

Lucian of Samosata: φιλοψευδής or ἀπιστῶν?: The Dissolution of the Aristotelian
Concept of Credibility in the Literary Text

The title and the idea of this paper was inspired by the title of a dialogue of Lucian of Samosata: Φιλοψευδεῖς ἢ ἀπιστῶν. In this dialogue, Tichiades, usually considered the *alter ego* of Lucian himself, deals with a group of friends that try to convince him of the truthfulness of the fantastic stories that they enjoy telling and listening to. Tichiades – and by extension Lucian – appears to be the one that is incredulous, ἀπιστῶν, as opposed to a chorus of lovers of lies, φιλοψευδεῖς. He condemns the use of lies, wondering why mankind is inclined to believe so many patently invented stories. However, in the *True History*, Lucian shows a completely different attitude towards deception: he is proud of creating fantastic and impossible stories, proud of his ‘varied falsehoods’ (ψεύσματα ποικίλα), that offer amusement and entertainment to the literary man used to more challenging readings. In this paper, I argue not only that the incredulous Lucian of the *Philopseudeis* is totally compatible with the Lucian that enjoys writing incredible stories, but that he does so precisely because he is an incredulous man.

First of all, I analyze the structure of the *Philopseudeis*. The scholarship generally considers it an anthology of fantastic stories (Aguirre Castro 2000, Möllendorff 2006), a collection of traditional tales (Ogden 2007) whose interest for us lies in their literary antecedents (Bompaire 1958, Anderson 1976), or a satyric work about popular beliefs (Stramaglia 1999). Actually, the main focus of the dialogue appears to be the incredulity of Tichiades: the incredulous man is considered a fool that refuses to believe in what is evident to everyone else (*Philops.* 3). All the fantastic stories are in fact told as if they were perfectly true, and the narrators use all the possible rhetorical techniques to make the text seem true.

This characteristic of the narration that appears to be the real object of Lucian's satyr is a literary tendency that we can find in many different literary genres: writers of

paradoxography, travel and utopian novels, imitated the techniques that are typical of historiography. Their aim was to make their text seem true, because, since the *Poetics* of Aristotle, the most important value of a literary work was considered to be credibility. In the *Poetics*, the concept of credibility seems even to prevail upon the concept of verisimilitude, because “a believable impossibility is preferable to an unbelievable possibility” (*Po.* 1461B11).

In the introduction to his *True History* (*VH* I.1-4), Lucian strongly condemns this conception of literature. While, according to Aristotle, the historian writes all that actually happened and the poet writes what could happen (*Po.* 1451B5), Lucian is going to describe things that not only never happened, but also could never happen. He warns his readers that his stories are only lies, and nobody should believe in them (*VH* I.4).

It is no accident that the only writer Lucian seems to admire in his *True History* is Aristophanes, defined as “a wise and truthful man whose writings are distrusted without reason” (*VH* I.29). Although part of the scholarship considers this sentence to be simply ironic, I think (with Georgiadou and Larmour 1998) that Lucian is referring here to the fantastic and obviously incredible features of the Aristophanic comedy, features that his author did not try to hide behind an appearance of truth: like Lucian, Aristophanes’ truthfulness resides in his *not* pretending that all his fantastic stories are true. Just like the *True History*, Aristophanic comedy doesn't meet the Aristotelian criterion of credibility.

Precisely because he is an incredulous man, Lucian tried to fight not only all the intellectual and philosophical mystifications of his time, but also the literary ones, according to which a text is valuable only as long as it is true, or at least credible as if it was true. Following the example of Aristophanes, he champions a method of literary valuation that permit literature to differ from reality (to be, in this sense, a “lie”), and to be appreciated precisely for this reason.

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