

Lightning and the Deaths of Charlatans in Lucian

Lightning is significantly involved in the deaths of two famous charlatans from Lucian's corpus. In *Alexander or the False Prophet*, Lucian subverts the literary *topos* of famous cultural figures being struck by lightning to satirize not only Alexander's 'actual' death by leg infection, but also the ideal death which Alexander is purported to have desired for himself: to live to the age of 150 and die being struck by lightning. As Von Der Osten (2013) has shown, Lucian exploits the trope of famous thinkers' longevity to undermine Alexander's own hope for a long life. Building on this, I contend that Lucian adds Alexander's desired death by lightning for a similar rhetorical purpose, to expose Alexander's naïveté and fraudulence as a religious expert. Lucian achieves this by having Alexander invert the theme of famous cultural figures prodigiously *surviving* lightning strikes. That Lucian intentionally portrays Alexander as misinformed in his expertise about lightning is corroborated by another similar work of his, *The Passing of Peregrinus*. The *Peregrinus* depicts Peregrinus' disciple Theagnes as defending his teacher's choice to be burned alive by comparing his death to Heracles' (immolation). Theagnes additionally likens these fiery deaths to those of Asclepius and Dionysus, whom he asserts died by lightning strikes. However, Theagnes *incorrectly* compares these deaths to that of Peregrinus: it was Dionysus' mother Semele, not Dionysus, who died being struck by lightning, and Asclepius did not die of his own free will like Peregrinus, but as a punishment by Zeus (Spickermann 2013; Pind. *Ol.* 2.25-26, Eu. *Alc.* 1-6, 126-129).

The literary record shows that surviving a lightning strike is clearly a favorable portent, whereas dying by a lightning strike is negative. Plutarch reports that the mother of Alexander the Great (who serves as a foil for the prophet Alexander) survived her womb being struck by

lightning on the night before consummating her marriage (Plin. *Vit. Alex.* 2). Similarly, Thecla in *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* is unharmed after being struck by lightning during her self-baptism (AP 4.9.1). Lastly, Philostratus writes that the famed rhetorician Scopelian survived a lightning strike as a child, despite his brother and those nearby perishing (Scopelian, Phil. *VS* 515-516). Given these positive accounts of survival, the desire of Alexander to *die* by lightning reveals his misguided sensationalism as a fraudulent religious expert. Lucian similarly undermines Peregrinus when Theagnes incorrectly interprets the lightning ‘deaths’ of Dionysus and Asclepius to validate Peregrinus’ own fiery end. In fact, dying by a lightning strike is largely found to be a negative portent in ancient literary sources to the point that it was forbidden to move or provide a funeral for the remains of individuals killed by lightning (Hillard 1996). Historical figures such as Tullus Hostilius (Plin. *NH* 2.140), Pompeius Strabo (Plut. *Vit. Pomp.* 1), as well as the child of the Vestal Marcia and the *decurio* of Pompeii Marcus Herennius (both related to the Catilinian conspiracy, Plin. *NH* 2.137) all died by lightning, which later authors interpret as a form of divine punishment or as portending negative historical events.

The above literary accounts of individuals struck by lightning therefore confirm how Lucian inverts this trope to sabotage the charlatans in his texts. Lucian intentionally has his characters in both the *Alexander* and *Peregrinus* misconstrue lightning portents to expose their lack of authority as religious experts, rendering their attempts at fame and recognition as ironic and laughable in the eyes of educated readers.

Works Cited

- Barrier, Jeremy W. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla: A Critical Introduction and Commentary*.
Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009.
- Eshleman, Kendra. *The Social World of Intellectuals in the Roman Empire: Sophists,
Philosophers, and Christians*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Gordon, Richard L. "Individuality, Selfhood, and Power in the Second Century: The Mystagogue
as a Mediator of Religious Options." In *Religious Dimensions of the Self in the Second
Century CE*, edited by Jörg Rüpke and Greg Woolf, 146-172. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck,
2013.
- Hillard, T. W. "Death by Lightning, Pompeius Strabo and the People." *Rheinisches Museum Für
Philologie* 139, no. 2 (1996): 135–45. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41234220>.
- Spickermann, Wolfgang. "Philosophical Standards and Individual Life Style: Lucian's
Peregrinus / Proteus : Charlatan and Hero." In *Religious Dimensions of the Self in the
Second Century CE*, edited by Jörg Rüpke and Greg Woolf, 175–91. Studien Und Texte
Zu Antike Und Christentum. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013.
- Von Der Osten, Dorothee Elm. "*Habitus Corporis*: Age Topoi in Lucian's *Alexander or the False
Prophet* and *The Apology* of Apuleius." In *Religious Dimensions of the Self in the Second
Century CE*, edited by Jörg Rüpke and Greg Woolf, 192-217. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck,
2013.
- Wendt, Heidi. *At the Temple Gates: The Religion of Freelance Experts in the Roman Empire*.
New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.