

The Politics of Lucian's Fifth *Dialogue of the Courtesans* in the Fight for Gay and Sexual Liberation

Lucian's *Dial. meret. 5* describes a hetaira's (Leaina's) sexual encounter with two women, Demonassa and Megilla. During the encounter Megilla removes a wig and declares himself a man by the name of Megillos. Leaina and Megillos then discuss what it means to be a man. Most readings of *Dial meret. 5* focus their readings of the text on sexuality—either reading *Dial. 5* as historical sexual practices between women (e.g., Haley's "pomosexuality"; Davidson's "'modern style' lesbians"; Bissa's claim that the text is "about female same sex desire"; and Carla-Uhink's "two butch women", or pushing back against reading these characters' practices as reflections of reality (Boehringer 2014, 2015; Gilhuly). This focus on homosexuality has largely removed discussions of gender and gender identity from the text.

Yet, Lucian's world was full of examples of women becoming men (e.g., Hippocrates *Ep.* VI 8.32; Diod. Sic. 32.10–12; Pliny, *N.H.* 7.32–36; Phlegon's *Mirabilia* (FGrHist II 257 f36)) and the conception of gender and identity was far more fluid. This paper argues that there is a clear reason why readings of Dialogue 5 have centered on homosexuality and sexual practices. By tracing the history of translation and publication of *The Dialogues of the Courtesans*, I observe how the text came to serve a political purpose as a cultural object centered on sexual (and later gay) liberation.

After a brief survey of translations of Dialogue 5 in the 17th–early 19th century, I turn to the latter half of the 19th century and the translations of Luigi Settembrini (1861) and Pierre Louÿs (1894). Both translators falsely claimed to have "discovered" ancient texts which featured homosexuality and sexual liberation, Settembrini's *I neoplatonici* and Louÿs' *Les Chansons de*

Bilitis. By reading these texts against their respective translations, we can easily observe how these translations support their larger agenda, gay and sexual liberation respectively.

Louÿs' translation, in particular, became immensely popular with translations of Pierre Louÿs' French translation of Lucian's Greek produced in Spanish, English, and German. Louÿs' translation also inspired others to produce translations of this text which called for gay liberation. A.L. Hillman's (1928) American translation clearly relies on the work of Louÿs and explicitly calls for gay liberation in its preface. With reprints of Louÿs' work constantly appearing throughout the early 20th century, the next major English translation is that of Lionel Casson (1962) published in a brief selection of Lucian's work. Casson's translation follows the assumptions created by Louÿs' and Hillman's translation treating Megillos as a butch lesbian. Casson's translation directly influences and is utilized in recent scholarship (e.g., Haley 2002) bringing us full circle.

When trying to find new readings of Dialogue 5 and open the trans potentiality of the text, it is necessary to understand the weight this dialogue has as a cultural object. Dialogue 5 has represented the modern turn towards sexual liberation for more than 150 years. Without recognizing its importance in *this* sphere, it becomes difficult to write other histories, particularly trans histories, of this text.

Works Cited

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