

Muses, Madness, and Magnets: Plato's Idea of Poetic Inspiration in Lucian

The notion that poets are divinely inspired has an important place in Greek literature, but manifestations of this notion in the imperial period have been understudied (cf., for Lucian specifically, the very brief remarks by Bompaire 1958, 125, and Pernot 1993, 633). Plato made a lasting mark on ancient views about inspiration by depicting poets as divine lunatics and positing that inspiration is mutually incompatible with artistic skill (Tigerstedt 1969). This paper shows how Lucian of Samosata reimagined Plato's idea of poetic inspiration, employing it both to cast humorous light on the ancient poets and to portray himself as a divinely-inspired orator.

After briefly explaining Plato's idea of poetic inspiration, I will examine three texts in which Lucian variously redeploys this idea for his own literary and oratorical purposes. First, I will show how Lucian adopts Plato's conception of the "mad poet" in his comic dialogue *A Conversation with Hesiod*. Here, Hesiod argues that he should not be blamed for oversights in his poetry, since it is really the Muses who are responsible for it. Kuhn-Treichel (2020, 416) has accurately observed that both Lucian's *Hesiod* and Plato's *Ion* center around a poetic expert whose ignorance is exposed. I expand on this observation by pointing out further connections between the two texts and showing how Lucian's imposition of the Platonic idea of inspiration onto Hesiod both elicits humor and demonstrates Lucian's *paideia*.

Second, I explore Lucian's introductory speech *Bacchus* to show how Lucian humorously represents himself as a divinely-inspired orator. This *prolalia* ends with an amusing description of how certain old men in India drink from a sacred stream, which causes them to get possessed by Silenus and madly declaim excellent speeches. Building on Bracht Branham's analysis of the first half of the *prolalia*, I argue that Lucian continues his "technique of estrangement" (Branham

1985, 241-2) in this second half by placing familiar Greek tropes pertaining to poetic inspiration (e.g., Helicon's three streams, and the river-side setting of Plato's *Phaedrus*) in a foreign setting. Moreover, I show how Lucian applies these tropes to oratorical inspiration, highlight his debt to Plato in portraying the eloquent old men as inspired but insane, and consider the implications of his tongue-in-cheek claim that Silenus (not he) is responsible for the speech he is about to give.

Third, I examine another Lucianic *prolalia*, *Heracles*, to show another angle of his portrayal of divinely-inspired oratory. Here, Lucian describes a strange painting he saw in Gaul of an elderly Heracles who drags a crowd behind him with a beautiful chain connected to his tongue and their ears. This image—as a Celt explains to Lucian—represents the power of oratory. Scholars have long debated whether the painting was real (Benoit 1952) or made up by Lucian (Caster 1937, 362), but this debate often obscures the more important question of how and why Lucian describes the painting as he does. I propose a new reading of the *prolalia* by pointing out a previously unnoticed intertextual link with Plato's magnet analogy in the *Ion*. Both descriptions involve an audience enraptured by the divine power of the *logos* (poetry/oratory), which is represented by a chain connected to a Heracleian figure (cf. Plato's name for the magnet, "Heracleian stone," *Ion* 533d). This intertextual link, I argue, provides the impetus for Lucian's depiction of the painting: he is appropriating an image of poetic inspiration in order to depict the quasi-divine power of oratory. This remarkable adoption and adaptation of Plato's idea of poetic inspiration, as in the other passages I discuss, sheds new light on the nature of Lucian's mimetic play and oratorical self-depiction. Overall, my analysis contributes both to Lucianic studies and, more broadly, to scholarship on the literary reception of Plato in antiquity (Hunter 2012).

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