

## Lucian's *Dialogues of the Courtesans*: A "Lesson" for Every Reader

Anything that we read can be educational. From Homer, for instance, we can learn a lot about weaponry. In the case of Lucian's *Dialogues of the Courtesans*, however, additional signs point to the dialogues as intentionally and particularly educational. It has been suggested by Bartley (2005) that because Lucian's shorter dialogues do not represent as strongly developed philosophical themes as the longer dialogues, the shorter dialogues instead "represent a series of experiments in different directions by Lucian, with his skills and techniques being used in a series of different combinations to produce particular effects, rather than that there was some noteworthy development of his style over the period of their composition." I argue that Lucian's "experiment" with the *Dialogues of the Courtesans* is to produce the effect of a satirical, educational manual.

Lucian's work exhibits the influence of numerous genres that often purport to educate such as philosophy, and perhaps even the fable and didactic genres such as the sex manual and Roman elegy. For instance, the didactic authors usually announce that they are teaching something, e.g. *Ars Amatoria* 1.1-2, and claim experience, e.g. *Ars* 1.29. Although Lucian himself does not explicitly announce that he will teach something or claim experience, the issues of his hetairai in the dialogues share many points of contact with the instructions that Ovid gives to men (books 1-2) and women (book 3) in his instructive and somewhat satiric love elegy, *Ars Amatoria*.

Lucian's *Dialogues of the Courtesans* consists of fifteen brief, separate dialogues between courtesans and mothers, courtesans and courtesans, courtesans and attendants, and courtesans and clients. Through the interaction of these characters, the reader learns about the obstacles and the tricks of the courtesan trade. In the first dialogue, Lucian introduces the reader to the

important themes of the work: losing or fear of losing the client and tricking, kicking out, or taking others' clients.

Lucian's careful organization of these themes of losing and gaining a client further supports the argument that the dialogues are educational. The main hetairai in these dialogues, that is, the women who are usually the ones to engage the other speakers in conversation often concerning a particular problem, progress from being inexperienced and unskilled to being tricky and powerful. Each of these dialogues, furthermore, teaches a specific lesson, and many of those hetairai in the first part of the dialogues (1-7) who are learning these lessons are mirrored by hetairai in the second part of the dialogues (8-15) who *have* learned the lessons and now practice what they learned. The blossoming of the novice hetaira into the calculating, experienced hetaira is evident through the following themes and characters: jealousy, emotions, tricks, naïvety, other female characters in the dialogue, wealth and status, and even names.

Overall, therefore, the above themes and characters indicate that the hetairai in the first seven dialogues are inexperienced, jealous, and/or overly attached to their clients. By contrast, in the last seven to eight dialogues the hetairai deal with jealous clients—and often manipulate the client's jealousy for their own benefit—become very tricky and calculating, become increasingly independent and more assertive, develop stratagems to win back lost clients, and finally, in the last three dialogues, shut out the client. By the end of the dialogues, the hetairai are not primarily concerned about love, as are the courtesans in the beginning dialogues, but about *income*. Those in the first seven dialogues, usually blinded by love for their clients, act irrationally in their profession, in direct contrast to those at the end. The maturation of the hetairai throughout the dialogues and the lessons taught in the vignettes suggest that Lucian's

*Dialogues of the Courtesans* satirizes a type of instruction manual intended to inform the reader about the hetaira's bag of tricks.

### Bibliography

Adrados, F.R. 1999. *History of the Graeco-Latin Fable*. Boston.

Bartley, A. 2005. "Techniques of Composition in Lucian's Minor Dialogues." *Hermes* 133:358-367.

Blondell, R. 2002. *The Play of Character in Plato's Dialogues*. New York.

Dickie, M.W. 2001. *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*. New York.

Faraone, C.A. 1999. *Ancient Greek Love Magic*. Cambridge.

Holzberg, N. 2002. *The Ancient Fable*. Bloomington.

Mras, K. 1916. "Die Personennamen in Lucians Hetären-gesprächen." *Wiener Studien* 38:308-342.

Richlin, A. 1992. *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome*. New York.

Stratton, K.B. 2007. *Naming the witch: Magic, Ideology, and Stereotype in the Ancient World*.  
New York.

Teloh, H. 1986. *Socractic Education in Plato's Early Dialogues*. Notre Dame.