

## LUCIAN'S MOCKERY IN CONTEXT

KUIN (I.N.I.) *Lucian's Laughing Gods. Religion, Philosophy, and Popular Culture in the Roman East*. Pp. x + 293. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2023. Cased, US\$80. ISBN: 978-0-472-13334-5. doi:10.1017/S0009840X24001318

K.'s monograph, building on her Ph.D. dissertation written at New York University, analyses a selection of works by the second-century CE Greek author Lucian of Samosata. K.'s stated goals are to highlight Lucian's prioritisation of live performance over literary dissemination (p. 3), to demonstrate that neither Lucian nor his audience would have perceived his works as being impious, as assumed by later commentators and scholars (p. 4), and to depict Lucian's overt challenge to dominant contemporary philosophical theologies, providing 'anti-hierarchical messages that undermine self-serving elite moralizing' connected to imperial ideology and, in the process, appealing to the socio-economically underprivileged (p. 4). For example, K. demonstrates that Lucian repeatedly challenges the phenomenon of elites justifying their success as divine favour through portrayals of unjust and incompetent gods (p. 22).

K.'s study is 'driven by an interest in how Lucian challenges his contemporaries' assumptions about the gods that underpin their interactions with them' (p. 6). These concerns are interconnected: K. repeatedly and convincingly demonstrates how live performance to a diverse audience informs new interpretations regarding Lucian's works that convey philosophically challenging messages to the relevant non-elite portion of his audience. In emphasising Lucian's engagement with contemporary issues, K. productively redirects the scholarly discussion away from opaque topics such as Lucian's biography or personal beliefs.

K. further contextualises contemporary socio-religious concerns as portrayed in Lucian's literary predecessors. To that end, K. provides an extensive bibliography with references that ensure readers can effectively pursue unfamiliar concepts, duly providing and detailing competing sides in meaningful scholarly debates. This is particularly useful, since K. productively compares Lucian's engagement with philosophical and religious issues with a myriad of ancient authors, most prominently: Homer, Aristophanes, Plato, Aelius Aristides, Apuleius, Dio Chrysostom, Diogenes of Oenoanda, Maximus of Tyre and Plutarch.

The works of Lucian K. repeatedly examines in this study are *Assembly of the Gods*, *Dialogues of the Gods*, *Icaromenippus*, *Tragic Zeus* and *Zeus Refuted*, with the following works studied prominently within individual chapters: (3): *On Sacrifices*, *Prometheus*; (4): *On the Syrian Goddess*, *True Histories*; (5): *Double Indictment*, *Saturnalia*; (6): *Alexander or the False Prophet*, *Dialogues of the Dead*, *Lover of Lies*, *Menippus* and *Peregrinus*. K. consciously includes works that are set in both divine and human contexts (p. 22).

K. uses the first two chapters to establish her methodology, which the subsequent four chapters apply along distinct thematic categories. Chapter 1 has two objectives. First, K. demonstrates how ancient and medieval interpretations of Lucian influenced much of the modern scholarly discussion, such as reducing Lucian to an atheist satirist of religion. K. demonstrates that such early interpretations have led to a lingering division between studies on Lucian's authorial voice from those on his religious depictions (pp. 31–2), which K. seeks to unite. The second part of the chapter examines the role of performance in Lucian's works, with K. concluding that they were likely composed for live (likely solo) performance prior to literary dissemination. Building on

A. Bellinger's *Lucian's Dramatic Technique* (1928), K.'s evidence includes excessive speaker-signposting and dialogue, which suggests a form of literary production geared towards performance. K. further notes that Lucian refers to himself as a performer, and she concludes that, hence, the onus is rather on finding evidence disproving live performance (p. 42). The chapter concludes by evaluating the evidence for Lucian's audiences, finding that Lucian likely performed his works to a large (hundreds to thousands) audience of diverse backgrounds, including many presumed illiterate (p. 52). K.'s first chapter is ultimately compelling and sets the stage for subsequent analysis depending on these initial interpretations. Chapter 2 examines the long literary tradition from Homer through Lucian's contemporaries in order to refute the notion that Lucian's mockery would seem desecralising or harmful to the gods or even offensive in general (p. 53). K. further demonstrates that, while Lucian frequently targets comically the gods' anthropomorphism, his target is rather the imperial philosophies dependant on certain representations of the gods (pp. 86–7).

Chapters 3–6 analyse Lucian's works through their respective themes: Chapters 3 and 5 explore Lucian's depiction of the gods' hunger and political activities, such as having assemblies and law courts, respectively, both drawn-out ramifications of the gods' anthropomorphism. Chapter 4 explores Lucian's mockery of a contemporary pattern called 'new conjugality', a sudden strong interest in marriage and rejection of extra-marital sex found in Second Sophistic literature (p. 115), developed by M. Foucault and revived by S. Swain (p. 120). Chapter 6 explores magic and its practitioners as they appear in Lucian, depicted through what K. calls an 'aesthetics of excess'. K. demonstrates how Lucian's works reveal elite predilection for such behaviour despite their overt rejection of magic as base superstition.

K.'s strongest piece of analysis across her thematic chapters comes from Chapter 4 in her examination of how Lucian's *On the Syrian Goddess* mocks the contemporary mentality of conjugality. *On the Syrian Goddess* is one of Lucian's most elusive works, to the extent that many scholars have rejected its attribution to Lucian for centuries. J.L. Lightfoot's *Lucian: On the Syrian Goddess* (2003) prominently rehabilitated Lucianic authorship, and K.'s study both justifies Lightfoot's conclusions as well as answers many of Lightfoot's remaining questions. K. brilliantly demonstrates how the otherwise enigmatic Herodotean tour-guide of Hierapolis subversively wages a battle of authority between Hera, the goddess of marriage, and Aphrodite, representing extra-marital relations, in which the latter is decisively victorious (p. 150). For example, the narrator ends a list of potential origin stories for the temple of Syrian Atargatis, whom the narrator approximates as the Greek goddess Hera, deciding that Dionysus was responsible for its foundation. The narrator's proof is an inscription from Dionysus to Hera, explicitly addressed as stepmother, dedicating to her impossibly large phallic statues situated in front of the temple. K. interprets this passage as a 'stinging joke' against conjugality by emphasising Dionysus' birth out of wedlock, rendering his temple foundation double-edged. Rather than an honour, it undermines the power of the institution of marriage that Hera oversees (p. 148). This example – in conjunction with additional anecdotes throughout Lucian's dialogue that depict lust repeatedly conquering marriage or that portray the followers of Hera attempting to worship her in ways that prevent their own marriages (p. 151) – denotes Aphrodite as the winner in the unspoken contest with Hera, defeating conjugality. K.'s analysis reveals the throughline that renders coherent a series of seemingly disparate anecdotes regarding Hierapolis, whose otherwise ostensible lack of humour or satire has utterly baffled scholars. K. thus rehabilitates the dialogue's humour as well as Lucian's authorship whilst demonstrating Lucian's engagement with contemporary religious and social issues.

K.'s monograph is thus a well-organised and compelling study that isolates across Lucian's works a series of issues and themes relevant to his contemporaries. K.'s analysis successfully highlights the importance of relating Lucian's comic dialogues to such issues, which would have resonated with his socio-economically diverse audiences through his performances. During a flourishing era of scholarship on Lucian K. has found novel approaches that open significant avenues for continued study. K. invites further research into the largely unexplored ramifications of the live performance of Lucian's dialogues to an audience not merely comprised of the highly educated elite. While K.'s clear prose and organisation render the book accessible to a general audience without Greek literacy, her thorough analysis of how Lucian engages contemporary authors and issues renders the monograph essential for scholars of Lucian and useful to scholars of the Second Sophistic, or those who are interested in the reception of earlier authors, particularly Aristophanes and Plato.

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