

## Historical (In)consistencies: Lucian's Literary Persona in *How to Write History*

Recent critical studies have drawn attention to Lucian's sophisticated self-representation (ní Mheallaigh 2014), particularly in light of his self-effacing (if not ironic) comments about his own literary creations in his 'warm-up' speeches (*prolaliai*) (Romm 1990, Branham 1985), in which he compares his works to cheap pottery (*Prometheus es in verbis*, 1-2), or unseemly monsters (*Prometheus es in verbis*, 5). Lucian appears to dismiss, but in fact revels in, his literary innovations (*Bis Accusatus*, 34-5), which involve the skillful fusion of diverse genres and models into hybrid creatures (Möllendorff 2006). In all of his discussions the culturally and intellectually fraught issue of appropriate and inappropriate literary imitation (*mimesis*) looms large (Whitmarsh 2001, Weissenberger 1996, Bompaire 1958), and Lucian's works are generally read as presenting a provocative, and even consistent, poetics for which imitation serves as a key element.

The presence (and suitability) of this playful literary persona to Lucian's writings about historiography (in particular, *How to Write History*, *True Histories*, and *On the Syrian Goddess*), however, has yet to be adequately addressed. Unlike comic fiction or comic dialogue, historical writing has a unique ontological claim: it strives to represent what actually occurred, a prerequisite reaffirmed by Lucian himself (τοῦ δὴ συγγραφέως ἔργον ἔν—ὡς ἐπράχθη εἰπεῖν, *Hist. conscr.* 39; cf. *Ver. hist.*, 1). Therefore, when Lucian offers precepts to the would-be historian that include faithfulness to the truth, how seriously should we take this mandate from an author widely characterized as parodic, ironic, and playful in his other, more explicitly *literary* works? And given Lucian's attitude toward literary imitation, which as he acknowledges can transform genres in the act of imitating beyond recognition (*Prometheus es in verbis*, 5), how should prospective historians imitate Thucydides and Herodotus without manipulating the events

they intend to depict? The nature of truth, naturally, has significant weight on Lucian's understanding of historiography, and in turn his perception (reflected in *How to Write History*) has particular import on our view of ancient historiography. After all, modern historians and historiographers often cite *How to Write History* (one of the few texts surviving from antiquity that explicitly discusses historiography) to form judgments on ancient historical writing. Considering how slippery the Lucianic narrator can be, I think it is dangerous to mine information on history writing from his works in the same manner as one would cull rules from a dry rhetorical handbook, or treat Lucian as a derivative parrot of rhetorical training or lost Hellenistic works (*pace* Avenarius 1956). Likewise, from a literary perspective, is it fair to presume absolute consistency in Lucian's self-representation, or does his aspirations for literary innovation break down in the face of history's 'unique' status? Is Lucian's *literary* persona consistent in texts that handle *historical* issues?

My paper responds to these questions in the following four-part structure: (1) First I compare the narrator found in the historiographical treatise *How to Write History* with the persona in the *prolaliai*, richly analyzed in previous scholarship; (2) I assess how this mendacious persona may encourage the reader to reconsider Lucian's famous attacks on contemporary historians for their failures in historical *mimesis* (esp. *Hist. conscr.* 15) and to re-read Lucian's own *mimesis* of the historian Thucydides (cf. Thuc. 2.47.2-54) in the preface of his *How to Write History* (*Hist. conscr.* 1) among other relevant passages; (3) I briefly look outside this work for similar complications in the problematic (and inconsistent) imitations of Herodotus that appear in the *Herodotus*, *True Histories*, and *On the Syrian Goddess*; (4) I argue that the case studies of (2) and (3) indicate the need for a more wide-ranging analysis of the relationship

between Lucian and Greek historiography that takes into account the whole of the Lucianic corpus.

#### Bibliography

Avenarius, G. 1956. *Lukians Schrift zur Geschichtsschreibung*. Meisenheim.

Bompaire, J. 1958. *Lucien écrivain: imitation et creation*. Paris.

Branham, R. B. 1985. "Introducing a Sophist: Lucian's prologues." *TAPA* 115: 237-43.

Möllendorff, P. von 2006. "Camels, Celts and Centaurs: Lucian's Aesthetic concept – the *charis* of the hybrid." In R. R. Nauta, ed. *Desultoria scientia. Genre in Apuleius' 'Metamorphoses' and related texts*, 63-86. Leuven.

ní Mheallaigh, K. 2014. *Reading Fiction with Lucian*. Cambridge.

Romm, J. 1990. "Wax, Stone, and Promethean Clay: Lucian as Plastic Artist." *Classical Antiquity* 9: 74-98.

Weissenberger, M. 1996. *Literaturtheorie bei Lukian: Untersuchungen zum Dialog Lexiphanes*. Stuttgart and Leipzig.

Whitmarsh, T. 2001. *Greek Literature and the Roman Empire*. Oxford.