

The Morality of Viewing and Verbalizing in Achilles Tatius and Lucian's *Eikones*

In both Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Clitophon* and Lucian's *Eikones*, a male narrator is dumbstruck by the sight of a beautiful woman. He becomes a model of viewership (whether good or bad) for the reader in his description of the woman's appearance, his feelings toward her, and the actions he takes as a result. Both texts imply that there are moral ramifications not only in how one responds to beauty, but whether one responds to a *visual* or *verbal* experience of beauty. Yet, this paper argues, both texts deliberately maintain ambiguity regarding which experience is morally better or what the viewer/hearer's response should actually look like, refusing to settle on either side of the visual/verbal debate which pervades rhetorical texts (Webb 83). This tactic forces the reader into deeper engagement with the text itself and with cultural assumptions regarding the power (and drawbacks) of sight and eyewitness accounts.

In *Leucippe and Clitophon*, Clitophon is "immediately destroyed" (εὐθὺς ἀπωλόλειν, *Ach. Tat.* 1.4), emotionally and physically, when he sees Leucippe for the first time. This is love at first sight: Leucippe's beauty prompts Clitophon to pursue her as his beloved, first by flirting and stealing kisses, then by attempting to sleep with her, finally by running away with her. Clitophon's actions, which are eventually rewarded in the novel, are prompted by the *visual* experience of seeing Leucippe with his own eyes. By contrast, the wicked Kallisthenes falls in love with Leucippe merely by *hearing* an account of her beauty, which indicates his dissolute character (Clitophon calls him a "hearsay suitor," ἀκοῆς ἐραστής, *Ach. Tat.* 2.13). Kallisthenes then mistakes Clitophon's sister, Kalligone, for Leucippe and kidnaps her; by spending time with Kalligone and *seeing her* in person, Kallisthenes is eventually reformed and allowed to marry Kalligone. Thus Achilles Tatius' reader learns that emotions felt or actions taken based on *verbal* descriptions of beauty are morally dubious — yet how, then, is the reader to respond to their own

verbal experience of Leucippe’s beauty via effusive *ekphraseis*? Is the reader necessarily forced into improper auditory “viewing” of Leucippe? But for the guidance of Clitophon, might we be Kallisthenes ourselves?

In Lucian’s *Eikones*, Lycinus sees an unknown (to him) woman and is overcome by her beauty. His interlocutor Polystratus asks Lycinus to “sketch her appearance in words” (κἄν τὸ εἶδος ὡς οἶόν τε ὑπόδειξον τῷ λόγῳ, *Imag.* 3). Lycinus first describes the woman as a hybrid of mix-and-match body parts rendered by the most famous Greek sculptors, followed by a mixture of the best Greek painters, rendering his *verbal* description in terms of the *visual* arts. Unlike Kallisthenes, Polystratus is able to correctly identify the woman based on a *verbal* description of her beauty, which Lycinus offers at great length despite claiming to be dumbstruck — she is Panthea, Emperor Verus’ mistress.

But Lucian’s interlocutors are driven by their experiences of Panthea’s beauty to a much different type of action than Achilles Tatius’ lovers: rather than fall in love or make attempts on Panthea, they are compelled to contemplate, describe, and praise her moral character and virtues. In fact, it is Polystratus, the one who knows the woman *only by hearing*, who chides his friend for praising only Panthea’s physical beauty and initiates the discussion of her moral virtue, her true beauty (*Imag.* 11). Lucian, then, tells a very different story than Achilles Tatius about the relative merits of *seeing* versus *hearing* about beauty, and how best to respond to an experience of feminine physical beauty. Is Lucian’s reader supposed to identify more strongly with one or the other of his interlocutors? And if they do, what does that say about their own moral standing as a hearer, visualizer, examiner of beauty?

Both Achilles Tatius and Lucian underscore the importance of their characters’ *visual* encounter with female beauty as a catalyst to deep emotion and action. But each viewer/narrator

is driven to *verbal* description of the woman he sees, and this *ekphrasis* is as close as their readers may get to “seeing” the woman for themselves. Both texts imply that the question of whether one’s actions respond to a *visual* or *verbal* experience of female beauty is a morally charged issue. It is up to the reader to decide whether their own verbal experience of reading these very texts is a morally dubious one.

Bibliography

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