

Lucian the Syrian, The Roman Empire's Most Popular Comedian

Lucian (~120 to ~190 AD) was born in Samosata in what was then the Roman Empire province of Syria. Because he was extremely popular, a great deal of his work has survived. Lucian travelled throughout the empire, selling tickets to performances where he would present his dialogues. People wrote them down and they circulated widely. Although Lucian's native language was Aramaic, the same language Jesus spoke, he performed and wrote in Greek, the common language of the educated.



According to Lucian, he was born to a working class family and worked his way into the intellectual elite. He was certainly familiar with the classical Greek philosophy important to his audience. He frequently made jokes about “sophists”, educated Greeks who studied different schools of philosophy but didn’t really live up to its demands. In making fun of “sophists” he is making fun of his own audience, or at least its more pretentious members. The audience loved it.

In one of his dialogues (The Fugitives) the goddess “Philosophy” complains to Zeus about how she is misunderstood by humans.

Lucian (all shaded text below is Lucian):

Zeus: But who comes here in such haste? There must be something wrong: she is crying; someone has been ill-treating her. Why, it is Philosophy, in a sad way, calling out to me. Why are you crying, child? and what brings you here, away from the world? More misdeeds of the ignorant herd? a repetition of the Socrates and Anytus affair? is that it? [Amytus led the effort to force Socrates to commit suicide by drinking hemlock.]

Philosophy: No, father, nothing of that kind. The common people have been most polite and respectful; they are my most devout admirers,—worshippers, I might almost say; not that they understand much of what I tell them. No; it was those—I don't know what to call them—but the people who pretend to be on such friendly terms with me, and are always using my name;—the wretches!

Zeus. Oh, it's the philosophers who have been misbehaving themselves?

Philosophy: No, no, father; they have been just as badly treated as I have.

Zeus. Then if it is neither the philosophers nor the common people, who is it that you complain of?

Philosophy: There are some people who are between the two: they are not philosophers, and yet they are not like the rest of mankind. They are got up to look like philosophers; they have the dress, the walk, the expression; they call me mistress, write philosopher after their names, and declare themselves my disciples and followers: but they are evil men, made up of folly and impudence and wickedness; a disgrace to my name. It was their misconduct that drove me away.

Zeus. Poor child! it is too bad of them. And what have they been doing to you exactly?

Philosophy: Judge for yourself whether the provocation was a slight one. When formerly you looked down upon the world, and saw that it was filled with iniquity and transgression, and was become the troubled abode of sin and folly, you had compassion on the frailty of ignorant mankind, and sent me down to them: you bade me see to it, that wickedness and violence and brutality should cease from among them; I was to lift their eyes upwards to the truth, and cause them to live together in unity. Remember your words on that occasion: 'Behold, my daughter, the misdeeds of mankind; behold how ignorance has wrought upon them. I feel compassion for them, and have chosen you from among all the Gods to heal their ills; for who else should heal them? '

Zeus: I said that, and more. Yes? and how did they receive you at your first descent? and what is the trouble now?

Philosophy: My first flight was not directed towards Greece. I thought it best to begin with the hardest part of my task, which I took to be the instruction of the barbarians. With the Greeks I anticipated no difficulty; I had supposed that they would accept my yoke without hesitation. First, then, I went to the Indians, the mightiest nation upon earth. I had little trouble in persuading them to descend from their elephants and follow me. The Brahmins, who dwell between Oxydracae and the country of the Nechrei, are mine to a man: they live according to my laws, and are respected by all their neighbours; and the manner of their death is truly wonderful.

Zeus. Ah, to be sure: the Gymnosophists. I have heard a great deal of them... [In ancient Greek tradition, the Indian Gymnosophists were the original skeptics. Lucian is having the king of the gods praise the skeptics. Lucian doesn't believe in Zeus for a second, but is having fun.]

Philosophy: But to continue: after I had left the Brahmins, I went straight to Ethiopia, and thence to Egypt, where I associated with the priests and prophets, and taught them of the Gods. Then to Babylon, to instruct the Chaldaeans and Mages. Next came Scythia, and after Scythia, Thrace; here Eumolpus and Orpheus were my companions. I sent them on into Greece before me; Eumolpus, whom I had thoroughly instructed in theology, was to institute the sacred mysteries, Orpheus to win men by the power of music.

I followed close behind them. On my first arrival, the Greeks received me without enthusiasm: they did not, however, wholly reject my advances; by slow degrees I gained over seven men to be my companions and disciples, and Samos, Ephesus, and Abdera, each added one to the little company.

And then there sprang up—I scarce know how—the tribe of sophists: men who had but little of my spirit, yet were not wholly alien to me; a motley Centaur breed, in whom vanity and wisdom meeting were moulded into one incongruous whole. They clung not entirely to ignorance, but theirs was not the steady eye that could meet the gaze of Philosophy; and if at moments my semblance flashed phantom-like across their dulled vision, they held that in that dim shadow they had seen all that was to be seen. It was this pride that nourished the vain, unprofitable science that they mistook for invincible wisdom; the science of quaint conceits, ingenious paradoxes, and labyrinthine dilemmas.

My followers would have restrained them, and exposed their errors: but they grew angry, and conspired against them, and in the end brought them under the power of the law, which condemned them to drink of hemlock. Doubtless I should have done well to renounce humanity there and then, and take my flight: but Antisthenes and Diogenes, and after them Crates, and our friend Menippus, prevailed upon me to tarry yet a little longer. Would that I had never yielded! I should have been spared much pain in the sequel. [Antisthenes, Diogenes, Crates, and Menippus were all well known cynics.]

Cynicism

Lucian himself would have identified as an “atheist”, “skeptic”, and “cosmopolitan”. Indeed all of those words are in English today because they were commonly used by Lucian and his contemporaries to mean the same thing they mean today. Lucian also thought of himself as a “cynic”, a word which has changed a little in meaning. In Lucian’s time cynicism was a school of philosophy which followed Socrates, but not Plato. Cynics believed in virtue and truthfulness, rejecting social conventions such as seeking wealth or wearing nice cloths. They rejected religion and other social customs not firmly grounded in logic. The most famous cynic was Diogenes, who wandered the city with a lamp in the middle of the day saying he was “searching for an honest person.” Lucian was not ascetic in his personal lifestyle, but admired the cynics’ values, especially the search for truth in a world filled with religion, which Lucian and the cynics considered a particularly evil form of falsehood.

The word “cynic” comes from the Greek work kynos, meaning doglike. It is cognate to the Latin word canis, also meaning dog. The name apparently began as a slur. But the cynics adopted it as a badge of honor. They argued that dogs care nothing for pretense, always live in the moment, are always trying to sniff out the truth, and are loyal to their beliefs.

Lucian was particularly harsh on “cynics” who used their skeptical insights to deceive other humans. This group included religious leaders. In the above dialogue Philosophy complains:

The city swarms with these vermin, particularly with those who profess the tenets of Diogenes, Antisthenes, and Crates. Followers of the Dog, they care little to excel in the canine virtues; they are neither trusty guardians nor affectionate, faithful servants: but for noise and greed and thievery and wantonness, for cringing, fawning cupboard-love,—there, indeed, they are perfect.

In modern use, the word “cynic” has a negative connotation. Lucian would have understood, but insisted that a true cynic would use their insight to proclaim truth and not for personal gain.

Christianity

Lucian is noted as one of the earliest non-Christian writers to discuss Christianity. He does this in his account of the life of an wicked “cynic” who knows that Christianity is phony, but exploits the gullibility of Christian believers to make money.

Lucian: (describing the career of the clever scam artist, Peregrinus.)

It was then that he learned the wondrous lore of the Christians, by associating with their priests and scribes in Palestine. And—how else could it be?—in a trice he made them all look like children, for he was prophet, cult-leader, head of the synagogue, and everything, all by himself. He interpreted and explained some of their books and even composed many, and they revered him as a god, made use of him as a lawgiver, and set him down as a protector, next after that other, to be sure, whom they still worship, the man who was crucified in Palestine because he introduced this new cult into the world.

Then at length Peregrinus was apprehended for this and thrown into prison, which itself gave him no little reputation as an asset for his future career and the charlatanism and notoriety-seeking that he was enamoured of. Well, when he had been imprisoned, the Christians, regarding the incident as a calamity, left nothing undone in the effort to rescue him. Then, as this was impossible, every other form of attention was shown him, not in any casual way but with assiduity, and from the very break of day aged widows and orphan children could be seen waiting near the prison, while their officials even slept inside with him after bribing the guards. Then elaborate meals were brought in, and sacred books of theirs were read aloud, and excellent Peregrinus—for he still went by that name—was called by them ‘the new Socrates’.

Indeed, people came even from the cities in Asia, sent by the Christians at their common expense, to succour and defend and encourage the hero. They show incredible speed whenever any such public action is taken; for in no time they lavish their all. So it was then in the case of Peregrinus; much money came to him from them by reason of his imprisonment, and he procured not a little revenue from it. The poor wretches have convinced themselves, first and foremost, that they are going to be immortal and live for all time, in consequence of which they despise death and even willingly give themselves into custody; most of them. Furthermore, their first lawgiver persuaded them that they are all brothers of one another after they have transgressed once, for all by denying the Greek gods and by worshipping that crucified sophist himself and living under his laws. Therefore they despise all things indiscriminately and consider them common property, receiving such doctrines traditionally without any definite evidence. So if any charlatan and trickster, able to profit by occasions, comes among them, he quickly acquires sudden wealth by imposing upon simple folk.

Science Fiction.

Lucian is often considered the first science fiction writer because of his book *A True History*, which is an account of the narrator’s journey to the moon and beyond.

He starts his account by comparing his writing to Homer's, noting that, unlike Homer, he admits that his book, *A True History*, is not itself true.

Many writers ..composed what they claimed were accounts of their own wanderings and travels and they told of the beasts of monstrous size that they encountered and the savagery of humans and their strange ways of life. Their guide and the master in this kind of twaddle is Homer's Odysseus and the tales he told in the court of Alcinous: winds made slaves and feral men with only one eye who are cannibals, as well as many-headed animals and Odysseus' companions who were transformed into beasts by drugs.

When I encountered all these tall tales, I did not much blame these writers for lying, since I observed that fiction is an ingrained habit even among those who profess to be philosophers. But what amazed me most was that these writers believed that no one would realize that they were writing fiction and lies. For this reason, I too, prompted by vanity, have made this effort to leave something to posterity. I did not want to be the only author who could not enjoy the license of telling tall tales. I had nothing true to relate. I have had no experiences worth recording. I turned to a fiction that is much more sensible than those of the others, I make this sole claim to the truth: I am lying. I think that by this confession I will be acquitted of the charge leveled against other writers who are made vulnerable by the very fact that *I* confess that nothing I say is true. And so, I am writing about things that I never saw myself nor actually experienced nor learned from others; things that, moreover, are not real at all nor can, fundamentally, be real. For this reason, those who open this book should believe nothing it says.

Lucian follows this by an account of a fantastic voyage through space. The spaceship is a Greek galley that happens to catch favorable winds for space travel. After some adventures where, for example, some of Lucian's sailors are seduced by grape-trees, Lucian arrives at the Moon. He finds it at war with the Sun. Both armies are surreal. For example:

Behind these [radish slingers] advanced the mushroom-stalkers; 10,000 heavily armed troops that fight at close quarters. They are called mushroom-stalkers because they fight with mushroom shields. Their spears are shafts of asparagus. The dog-nutters were positioned next to them. They were dispatched by the people of the Dog Star, or Sirius. These warriors had dog faces and they fought mounted on winged acorns. They numbered 5,000.

Lucian described the society of the moon's inhabitants.

The very first thing to report is that the inhabitants of the Moon are not born of women but of males. The Selentai mate with males and are completely innocent of the word "women". Up until the age of 25 they are brides but afterwards they are grooms. They do not conceive in a womb but in the calf of the leg. When the embryo begins to develop, the calf begins to swell and with the passage of time they make an incision and draw the fetus out dead. But they revive the fetus by exposing it to the wind with its mouth open.

Lucian is making the point, common to cynics, and subsequent science fiction writers, that many aspects of current human society are arbitrary. Things could be quite different.

Later, Lucian visits an island inhabited by deceased philosophers. The king is the Rhadamanthus, wise lord of the underworld in Greek tradition. For Lucian this is an opportunity to make jokes about philosophers, including Socrates and the ascetic cynic Diogenes. They are Lucian's heroes, but he includes them in the fun. In the realm of the dead:

As they banquet, they entertain themselves with music and song. Homer's epics are their favorite poetry. Indeed, Homer himself was present and he joined in the feasting, reclining on a chaise lounge above Odysseus.

I saw Socrates too, chatting garrulously with Nestor and Palamedes. Standing at his side were Hyacinthus, Narcissus, Hylas and other good-looking young men. I got the impression that Socrates was in love with Hyacinthus – he interrogated him the most. It was reported that Rhadamanthus was very annoyed with Socrates and often threatened to exile him from the island, if he insisted on talking and did not give up on his ironical distance and join in the festivities. Only Plato was absent. It was said that he was living in the city that he had invented and lived according to the Republic and Laws that he had written.

As for Diogenes, he had so changed in character that he had married the courtesan, Lais, and would often leap up from his chaise lounge while under the influence and dance and go on drinking too much. None of the Stoics was there. They were said to be still trudging up the steep path to Virtue.

They said that the Academic philosophers wanted to come to the island, but that they were still withholding assent from the decision and were still weighing it, for they had not yet arrived at a "clear and distinct" conclusion that such an island exists. And, I think, they would have dreaded the judgement of Rhadamanthus, because they themselves had rejected any sure basis of judgement. They said that some of them had actually begun to join in the procession to the island, but out of sheer inertia they could not catch up, fell behind, and turned back half way there.

Lucian's comments about academics were considered spot on in 150 AD. Generations of humanist scholars who have read Lucian since have agreed.

Sex.

Lucian wrote about sex quite openly. Cynics believed that sex was nothing to be ashamed of. The cynic Crates was famous for having an egalitarian relationship with his wife. The two of them reportedly had sex in public. That was an extreme case, but certainly Lucian had no problem with anything consenting adults wanted to do. One of his dialogues is famous today for its discussion of transgender sexuality.

CLONARIUM

We've been hearing strange things about you Leaena. They say that Megilla, the rich Lesbian woman, is in love with you just like a man, that you live with each other, and do goodness knows what together. Hulllo ! Blushing ? Tell me if it's true.

LEAENA

Quite true, Clonarium. But I'm ashamed, for it's unnatural.

CLONARIUM

In the name of Mother Aphrodite, what's it all about? What does the woman want? What do you do when you are together? You see, you don't love me, or you wouldn't hide such things from me.

LEAENA

I love you as much as I love any woman, but she's terribly like a man.

CLONARIUM

I don't understand what you mean, unless she's a sort of woman for the ladies. They say there are women like that in Lesbos, with faces like men, and unwilling to consort with men, but only with women, as though they themselves were men.

LEAENA

It's something like that.

CLONARIUM

Well, tell me all about it; tell me how she made her first advances to you. how you were persuaded, and what followed.

LEAENA

She herself and another rich woman, with the same accomplishments, Demonassa from Corinth were organising a drinking party, and had taken me along to provide them with music. But, when I had finished playing, and it was late and time to turn in and they were drunk, Megilla said, "Come along Leaena, it's high time we were in bed; you sleep here between us."

CLONARIUM

And did you? What happened after that?

LEAENA

At first they kissed me like men, not simply bringing their lips to mine, but opening their mouths a little, embracing me, and squeezing my breasts. Demonassa even bit me as she kissed, and I didn't know what to make of it. Eventually Megilla, being now rather heated, pulled off her wig, which was very realistic and fitted very closely, and revealed the skin of her head which was shaved close, just as on the most energetic of athletes. This sight gave me a shock, but she said, "Leaena, have you ever seen such a good-looking young fellow?" "I don't see one here, Megilla," said I. "Don't make a woman out of me," said she. "My name is Megillus, and I've been married to Demonassa here for ever so long; she's my wife." I laughed at that, Clonarium, and said, "Then, unknown to us, Megillus, you were a man all the time, just as they say Achilles once hid among the girls, and you have everything that a man has, and can play the part of a man to Demonassa?" "I haven't got what you mean," said she, "I don't need it at all. You'll find I've a much pleasanter method of my own." "You're surely not a hermaphrodite," said I, "equipped both as a man and a woman, as many people are said to be?"; for I still didn't know Clonarium, what it was all about. But she said, "No, Leaena, I'm all man." "Well," I said, "I've heard the Boeotian flute-girl, Ismenodora, repeating tales she'd heard at home, and telling us how someone at Thebes had turned from woman to man, someone who was also an excellent soothsayer, and

was, I think, called Tiresias. That didn't happen to you, did it?" "No, Leaena," she said, "I was born a woman like the rest of you, but I have the mind and the desires and everything else of a man." "And do you find these desires enough?" said I. "If you don't believe me Leaena," said she, "just give me a chance, and you'll find I'm as good as any man; I have a substitute of my own. Only give me a chance, and you'll see."

Well I did, my dear, because she begged so hard and presented me with a costly necklace, and a very fine linen dress. Then I threw my arms around her as though she were a man, and she went to work, kissing me, and panting, and apparently enjoying herself immensely.

CLONARIUM

What did she do? How? That's what I'm most interested to hear.

LEAENA

Don't inquire too closely into the details; they're not very nice; so, by Aphrodite in heaven, I won't tell you!

Legacy

Despite Lucian referring to Jesus Christ as the “crucified sophist”, many Renaissance humanists combined great love of Lucian with at least nominal Christianity. For example Thomas More (1478-1535) and Erasmus (1466-1536) early in their careers worked together on preparing a translation of Lucian’s works published in 1506. Lucian had an enormous influence on both of them. Lucian’s science fiction directly inspired More’s *Utopia*. Another famous admirer was Jonathan Swift, who used the same science fiction device for *Gulliver’s Travels*. In nineteenth century England Lucian’s sexual tolerance made him a hero for people repressed by Victorian morality. For example, an 1894 edition of Lucian’s *A True History* had illustrations by Audrey Beardsley, including the below image of the grape-trees seducing sailors. But only 251 copies were printed. It wasn’t in every bookstore.

