

The Open Door to Elysium in Lucian's *True History*

Lucian's *True History* describes a fantasy sea voyage in which the narrator travels to many archetypally inaccessible places, including Elysium. It has a rich literary background, and parodies many works of literature, including the *Histories* of Herodotus, traveling epics such as the *Odyssey*, and non-fiction travelogues (Georgiadou and Larmour 1998, Stengel 1911). My paper examines the literary influences embedded in the narrator's visit to Elysium. The episode in Elysium is full of references to Homeric heroes and events, and Homer himself is a prominent character; it forcefully recalls book 11 of the *Odyssey* (Kim 2010). It is noteworthy, then, that the physical description of Lucian's Elysium is entirely different from the afterlife as depicted in Homer: when imagining Elysium, Lucian evokes descriptions not of the Homeric Plain of Asphodel but rather of paradise, as depicted in Hesiod, Pindar, Plato, and Iambulus. The disconnect between the Homeric cast and the non-Homeric setting of Lucian's Elysium plays on a similar divergence in the *Odyssey*: in book 4, Menelaus describes the Edenic afterlife that he has been promised by Proteus; in book 11, Odysseus sees firsthand the grim afterlife that his fellow heroes are experiencing. Taken together, these two episodes ominously contrast expectation against reality in a way that Lucian echoes. Throughout Lucian's other works (such as the *Dialogues of the Dead*), one sees an overwhelmingly pessimistic depiction of the afterlife; characters are stripped of their wealth and beauty and dwell eternally in a ghastly world of skeletons. In the *True History*—where Lucian admits from the start that everything is false—Lucian jokingly presents a paradisiacal afterlife even though, or rather because, his real expectation of the afterlife is anything but paradisiacal.

Furthermore, Lucian is unique in depicting Elysium as a place that can be found by chance in the process of exploration. There is a long tradition of classical heroes visiting the

underworld (including Lucian's own *Nekyomantia*), and typically, this requires extensive planning, travel, and knowledge. In contrast, Lucian's narrator in the *True History* reaches Elysium with no planning or ritual. Lucian's unusually accessible Elysium fits into a travelogue better than an epic, particularly recalling Pausanias' description of the island Leuce on the Danube, where the Homeric heroes live immortal in isolation. Here Lucian mocks travelogue authors by playing on their implicit self-regard and ironically exaggerating them from adventurous explorers to epic heroes. When describing relatively distant places like the Danube, especially fantastic places like Leuce, Pausanias gives his audience the vicarious thrill of hearing about fabulous places they will likely never see. The *True History* evokes this same excitement, and thereby the narrator implicitly extols his own valor in having the intrepidity to reach fantastic places like Elysium. Furthermore, Lucian's Elysium is solely populated by extraordinary individuals, rather than all the dead. When Lucian's narrator is shown a seat reserved for him at the Elysian banquet, he is cast as similarly extraordinary, presumably because of his exceptional travels. However, the *True History* overall is written as parody, and the narrator's implicit self-aggrandizement mocks authors of similar works who might set themselves above their contemporaries on the grounds of their extraordinary knowledge and travels. In making his narrator an epic travelogue author, Lucian implies that there is no banquet seat reserved in Elysium for Pausanias, for Herodotus, even for Homer.

Bibliography

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