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978-1-107-07933-5 - Reading Fiction with Lucian: Fakes, Freaks and Hyperreality

Karen Ní Mheallaigh

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READING FICTION WITH LUCIAN

This book offers a captivating new interpretation of Lucian as a fictional theorist and writer to stand alongside the novelists of the day, bringing to bear on his works a whole new set of reading strategies. It argues that the aesthetic and cultural issues Lucian faced, in a world of *mimēsis* and replication, were akin to those found in postmodern contexts: the ubiquity of the fake, the erasure of origins, the focus on the freakish and weird at the expense of the traditional. In addition to exploring the texture of Lucian's own writing, Dr ní Mheallaigh uses Lucian as a focal point through which to examine other fictional texts of the period, including Antonius Diogenes' *The incredible things beyond Thule*, Dictys' *Journal of the Trojan War* and Ptolemy Chennus' *Novel history*, and reveals the importance of fiction's engagement with its contemporary culture of writing, entertainment and wonder.

KAREN NÍ MHEALLAIGH is Senior Lecturer in Classics at the University of Exeter. Her research focuses on the postclassical literary cultures of the Hellenistic and Romano-Greek worlds, especially ancient fiction.

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Acknowledgements

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Preface

This book invites you to read the postclassical literary culture of the imperial period through Lucian as through a prism, for much of what I have to say about Lucian here has a direct bearing on what other writers of this period are doing too, and parallels can be found both then and in our own postmodern period as well. The book also invites you to read with imagination, and with pleasure. My exploration of parallels is eclectic and meant to be suggestive, not comprehensive. There is much more to be said than I can possibly say in just one book: Lucian's place in the contemporary culture of wonder-entertainment with its *Wunderkammer*, horror-stories, religious and scholarly hoaxes, stage illusions, and mechanical wonders will be the subject of another study, for example, and he shares much in common, too, with the writers of pseudo-documentary fictions (Dictys, Dares, Ptolemy Chennus, Antonius Diogenes and many others) who also require a book of their own. Many other parallels or contrasts will not have occurred to me at all; I *hope* this book creates much more to be said.

A few words about the book's shape and architecture. I have not adhered to a rigid structure throughout; rather, each of the chapters is designed so that it can be read as a stand-alone essay on Lucian as well part of a cumulative analysis which moves gradually towards an ever-deepening and broadening appraisal of Lucian's importance as a literary theorist and writer of fiction both within the context of his own postclassical culture then and in the light of our postmodern culture today. The fundamental idea which will, I hope, emerge is that Lucian's creative and critical energies are inextricably interconnected, and even Lucian's wildest fictions are centrally *about* what makes postclassical culture tick. The first chapter is introductory in nature: it provides an entry-point to Lucian's literary-theoretical interests and his work's affinity with postmodern ideas, and it lays the foundations for my reading of individual works in subsequent parts of the book. In the five following chapters, I examine particular Lucianic works in the context of the contemporary literary tradition, and suggest parallels with the works

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of modern authors which show how Lucian speaks to readers in our era as well. It will be noticeable that I have devoted more space here to *True stories* than to any other work. That is because, more than any other single work, I regard *True stories* as *the* iconic work of its age, a work of striking postmodernity which encapsulates in its two short books the entire world of Greek literary culture in the imperial era – as well as, in many ways, our world of post-modernist literature and thought, too. Features which stand out for me include its obsession with copies, fakes and *simulacra*; its fascination with the fragmentary text (*True stories* is the only ancient work I know of which creates a fiction of its *own* fragmentary status); its refusal to distinguish in ontological terms between the characters inside a text and the authors who write them, between fiction and the ‘real’ world; and its disconcerting play with the peritextual boundaries of the text itself. Far from viewing this as the most self-indulgently and exclusively literary of Lucian’s experiments, *True stories* leads us straight out into the heart of the entertainment-culture and thought-world of the imperial period; how it does so, I will explore in the book’s conclusion, which I see as a jumping-off point to bigger questions about *Wunderkultur* in the imperial period.

Some of the material in these chapters appeared, in slightly different form, in articles previously published. My ideas in chapter 5, ‘*True stories*: travels in hyperreality’ grew out of an earlier article, ‘Monumental fallacy: the teleology of origins in Lucian’s *Verae historiae*’, in A. Bartley (ed.), *A Lucian for our times* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2009), 11–28. The section on onymity in *True stories* in Chapter 4 is adapted from an article, ‘The game of the name: onymity and the contract of reading in Lucian’, in F. Mestre and P. Gomez (edd.), *Lucian of Samosata, Greek writer and Roman citizen* (Barcelona, 2010), 121–132. And Chapter 3, which reads *Onos* intertextually with *The Name of the Rose*, is based on an article ‘Ec[h]oing the ass-novel: reading and desire in *Onos*, *Metamorphoses* and *The name of the Rose*’, *Ramus* 38.1 (2009), 109–122. In all cases, I have revised and expanded the arguments from the original articles. I am very grateful to the editors and publishers in each case who generously permitted me to draw on this material here.