

Narrative Identity in Lucian's *Dialogues of the Courtesans* V

Lucian's *Dialogues of the Courtesans* (*DM* hereafter) is one of the rare classical texts to center the experiences of non-male subjects. Like other Lucianic texts, *Dialogues of the Courtesans* (*DM* hereafter) engages with issues of fact and fiction, narrativity, and how or when to trust a storyteller; however, *DM* situates this constellation of questions within a framework of alterity far more explicitly than any of its counterparts. The courtesans are not enslaved (in fact, some of them enslave other women themselves) but their gendered difference and status as sex workers relegates them to the margins of Athenian society. And yet, from the margins these courtesans are able to speak the peculiarities and nuances of their identities into existence. This essay contends that in *Dialogues of the Courtesans*, Lucian explores the process of forming and actualizing marginalized identity through narration.

Though the dialogues as a whole are somewhat understudied, one dialogue in particular has excited critical – and censorial – attention: in Dialogue V, the courtesan Leaena narrates to her friend Clonarium a sexual encounter she had with Demonassa, a woman, and Megillus, whose narration of his identity to Leaena (as reported by Leaena) suggests that he is a man, but one whom others believe to be a woman. A number of suggestions have been made as to how to categorize Megillus by modern terms of gender and sexuality as well as how to understand Lucian's interest in the topic: Brisson (2002) argues that Megillus is a lesbian whom Lucian ungraciously caricatures as a man; rather oppositely, Haley (2002) offers “pomosexual” for Megillus and suggests that Lucian may himself be bisexual; Bissa (2013) tentatively offers that Megillus is a transgender man. I am not as interested in defining Megillus's gender or sexual identity (though I will use he/him pronouns throughout my paper); my aim here, rather, is to

show how *DM*, and the Leaena/Clonarium episode in particular, fit into Lucian's broader project of exploring the relationships between truth and fiction, narrator and reader, speaker and listener. For Lucian, identity – like fiction – is the product of narrative: it represents an agreement between speaker and listener, whereby the identity narrated by the speaker is only validated insofar as the listener substantiates the claim to said identity.

My reading of *DM* engages with the arguments of Italian philosopher and feminist Adriana Cavarero in her work *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, in which she offers the “narratable self” as a category of analysis for subjectivity. Drawing upon the work of Hannah Arendt, who writes that “in acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world,” (Arendt 1958: 179), Cavarero argues for a self that is conditional on its perception and recognition by others via narration. In a similar way, this paper will explore the relationship between narrative and identity in *DM V*, while bearing in mind that “identity” is as evasive and unreliable conceptually in antiquity as in modernity. A correlative aim here, then, is to show that, for Lucian, identity is entirely dependent on narrative.

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