

A Courtesan's Lesson in Philosophic Heroism

In this paper, I will examine how Lucian's *Dialogues of the Courtesans* 13 parodies Plato's interpretation of Achilles' heroism in the *Crito*. Plato's own disparaging treatment of Homer's portrayal of Achilles is well established (Hobbs 2000). Scholars have also discussed Lucian's allusions to Plato and Homer as a recurring theme in a number of the *Dialogues* (Gilhuly 2007, Norman 2024). These studies have offered valuable insights into Lucian's sophisticated attitude towards the struggles of the courtesans in general. My examination will focus in particular on Lucian's parody of Plato and Homer in *Dialogue* 13.

Lucian's presentation of Leontichos as an accomplished war hero is rich with Homeric imagery, and his argument over glory with the courtesan, Hymnis, is interwoven with Platonic motifs. Plato's *Crito* has been considered a reflection of the embassy to Achilles repurposed to demonstrate that while both Socrates and Achilles refuse to bend to outside influence, Socrates does so in the interest of virtue alone, and is therefore superior to Achilles whose Homeric heroism aims only at glory (Arieti 2023: 98). I argue that, based on Socrates' counterdefinition of Homer's hero, Lucian reverses traditional expectations by giving Hymnis the superior values of a philosophic hero, while Leontichos exaggerates the shortcomings of Achilles that Plato criticizes.

I begin by examining how Lucian compares Leontichos' defeat of the satrap of Paphlagonia to feats of Homeric heroes: Agamemnon, like Leontichos, is wounded by Coon but then kills and decapitates him (*Il.* 11.251ff.); Peneleos kills Ilioneus and decapitates him, then puts the head on the tip of his spear like a trophy, just as Leontichos does (*Il.* 14.496–500). Yet although Leontichos explicitly likens himself to Achilles (Τίτι δὲ ἄλλω ἢ Ἀχιλλεῖ *Dial. Meret.* 13.3), he is described wearing a πέλιτη—a shield not only different from, but inferior to Achilles'

god-made shield. These examples establish Leontichos as something of an anti-hero because rather than seeking the true values of philosophic heroism, he strives only to fill in the empty shell of Achilles' Homeric heroism, and fails to attain even that.

Instead of Leontichos becoming the philosophic hero, it is Hymnis. Like Socrates in the *Crito*, she embodies superior heroism by staying true to her convictions. She is revolted at Leontichos' actions and abides by her own standards despite his offer to double her pay (*Dial. Meret.* 13.4). Conversely, Leontichos' subsequent attempts to erase his presumed heroics in the interest of maintaining his relationship with Hymnis is precisely the opposite of the constancy with which Plato presents Socrates and even Achilles as heroes (Arieti 2023: 88). As Leontichos sinks further into the position of the anti-hero, Hymnis proves herself the ideal, philosophic hero, all the more capable for her rejection of Leontichos' unheroic actions.

The heart of this *Dialogue's* comedy lies in the mockery of Leontichos' failure to emulate even the simple, glory-based heroism of Achilles that Hymnis, like Socrates, so effortlessly surpasses by rejecting material rewards (Arieti 2023: 99). Through this juxtaposition of heroic ideals, Lucian recasts Socrates' idealized virtue from Plato's *Crito*, but in the persona of a courtesan. With this novel approach, Lucian elevates Hymnis' status as a heroic, philosophical courtesan whose admirable behavior exemplifies true virtue.

Bibliography

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