

Risible Cities: Ignorance as Madness and Social Contagion in
Pseudo-Hippocrates, Dio Chrysostom, and Lucian

According to such varied sources as Cicero and the author of *Philogelos*, the citizens of the Thracian city of Abdera were outstandingly dim-witted. Despite producing such luminaries as the sophist Protagoras, the historian Hecataeus, and the philosopher Democritus, the label of ignorant stuck to this hapless city throughout antiquity.

As with other communities famous for their stupidity (e.g. Kyme, Sidon), and naturally the butt of jokes, it is hard to determine how this particular trope emerged; but the connection with the laughing philosopher, Democritus, suggests something more specific, substantial, than simple ethnic prejudice (Beard, 2014). According to ‘Hippocrates’ (in his apocryphal letters), who investigated Democritus’ proverbial laughter, the entire city of Abdera is in fact mad; their ignorance is a kind of medical condition or disease (cf. Thiher, 1999). In the hands of Greek rhetors of the Imperial period (1st–2nd c. C.E.), this “republic of fools” / “republic of patients,” proved to be an irresistible comic metaphor for the wrong kind of audience—those lacking in *paideia* and the ability to achieve correct *mimesis*. Understood in these terms, ignorance becomes a contagion which can infect any audience—if they do not listen to the satirist’s winsome words, of course (cf. Hawkins, 2015; *ibid.* 2014).

In my paper, I will first argue for this medical turn in the trope of the ignorant city, starting with Hippocrates’ apocryphal *Letters to Democritus*, and trace how it is deployed by Lucian of Samosata in his *How to Write History (DHC)* and Dio of Prusa in his famous attack against the people of Tarsus in the *First Tarsian Oration (Or. 33)*. In Dio’s oration, he conjures the unusual and mysterious “snort” to characterize the intellectual and moral failings of the

people of Tarsus—a vivid form of civic chastisement (*loidoria*, cf. Halliwell, 2008) or abuse suitable to both comedy and philosophy which draws on the idea that each citizen cannot control his own body. Likewise, Lucian fabricates an episode from the history of Abdera when they are afflicted by a plague of madness in order to suggest that all of the Greek East has been infected by a desire to write exaggerated and biased histories of the recent Parthian Wars (Müller, 2014; Porod, 2013). I argue that each orator uses medical language to characterize audiences’ inability to understand *paideia*, and that the danger of ‘disease’ is that it is not isolated to one community, but may spread to other audiences, if they are not alert to its dangers. The ‘sickness’ of ignorance is not only a sign of poor education but also forms a moral hazard, connotating divine punishment latent in ancient attitudes toward disease. By constructing a not ideal audience through this comic imagery, each author is able to characterize the ideal auditor (patient), as well as the ideal speaker (doctor).

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