of the philosophical tradition is channeled into this message about truth: “The link that [Minucius] establishes between Christianity and truth is the reason for which he has made sure, more than anything, that the dialogue takes a philosophical pathway.”²⁵ Additionally, grace, or the need of the Christian for God’s help, forms part of what Santacruz calls Minucius’s “implicit” theology: “There is no doubt that one can recognize in it [the text] an implicit theology of grace, or, more precisely, the profound conviction that the Christian has a need for God’s help.”²⁶ Furthermore, Octavius’s speech begins with a lengthy discussion of the existence and character of the single true God of Christianity and ends with a discussion of the Christian apocalypse and resurrection.²⁷ In other words, while the text may lack specific reference to Christian doctrine compared to other early Christian texts, it is not devoid of Christianity, no more so than Tertullian’s or Cyprian’s apologetic writings, neither of which could be claimed to be respectful or appreciative of Roman tradition. It is in reference to *all three* of these writers that Price makes the observation that “in all these works there is little on the Bible, little Christology, nothing about the Holy Spirit or the emerging doctrine of the Trinity; little on the Redemption (only Judgement); nothing about the Church, its ministry, sacraments, and other practices.”²⁸ With these consid-

24. Victor Sanz Santacruz, “Filosofía y Teología En El Octavius de Minucio Félix,” *ScrTh* 31 (1999): 345–65. Subsequent translations of this article are mine. The original Spanish will appear in the footnotes.

25. “El vínculo que establece entre el cristianismo y la verdad es la razón de que haya buscado por encima de todo que el diálogo discurra por derroteros filosóficos.” Santacruz, “Filosofía y Teología,” 358.

26. “No cabe duda de que se puede reconocer en él [the text] una teología implícita de la gracia, o, más exactamente, el profundo convencimiento de que el cristiano tiene necesidad de la ayuda de Dios.” Santacruz, “Filosofía y Teología,” 363–4.

27. For Minucius’s discussion of God, see *Octavius* 17–19, 32; for his discussion of apocalypse and resurrection, see *Octavius* 34–35.

28. Price, “Latin Christian Apologetics,” 123.

erations in mind, Minucius's levels of interaction with Christian doctrine and Greco-Roman philosophy in the text do not seem altogether out of place.

But even if they were, choice of sources or content—like choice of structure—are a poor indication of an author's attitude or tone toward a set of ideas. A useful comparison can perhaps be made with other early Christian texts. No scholar would deny the presence of anti-Judaism in many early Christian texts.²⁹ Yet these early Christian writers quoted the translation of the Hebrew Bible available to them extensively throughout their writings. Could Clarke's argument about Minucius then also be applied to the author of the *Epistle of Barnabas*? Could we conclude that the author "carefully invokes the testimony of [Hebrew prophetic] tradition itself" in order to refute his predecessors, and thus, "the retention of respect for the past is typical of the general attitude of the [*Epistle of Barnabas*]?"³⁰ Not necessarily. And likewise, a better measurement of tone is needed to properly determine Minucius's attitude toward Roman tradition.

MENDACIUM ET FABULAS

In the second half of the text, when Octavius responds to Caecilius, he presents the Roman position as flawed in strong language.³¹ Earlier scholars, like Rendall in his introduction to the Loeb edition, have seen this freedom to attack paganism, along with the somewhat weak arguments and subsequent conversion of Caecilius, as representing "current Paganism in its impotent decline."³² Though "paganism" was probably not actually in an "impotent decline" by the beginning of the third century, as Powell points out, the description is certainly true of Minucius's *presentation* of the situation.³³ Another possibility presents itself. One would assume that if the use of philosophical dialogue and the presence or absence of Christian doctrine in the text are insufficient for determining Minucius's tone, then the words Minucius uses at rhetorically charged moments might shed more light on his actual feelings about Roman tradition. Instead of investigating structure, content, and sources to try to determine something definite about his views of Greco-Roman tradition, one must turn to Minucius's words themselves and their rhetorical habitats.

29. *Epistle of Barnabas* and Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* are but two examples of early Christian texts with overt anti-Judaic sentiments.

30. Clarke, *Octavius*, 273.

31. In section 20 alone, he uses words like *mendacia*, *aniles fabulas*, *inperitus* ("lies," "old wives' tales," "ignorant"), and others to describe Roman belief and tradition, the first two of which we analyze further, below.

32. Rendall, Introduction to *Octavius*, 305–7.

33. Powell, "Unfair to Caecilius," 188.

For this purpose, we turn to Octavius's speech as presented by Minucius. After pointing out the need to discover the divine and asserting the natural evidences of God's existence (Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 16–18), he surveys important philosophers from Greek and Roman antiquity in order to show that they all agreed on one point: monotheism (*Octavius* 19). At this point in the argument, we might expect the author to assert the universality of truth, to survey pieces of Greek and Roman tradition, and then to assert that these were the very same truths believed in by Christianity. For example, in his *First Apology*, Justin emphasizes common ground with Greek tradition in order to show that those who follow Christ (consciously or not) have always been persecuted:

We have been taught that Christ is the First-born of God, and we have suggested above that He is the logos of whom every race of men and women were partakers. And they who lived with the logos are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists; as, among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus, and people like them.³⁴

As Octavius puts it, “One might suppose, either that Christians of today are philosophers, or that philosophers of old were already Christians” (*Octavius* 20.1). Out of context, this sounds in line with Justin's argument and favorable toward Greco-Roman tradition. Indeed, Albrecht and many other scholars have taken this sentence *out of context*. Albrecht notes, “Minucius explicitly states that the terms ‘Christians’ and ‘philosophers’ are equivalent . . . in the spirit of Justin or Athenagoras,” and calls Minucius's rhetorical move an “alliance with philosophy.”³⁵

This analysis overstates the assertion of equivalence and ignores the adversative *quod si* immediately following the statement (*Octavius* 20.2). Minucius *explicitly* calls such an agreement with philosophy an error (*ad errorem mutui consensus*; *Octavius* 20.2). Rather than Abad's typical statement that “Minucius Felix's familiarity with various philosophical schools and using them to defend Christianity show that the author subscribes to the continuity between Christianity and classical tradition rather than mutual opposition,”³⁶ a close look at his use of language shows that Octavius allows neither for Christians to be seen as philosophers, nor for philosophers of old to be thought of as Christian. As mentioned, his generic statement in chiasmic form is followed by the adversative *quod si*. Together with a second generic statement in chiasm at 20.4, this section is marked off as

34. Justin, *1 Apol.*, 46. *St. Justin Martyr: The First and Second Apologies*, trans. Leslie William Barnard, ACW 56 (New York: Newman, 1966), 55.

35. Albrecht, “Minucius Felix,” 166.

36. Abad, “The Octavius,” 4.

a pivotal rhetorical moment.³⁷ It is within this *inclusio* framed by chiasms that Octavius begins to speak of Greco-Roman tradition in earnest and does so less than favorably. Here, he refers to Greco-Roman tradition as *mendacia* (20.3) and *aniles fabulas* (20.4).

Mendacium has a simpler semantic range than *fabula*. It is the common word in Latin for “lie,” sharing a root with the common verb *mentior*, “to lie,” and the adjective for “deceitful,” *mendax*, from which comes the modern English “mendacious.” When Caesar uses it in his *De Bello Gallico*, it refers to the simple lie that Litavicus tells his 10,000 soldiers—namely that the Romans had slaughtered two of their nobles for no reason and with no chance of pleading their case. In reality, these two men were still alive and cooperating with Caesar (Caesar, *De Bello Gallico* 7.38.10). Likewise, Plautus uses the word in *Mercator*, in this case to refer to the lie a son tells his father—that he had purchased a certain slave woman as a maid for his mother, when in fact she was his mistress (Plautus, *Mercator* 1.2.209). Cicero in his *Epistulae ad Familiares* refers to a bunch of lies (*quibus mendaciis*) that were spread about his interference in the distribution of money to ambassadors, which he corrects by telling what actually happened (Cicero, *Epistulae ad Familiares* 3.10.7.1). In these examples and others, the sense and usage of *mendacium* is the same: it is used to refer to simple untruths occurring more or less in day-to-day life. The translation of the word in *Octavius* as “fictions” or even “falsehoods” seems to blunt some of the force of what is being said.³⁸ Minucius, in saying that *maioribus enim nostris tam facilis in mendaciis fides fuit* (“our ancestors were so ready to believe in *mendaciis*”; *Octavius* 20.3), describes the stories of Greco-Roman tradition not as a fiction—which might include the sense of a figurative description of reality *that is truthful*—but as a lie. Contrary to Clarke’s words, this is clearly an “attack” on

37. Additionally, the first chiasm invokes Plato’s Republic: “Either the philosophers of the past were kings or present-day kings are philosophers”; and the second invokes Cicero: *si enim esset factitatum, non esset desitum*. See Clarke, *The Octavius*, 272, 274. Interestingly, Abad and Albrecht are both willing to suggest ties between the *Octavius* and Justin Martyr. If Justin is another source for Minucius, the first of these two chiasms could be parodying Justin’s statement already quoted above.

38. “Fictions” is from the Loeb and “Falsehood” is from the Roberts-Donaldson translation. <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/octavius.html>. The entry for *mendacium* in the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* lists two senses: (1) “a false statement, falsehood, lie” and (2) “a false impression or appearance, illusion, counterfeit.” The Loeb “fictions” does not fit well with either sense. “Falsehood” is of course listed as a possibility in sense (1), but I argue that even this obscures some of the force of *mendacium* simply because “falsehood” is nearly an archaism in present-day English. A quick search of the word in the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA) shows that use of “falsehood” in 2000 had decreased by 98% since 1810. <https://www.english-corpora.org/coha/>.

“the value of tradition generally.”³⁹ On the other hand, the better Latin equivalent to “fiction,” *fabula*, is regularly used by Latin authors to describe the tradition.

When Sallust uses *fabula*, he does so in a neutral way. In Book 4 of his *Histories*, he describes a protruding rock in Sicily which the inhabitants have given the name “Scylla,” and thus, Sallust writes, *monstruosam speciem fabulae illi dederunt* (“they gave to that thing the monstrous appearance of the story”; Sallust, *Historiae* 4, 18* 27M, 23Mc, 21D, 36K). Sallust, in his use of *fabula*, questions neither the truth nor the value of the story referenced. Cicero at least once uses the same word in a context of doubting veracity: *nolite enim id putare accidere posse quod in fabulis saepe videtis fieri* (“do not wish even to think that what you see happen often in plays can happen”; Cicero, *Oratio in Haruspicum* 28.62). Here Cicero is urging the senate to pay attention to the omens and prodigies recently given to them through earthquakes, and not to wait for a messenger from the gods, as occurs in mythological stories. While he is doubting one aspect of the plays—that of trusting the prognostications of divine messengers—the term *fabula* itself does not carry any prosodic commentary of value. Further, it is not used to refer to the entirety of Roman tradition.

Later in the Roman period, Quintilian, in his well-known textbook on rhetoric, uses the word *fabula* in conjunction with *anilis*, as Minucius does; this example is particularly important for reconstructing how Minucius charges his words with meaning. Quintilian discusses the usefulness of continuous reading for a teacher of rhetoric, specifically so they are able to explain any historical allusions in any given text that is being studied with a pupil. But, he cautions, it is important when doing this to stay within the bounds of the well-received or traditional (*receptas*) or that which is remembered by good authorities (*claris auctoribus memoratas*) and to not delve into everything ever written by unknown and rejected writers. One who forces themselves to read such things might as well also apply their work to old wives’ tales (*anilibus fabulis*; Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 1.8.18–20). Still closer to the date of our text, Apuleius in his *Apologia* uses *aniles fabulas* in like manner (Apuleius, *Apologia* 25.5–6). In his novel *The Golden Ass*, a character (an old woman) uses the phrase to refer to the story of Cupid and Psyche that she is about to narrate (Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 4.27.27). Since the story of Cupid and Psyche is such a well-known story today, this final example might seem contradictory; however, the story is not attested anywhere in the Roman tradition besides Apuleius’s work, so it seems that he may have been doing just the kind of work Quintilian cautioned against—digging around in what might be called “noncanonical” stories.

39. Clarke, *The Octavius*, 273.

It is clear that when these authors use this phrase, they are not referring to the entirety of Roman tradition, the stories surrounding the gods of the Roman Pantheon, or any of the well-known stories found in Ovid, Vergil, or others. Instead, they use *aniles fabulas* more as we might use “old wives’ tales,” to refer to the obscure and kooky stories on the periphery of culture and tradition. They do not use the phrase to refer to the myths that make up the foundation of their culture, even if they believe them to be untrue. This is an important distinction because Minucius, in a way apparently unprecedented (or at least uncommon), *does* use the phrase exactly in this latter fashion, to refer to the foundational myths of Greco-Roman tradition.

Quid illas aniles fabulas, de hominibus aves et feras? (“Why recall old wives’ tales of human beings changed into birds and beasts”; *Octavius* 20.4). This sentence in *Octavius* comes just before the second of the two generic chiasmic statements mentioned above. It must be due to Minucius’s masterful use of rhetoric that scholars have generally failed to recognize Minucius’s unfairness to the Roman position, as pointed out by Powell, and likewise to recognize the full force of this phrase, as with *mendacia* above.⁴⁰ Based on other authors’ usage of *aniles fabulas*, it is difficult to cast the passage as respectful. When Minucius refers to the stories in Ovid and elsewhere as *aniles fabulas*, he is taking a new semantic step in the application and extension of the phrase. As Clarke points out above, he does make careful rhetorical moves in citing the tradition itself to attack the tradition, but it does not follow that he is being altogether respectful of tradition, or that he is not also attacking “the value of tradition generally” through his diction and tone. Based on the evidence, his reference to antiquity as *aniles fabulas* is comparable to someone in antebellum America calling the biblical stories at the basis of Christianity “old wives’ tales”—while one might not believe the stories, the severest skeptic would still be considered rude to refer to fundamental cultural stories with the phrase. Likewise with Minucius. He deliberately uses a phrase that has previously referred to outlandish and obscure stories on the periphery of tradition to refer to the central and foundational stories of the *antiquitas inperitorum*. This goes against the assertion that “the general attitude of the *Octavius*” is one of “respect for the past.”⁴¹

40. Powell points precisely to this as the reason for misunderstanding Minucius. Why have scholars missed this? “Perhaps because Minucius seems such a nice man that he could not possibly do anything dishonest in presenting his opponent’s case; perhaps because a Christian scholar might be unwilling to attribute such a tactic to a fellow Christian. But the niceness, I have suggested, is deliberate *captatio benevolentiae*, an illusion of fairness (and a successful one, to judge from some modern readers’ reactions). There is no reason to assume that Minucius has any interest whatever in genuinely giving the pagans a fair hearing.” Powell, “Unfair to Caecilius,” 181.

41. Clarke, *Octavius*, 273.

As with the examination of *mendacium*, understanding the philological nuance of the phrase also sheds new light on the construal of the sentence. Lacking a main verb, translators generally supply one: Rendall maintains the interrogative form but renders it, “Why recall old wives’ tales of human beings changed into birds and beasts,”⁴² while Clarke translates the passage somewhat more light-heartedly, “Let us not forget those old wives’ tales of men transformed into birds and beasts.”⁴³ Given Minucius’s earlier use of *mendacium* and this use of *aniles fabulas*, and since it is commonplace in Latin to leave out the existential *esse*, it may be that Minucius is asking a more forceful question: “Why *are there* old wives’ tales of human beings changed into birds and beasts,” or “Why do these old wives’ tales *exist* in the first place?” Minucius is conversant with tradition and knows how to use its techniques effectively, but in light of his use of *mendacium* and *aniles fabulas*, it would be difficult to go so far as to say that he is respectful of the past.

CONCLUSION

Papias (c. 60–c. 130 CE) lived just a few generations before Minucius Felix. Those fragments that survive of his work, *Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord*, seem to show the work to be a historical (rather than theological or scriptural) approach to the Christian tradition.⁴⁴ Papias thus represents the growing need felt by Christians in the second and third centuries to historicize Christianity. In light of the evidence presented in this paper, Minucius’s text could be considered a complimentary effort begun by him and Tertullian and carried on by virtually every subsequent Latin apologist to *de*-historicize or delegitimize Greco-Roman tradition. Rendall, in his introduction to the Loeb series, points out that Minucius was writing at a time when apologists were no longer pleading for hearing; instead, they could be on the offensive, and “the attack on divine origins [of paganism] is carried into the field of history.”⁴⁵ Minucius shows us one method by which that attack was carried out, and he does this so well that modern readers have tended to miss the fact that he is attacking at all. The tone is anything but non-belligerent. He is not being peaceful; he is using Roman oratory as his weapon. Besides the fact that Minucius’s perceived lack of normalcy for apologetics has been challenged by

42. Rendall, *Octavius*, 371–373.

43. Clarke, *Octavius*, 86.

44. Drobner quotes Vielhauer as writing, “Apparently the book . . . was intended to examine the authenticity of the Jesus tradition and to ensure its correct understanding.” Drobner, *Father of the Church*, 55. Not much can be established with certainty regarding Papias since so few fragments of his work remain, but the fragments that are extant do tend to focus on what Papias regarded as eye-witness accounts of the establishment of Christianity and the apostolic tradition, as if Papias was trying to establish the legitimacy of the tradition.

45. Rendall, Introduction to *Octavius*, 310.

scholars as surveyed in this paper, considering Price's assertion that "there was not . . . a clear genre of apologetic," it should not be a surprise that many aspects of the *Octavius* differ from what seems normal for Christian apologetics.⁴⁶ According to the considerations of this paper, it may be appropriate to see the *Octavius* as less of an apologetic in the style of plea or defense, and more of an in-group boast in the style of "anything they can do, we can do better."

46. Price, "Latin Christian Apologetics," 113.