

REVIEW

THREADING THE NEEDLE OF LUCIAN'S *TRUE HISTORY*

Diskin Clay and James H. Brusuelas, *Lucian, True History: Introduction, Text, Translation, and Commentary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. vi + 214. Paperback, £18.99. ISBN 978-0-198-78965-9.

At the time of his death in 2014, scholar and professor of classical studies at Duke University Diskin Clay left behind a draft manuscript for a translation and commentary on Lucian's famous *True History*.¹ Two years ago, Clay's work appeared as an Oxford University Press publication, edited and supplemented with additional scholarly material by James H. Brusuelas. The synthesis between these two authors is near-seamless at first glance; only the translation bears Clay's name alone, and only in the preface does Brusuelas articulate his motivations for shepherding the volume to print: 'The goal was to address the needs of students, in particular those first-year graduate students who are striving to improve both their Greek and their general knowledge of Greek culture in a short period of time', Brusuelas writes (vi). Clay and Brusuelas are absolutely correct to identify a major gap between the excellent print-to-order edition of *True History* for undergraduates compiled by Hayes and Nimis, and more traditional scholarly commentaries on *True History* such as those by Aristoula Georgiadou and David H. J. Larmour (in English) and Peter von Möllendorff (in German).² As an effort to fill this lacuna for more advanced students of ancient Greek, this volume is desperately needed; unfortunately, several errors within the text render it troublesome for use with students.

I. The Introduction of the Volume

The introduction offers a detailed exploration of Lucian's identity as an author and his unique relationship with truth and fiction, as well as a wonderfully

¹ For the translation of the title of this work into English, see p. 19.

² Hayes and Nimis (2011); Georgiadou and Larmour (1998); Möllendorff (2000). The notes and vocabulary from Hayes and Nimis can also be found online via Dickinson College Commentaries.

accessible overview of Lucian's Second Sophistic Greek.³ At a hefty forty-four pages (almost a quarter of the book's entire page count), this introduction is one of the highlights of the volume, and a useful resource for students unfamiliar with Lucianic scholarship. To select one notable omission within this otherwise extensive discussion, the introduction contains little analysis of the relationship between Lucian's *True History* and the modern genre of Science Fiction (SF). It is a shame that 'the possibility of categorising Lucian's text as Science Fiction is left largely undiscussed', as Calum Maciver wrote in his 2022 review of the volume for *BMCR*.⁴ The fact that Lucian uses a 'strategy of deformation and defamiliarization of the known world via fantastic or technological proxies' occupies only a short section of the introduction, and the introduction does little more than note the fact that this 'deformation' is a technique shared with SF as a genre (39). Several references for Lucian's influence on modern SF writers are omitted: Tony Keen's chapter on Lucian in the edited volume *Classical Traditions in Science Fiction* is cited (though it does not appear in the 'Select Bibliography'; more on this issue in Section II below), but earlier works such as 'Lucian's *True History* as SF' by S. C. Fredericks and the implementation of Lucian within the writings of Darko Suvin do not receive mention.⁵ Similarly, the introduction contains little analysis of Lucian's apparent interest in exploratory literature; the reader is directed to James S. Romm's foundational discussion of Lucianic fiction only as a footnoted afterthought.⁶ Nevertheless, the introduction as a whole serves as one of this volume's greatest strengths, thanks to its lucid discussion of Lucian's (auto)biography and metaliterary humour.

II. The Select Bibliography and Its Omissions

Although the introduction contains an eminently useful overview of Lucian as an author, the introduction's citations contain some of the volume's first major problems. There appears to be no full bibliography for all of the footnoted references in the introduction; some items of scholarship mentioned are included neither in the 'Abbreviations' (45–7) nor in the 'Select Bibliography' (47–52) within the short 'Reader's Guide' that follows the introduction. In two cases, the full title of a work is provided in the body of the text or in a footnote (Rutherford (1881) in n. 79 on p. 32 is listed with its full title, as is Auberger

³ See esp. section §3.2 'Attic and Atticism: Language as Status' (29–34).

⁴ Maciver (2022).

⁵ Keen (2015); Fredericks (1976); Suvin (1972) and (1979).

⁶ Romm (1992) 211–14, cited in this volume at p. 4 n. 5.

(1991) in n. 83 on 35) but in many cases the only information given about these sources is the surname of the author and the date of publication. This poses an enormous issue for young scholars searching for references for their own research. As a resource for any readers of the volume, I have collected all of the missing references from the introduction and the commentary and compiled them into a twenty-six-item bibliography, indicated via asterisks within the list of scholarly sources at the end of this review.⁷

III. The Greek Text and Diskin Clay's Translation

The volume contains the Greek text of *True History* and Diskin Clay's facing English translation, based on Macleod's 1972 Oxford Classical Texts edition.⁸ As Heinz-Günther Nesselrath observes in his 2022 review of this volume for *Plekos*, the Greek text as printed here contains a considerable number of spelling mistakes, likely as a result of digital scanning problems, given the types of errors present (e.g., an α is often erroneously used instead of the similarly-shaped correct σ).⁹ Additionally, the intended audience of 'first-year graduate students' may find some of the editorial choices troublesome (vi). I, as a fifth-year graduate student, and the advanced undergraduates with whom I read the text, noted several ways this edition could be made more accessible. For example, one of the fictive inscriptions inset within Lucian's prose narrative (the graffito of Heracles and Dionysus at *Ver. hist.* 1.7) is marked out for special consideration only by the use of an initial capital letter (60). Students who are not prepared to encounter such subtle breaks in the narrative (especially those students attempting to avoid relying too heavily on the facing English translation, where this inscription is rendered in much more visible all-capital script) may struggle to untangle the fictional epigraphic text from the main body of the text. This issue could easily have been resolved using paragraph breaks, as in Harmon's 1913 Loeb, and as this volume does for quotations of poetry.¹⁰

⁷ Four missing entries—Baldwin (1961); Hubbard (1991); Pelling (2009); and Whitmarsh (2014)—are collected in Nesselrath (2022) 459 nn. 26–9, with further bibliographic errata in 459 n. 29.

⁸ Macleod (1972); see Clay and Bursuelas' 'Note on the Text', p. 53.

⁹ Nesselrath (2022) 460; these spelling mistakes are catalogued in useful detail, 460–1.

¹⁰ Harmon (1913) 248–358. Examples of embedded poetry quotations in Clay and Brusuelas' text can be found in the following sections: the opening line of Homer's new epic at *Ver. hist.* 2.24, pp. 118–19; Homer's epigram for Lucian at *Ver. hist.* 2.28, pp. 122–3; and the verse from Antimachus at *Ver. hist.* 2.42, pp. 134–5.

The facing English translation is relatively clear and accessible, albeit with a few shaky anachronisms and unfortunate renderings, such as the choice of the literalising title ‘the Cock’ for the mythic figure Alectryon, whose sanctuary sits on the Island of Dreams (pp. 126–7; *Ver. hist.* 2.32). In translating Lucian’s many pun-filled names, Clay’s text alternates between transliterating these terms and adapting them into English. No apparent rule governs which of these strategies is used in any particular case: e.g., *Λυχνόπολις* is merely transliterated as ‘Lychnopolis’, losing the pun in *λύχνος* as ‘lamp’, while the famous *Νεφέλοκοκκυγία* is translated as ‘Cloudcuckooland’ even though the playfully birdlike name of its ruler is directly transliterated in the same section: ‘Koronos, son of Kottyphion’ (Crow, son of Blackbird) is given as a letter-for-letter rendering of *Κόρωνος ὁ Κοττυφίωνος* (pp. 82–3; *Ver. hist.* 1.29).¹¹ In some instances, both a transliteration and a translation are provided together; e.g., the military leader ‘Aiolocentaurus, or Darting Centaur’, but not his rival, who is named only ‘Brinedrinker’ rather than also ‘Thalassopotes’ (*Θαλασσοπότης*) (pp. 96–7; *Ver. hist.* 1.42). These inconsistencies are puzzling but not necessarily stumbling blocks for all readers.

More troubling are the translation errors that introduce complete inaccuracies into the English text. For example, Clay’s translation (pp. 116–17; *Ver. hist.* 2.21) describes Pythagoras as having an ‘entire left thigh’ made of gold, but, as the commentary observes, Lucian is exaggerating a pre-existing legend in which Pythagoras possesses a single gilded appendage, describing instead ‘his entire right side’ (*ὅλον τὸ δεξιὸν ἡμίτομον*) as made of gold.¹² Although a fresh, colloquial translation of Lucian’s *True History* would be eminently welcome for students and scholars alike, inaccuracies like the one above make this translation unusable without editorial correction.

IV. The Commentary

The commentary provides a useful array of cultural and grammatical information. Although the grammatical and syntactical notes are not nearly as complete as those offered in the intermediate-level commentary of Hayes and Nimis, this volume’s level of guidance seems eminently appropriate for the target audience of first-year graduate students. Various glosses in the commentary often differ from the precise text of Clay’s translation, which offers

¹¹ Explanation of the avian puns within ‘Koronos, son of Kottyphion’ is relegated to the commentary, p. 174.

¹² This and numerous other translation issues are catalogued by Nesselrath (2022) 461–74.

the reader both benefits and disadvantages. Because of these alternative translations, readers are discouraged from leaning too heavily upon Clay's translation, yet one begins to wonder why the format of facing bilingual Greek and English was selected for this volume in the first place. As Maciver observes in his own review of the volume, 'Whether a facing translation is appropriate for an edition designed primarily for students learning Greek is another matter' and such a matter should be seriously considered by instructors who contemplate assigning this text.¹³ One solution may be for instructors to manually (or digitally) deconstruct the volume and provide only parts of the text to their students, such as the introduction and commentary (each cross-referenced with Nesselrath's errata); nevertheless, this type of radical intervention ought not to be necessary for a text specifically designed for use by students.

V. Additional Errata

As Maciver notes in his review, Karen ní Mheallaigh's surname is often misspelled as 'Mhealleigh', not only in the introduction, but also within the commentary.¹⁴ Similarly, von Möllendorff is spelled as 'Möllendorf' several times throughout.¹⁵ Most other errata for the commentary are collected in Nesselrath's exhaustive review.¹⁶ One additional error merits note: the commentary (182 *ad Ver. hist.* 2.3) claims that 'Night is the sister to Death, Sleep, and the race of Dreams (*Th.* 211)' but according to the passage cited from Hesiod's *Theogony*, Night is the *mother* of Death, Sleep, and the race of Dreams, not the sister of these divinities. Cultural inaccuracies such as the issue mentioned above, minor as it may seem, render the volume problematic for students and other non-expert readers who may not be able to untangle truth from error in every case.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this volume is less than the sum of its parts. Many of these parts—the accessible introduction and contextual commentary in particular—nevertheless offer some use for the junior scholar approaching Lucian's *True History*,

¹³ Maciver (2022).

¹⁴ See 12–13, 41–4, 160, 172, 185, 189, and 201; Maciver (2022) n. 3.

¹⁵ See, for example, Clay and Brusuelas (2021) vi, 20 nn. 46, 41, and 51; Maciver (2022) n. 6.

¹⁶ Nesselrath (2022) 474–8.

especially for senior undergraduate students or early-stage graduate students aided by an instructor able to point out the errors in the text. Hopefully a second edition with corrections to the text and bibliography will be forthcoming. A corrected volume could more effectively accomplish the goal stated by Brusuelas, to provide for ‘students who are striving to improve both their Greek and their general knowledge of Greek culture’ a more accurate guide to this fantastic work of Lucianic literature (vi).

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