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## **Dynamics of Laughter: Mithrobarzanes' Disguise as a *Magos* in Lucian's *Menippus***

Few of the surviving works from Classical literature are so exuberant and satirical as those by Lucian of Samosata, the Epicurean<sup>1</sup> sophist who lived in the second century AD. The most characteristic pieces of Lucian are written in the form of comic dialogues, and consist in a blend of themes derived from Comedy and popular philosophy in which the lively prose is often interspersed with epic and tragic verse. Such features were probably inspired by the works of the Cynic philosopher Menippus of Gadara, as Lucian himself admits (see handout). Regrettably, Menippus' entire production is lost, but later sources (handout again) acknowledge that the main feature of Menippus' narrative was the presence of mundane trivialities and particularly, as Strabo says, the *spoudogéloion*, the "mixture of serious and facetious themes" (16.2.29). These are the features that characterise Lucian's dialogues as well.

Lucian is not only inspired by Menippus, he also becomes the main character of some of Lucian's most amusing works, and a remarkable one is the *Menippus* or *Nekyomanteia* (that is to say "the oracle of the dead").<sup>2</sup> A probable model of inspiration might have been a lost *Nekyia* written by Menippus himself, who in turn seems to have been inspired by a *nekylia* by the Cynic Crates of Thebes<sup>3</sup> and another *nekylia* written by Timon of Phlius.<sup>4</sup> We also need to acknowledge the comic *katabasis*

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Lucian *Alex.* 47 and the detailed remarks in Ogden, 2007b, pp.181-4.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Bremmer, 2015 for methodological remarks.

<sup>3</sup> Lloyd-Jones, Parson, 1983, *SH*, frg.347; 349, pp.164-5.

<sup>4</sup> Di Marco, 1989, p.21.

by Sopater<sup>5</sup> and the *Necyomantia* by Decimus Laberius',<sup>6</sup> perhaps influenced by Aeschylus' *Psychagogoi*.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, since all these works are all lost, we will never be able to exactly reconstruct the sources on which Lucian drew. It is also very likely, as we shall observe, that Lucian might have looked at the famous *katabasis* of Dionysus dressed up like Herakles in Aristophanes' *Frogs*. Another obvious model, and not just for Lucian, but for every *nekyia*, was the eleventh book of the *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus consults with the dead prophet Tiresias.

But what is the content of Lucian's *Necyomanteia*? In this dialogue, the protagonist Menippus tells a friend the story of his descent into the netherworld to question Tiresias about the best possible lifestyle. The very satirical response of the prophet is the following (PASSAGE 1): "The life of the ordinary man is the best and the wiser choice. So stop investigating the sky and seeking first beginnings and final ends; despise the syllogistic reasoning of the philosophers and, considering all such matters as rubbish, make it your one and only pursuit to arrange the present well and pass on laughing for the most part, and take nothing seriously."

In this paper I will focus on a specific ironical feature of the *Necyomanteia*, namely the comic disguise by means of which Menippus and especially his guide Mithrobarzanes, a Chaldean *magos* from Babylon, descend into Hades. In fact, to

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<sup>5</sup> Kaibel, 1899, *CGF*, frg.14, p.195.

<sup>6</sup> Panayotakis, 2010, pp.299-310, frg.42-3, with a detailed commentary.

<sup>7</sup> Radt, 1985, *TrGF*, pp.370-4, frg.273-8.

safely access the lands of the dead (as you can see in PASSAGE 2), Mithrobarzanes provides Menippus with a costume:<sup>8</sup> he has to hold a lyre to resemble the demigod Orpheus, to wear the lion skin like Herakles, and to put on a woollen hat (a *pilos*) like Odysseus; this is, in fact, a customary iconographical trait of Odysseus, and can already be found in fifth century depictions on pottery inspired by comedy and onstage performances (see PowerPoint slide 4). Furthermore, should someone ask Menippus' name, he would have to answer that he was Herakles, or Odysseus, or Orpheus. Now, all these mythological characters are renowned for having been able to access the underworld while still being alive (as you can see in the handout): Orpheus went into Hades to rescue his love Eurydice; Herakles to capture Cerberus and rescue Alcestis; Odysseus to consult with Tiresias. Lucian trivialises these high literary models subverting them by means of a comic costume, undoubtedly amusing his readership since – although the comic use of the lion skin as a Heraklean disguise is already found in Aristophanes' *Frogs* – no previous model can be found for Menippus' threefold disguise as Orpheus, Herakles, and Odysseus.

Let us now focus on the figure of Mithrobarzanes. At the beginning of the tale, Menippus asserts that, in order to enter the underworld, (PASSAGE 3) "I resolved to go to Babylon, and beg help from one of the Magi, the disciples and successors of Zoroaster; I heard that by means of incantations they open the gates of Hades to send

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. also Helm, 1906, p. 19; McCarthy, 1934, p. 34; Bompaire, 1958, pp.365-6.

anyone they want safely down and bring them back again". Menippus, thus, travels to Babylon where he makes the acquaintance of (PASSAGE 4) one of the Chaldeans "a wise man of wondrous skills", by the name of Mithrobarzànes. To prepare Menippus for the descent, Mithrobarzànes performs some preliminary rituals, accompanied by a speech which is ironically described by the narrator in these terms (PASSAGE 5): "he delivered a long speech that I could not really understand since his pronunciation was hasty and indistinct as that of the inferior heralds at the games". When the apt moment finally comes, Menippus wears his triple costume, while the Chaldean *magos* Mithrobarzànes (PASSAGE 2 again): wore a *magiké stolé*, this is "a magical garment, almost identical to that of the Medians."

At this point, we need to ask ourselves whether Mithrobarzànes' outfit has any ironical connotations, similarly to that of Menippus. According to Peter Kingsley<sup>9</sup> the description of the costume would be serious, while Daniel Ogden rightly observes that the "Persianising" name Mithrobarzanes might actually be parodic, as it echoes the name of the Indo-Iranian deity Mithra.<sup>10</sup> It is necessary to add that not only Mithrobarzanes' name, but the *magiké stolé* worn by this Chaldean has an ironical connotation as well, and in order to ascertain this, some emic terminological

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<sup>9</sup> Kingsley, 1994.

<sup>10</sup> Ogden, 2002, p.187. Previously (but very cautiously) also Helm, 1906, p.23.

clarifications<sup>11</sup> are required to cast more light on what a *magos* and a *Chaldaios* were thought to be by Lucian and his readership.

Let us begin with *magos* and its cognates *magikòs* and *magèia*: these terms are *voces mediae* and were used to indicate either the Persian priests and their religious lore, a source of philosophical wisdom, or the *gòetes*-enchanters and their eerie, numinous practices. An interesting evidence for this twofold connotation of *magos* can be found in the *Apology* by the Latin sophist Apuleius of Madauros, a contemporary of Lucian, tried under suspicion of having used magic to win over the wealthy widow Aemilia Pudentilla. Apuleius asserts that (PASSAGE 6): “As I read in many authors, *magus* according to the Persian language is what we call priest; then what kind of crime is to be a priest and have due knowledge, science and competence in ceremonial rules, sacrificial duties, and religious laws?”; but Apuleius also acknowledges another meaning of *magus*, as (PASSAGE 7): “according to the vulgar fashion my prosecutors believe that *magus* is properly who can achieve any wondrous things that he wishes by means of powerful incantations and by communion of speech with the immortal gods”. The latter negative connotation of *magos-mageia* and of their Latin counterparts *magus-magia*, was applied to encompass a broad range of preternatural beliefs. For example, in the *Natural History* by Pliny the Elder, the term *magia* indicates the religion of the Persians; it is applied to the demi-god Orpheus; to

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<sup>11</sup> On this methodology, cf. Pike, 1968, pp.37-72 and Bremmer, 1999=2008 who applies it to magic.

the Jewish religion; to the arts of the Thessalian matrons; to the Roman laws of the Twelve Tables; and to the Druids in Gaul and Britain. Interestingly enough, in Lucian's writings the Greek term *magos* is predominantly used with the negative meaning of 'evil enchanter' (this is *goes*). Even in the only occurrence in which *magos* seems to indicate the Persian priests, (*Macr.* 4-5) these figures are associated again with goetic magic.

We have observed so far the semantic ambivalence of *magos*. But what is the relationship between the Chaldeans and the Magi? Chaldeans and Magi were actually two distinct religious sects: from Herodotus onwards, a group of authorities regards the Magi as a Median tribe with religious functions in the Persian Empire (see handout).<sup>12</sup> The Chaldeans, instead, were originally the priests of Babylon renowned for their astrological wisdom. Gradually, the term *Chaldaios* – that is to say "Chaldean" – acquired the pejorative connotation of *mathematicòs* (this is "astrologer") and, because of this pejorative connotation, *Chaldaios* was used to indicate the *goes*-enchanter. But, as we have previously observed, *magos* was a synonym for *goes* as well, hence the connection between *magos* and *Chaldaios*.

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<sup>12</sup> In *The Education of Cyrus*, Xenophon reports that Cyrus ordered his dignitaries to wear a *Mediké stolé* (Median garment), and emphasises that it was the first time that the Persians wore Median robes (*X. Cyr.* 8.3.1). Even though there is no ironic undertone, Xenophon's account could have constituted an example of using a Median robes as a costume (let us recall that Mithrobarzanes wears "a magical garment, almost identical to that of the Medians").

As to the Magi in Babylon, according to the reconstruction by Joseph Bidez and Franz Cumont,<sup>13</sup> more recently reviewed by De Jong,<sup>14</sup> these were part of a specific community later called Magusaeans by some Christian authors, such as Clemens bishop of Rome, Eusebius, Epiphanius, and also in the Byzantine lexicon Suda. This community would be the result of a syncretism between Chaldean astrologers and the Magian priests following Cyrus and especially Xerxes' expedition (Plin. *Nat.* 30.2.8).

To evaluate the reputation of the Magi in Babylon, the most significant evidence comes from Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, written in the first half of the third century AD. Here the Pythagorean sage Apollonius is said to have consulted with the *magoi Babylonion* ("the Babylonian *magoi*"), but *magos* here seems semantically closer to *goes-enchanter* rather than indicating the 'venerable disciple of Zoroaster'; and, in fact, Philostratus stresses that Apollonius was not a *magos* (V.A. 1.2), and that he did not entirely appreciate their lore (V.A. 1.26). Thus, we may conclude that these Babylonian Magi were actually not the good ones to consult with.

Lucian was well-aware of the different semantic connotations of *magos* and *Chaldaios*, which are clearly observable in earlier sources and in those chronologically

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<sup>13</sup> Bidez and Cumont, 1938, v.I, p.34-8.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. De Jong, 1997, p.404-13.



close to Lucian. Being probably Epicurean, Lucian would have been inclined to mock the positive-religious meaning of the terms *magos* and *Chaldaios* by using their pejorative connotation; as we said, in fact, even when he alludes to the *magoi* as Persian priests, he associates them with goetic magic (*Macr.* 4-5). Furthermore, it can be argued that Lucian holds in strong contempt magico-goetic beliefs as a whole, to the extent that he devotes an entire dialogue entitled *Philopseudés* (this is “the Lover of Lies”) to counter this lore.

Unsurprisingly, in the *Nekyomanteia* Lucian consciously plays with the semantic ambiguity of the term *magos* in order to satirise the Zoroastrian high priests by means of a character who is nothing but a Babylonian *goes*. If we look again at the text (PASSAGE 3-4) Menippus asserts, in fact, that he was looking for a *magos*, a high priest and a disciple of Zoroaster, and he finds one in the person of the Chaldean Mithrobarzànes; this might already have a satirical effect. Since he is not a Persian priest, Mithrobarzànes needs a costume as well to aptly perform his magical ritual; therefore, he has to wear a *magiké stolé* (PASSAGE 2), a garment, which is said to be not entirely identical but “almost identical to that of the Medians”, to disguise himself as a high priest of Zoroaster. The subtle mockery underlying this sentence becomes now visible: the pseudo-*magos* disguises himself with a costume in the same way in which Menippus conceals his real identity holding the lyre, wearing the woollen hat, and the lion skin. In doing so both Menippus and Mithrobarzanes trivialise, or – to use

a Bakhtinian expression – they carnivalise higher models, these being the mythical figures of Orpheus, Herakles, and Odysseus, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the Magi, the high priests of the Persians.

In conclusion, a closer examination of the text, the reconstruction of the semantic ambiguity of the term *magos* and *Chaldaios*, and of the relationship between Magi and Chaldeans, has enabled us to gain a deeper insight of the dynamics of laughter in Lucian's *Nekyomanteia* and to recover an additional farcical undertone of Mithrobarzanes' costume, allowing us to better appreciate this exuberant piece of narrative of the Second Sophistic.

Leonardo Costantini

## DYNAMICS OF LAUGHTER: MITHROBARZANES' DISGUISE AS A MAGOS IN LUCIAN'S *MENIPPUS*

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### Lucian and Menippus

Lucian referring to Menippus' production, cf. *Bis Acc.* 33; *Pisc.* 26.

The satirical features of Menippus' narrative, cf. D.L. 6.99; M. Ant. 6.47; Paus. 16.2.29.

### Comical *Nekyiai* before Lucian

*Menippus* (D.L. 6.101); *Crates of Thebes* (Lloyd-Jones, Parson, 1983, SH, frg.347; 349, pp.164-5); *Timon of Phlius* (Di Marco, 1989, p.21); *Sopater* (Kaibel, 1899, CGF, frg.14, p.195); *Decimus Laberius* (Panayotakis, 2010, frg.42-3, pp.299-300 and the detailed commentary at pp.301-10); *Aeschylus* (Radt, 1985, *TrGF*, pp.370-4, frg.273-8).

### The *Nekyiai* of Odysseus, Herakles, and Orpheus.

*Odysseus*, cf. Hom. *Od.* 11.90-149 in particular for the meeting with Tiresias. For the presence of the *pilos* in iconographical representations, cf. *LIMC*, VI. 1, s.v. Odysseus, p.967; *LIMC*, VI. 2, fig. 93; 147.

*Herakles* and Cerberus, cf. Hom. *Il.* 8.367-9; *Od.* 11.623-6; Herakles and Alcestis, cf. E.

*Alc.* 837-57; 1140-2; Serv. *Aen.* 4.694. For a discussion, cf. Stafford, 2012, pp.26-7; 165-6; 203-4; 209-11 (Herakles and Cerberus), and 40; 87-8; 227-8 (Herakles and Alcestis).

*Orpheus*, cf. E. *Alc.* 357-62; Isoc. *Or.* 11.8; Pl. *Phd.* 68a; *Symp.* 179d-e; VERG. *G.* 4.453-525; OV. *Met.* 10.1-63.

Dionysus comically disguising himself as Herakles, cf. Ar. *Ra.* 46-7; 495-6.

### Lucian's *Menippus* or *Necyomantia*

PASSAGE 1: Lucianus *Nec.* 21 (ed. McLeod, 1991; translation adapted):

Ὁ τῶν ιδιωτῶν ἄριστος βίος, καὶ σωφρονέστερος παυσάμενος τοῦ μετεωρολογεῖν καὶ τέλη καὶ ἀρχὰς ἐπισκοπεῖν καὶ καταπτύσας τῶν σοφῶν τούτων συλλογισμῶν καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα λήθρον ἡγησάμενος τοῦτο μόνον ἐξ ἅπαντος θηράσῃ, ὅπως τὸ παρὸν εὖ θέμενος παραδράμῃς γελῶν τὰ πολλὰ καὶ περὶ μηδὲν ἐσπουδακῶς.

"The life of the ordinary man is the best and the wiser choice. So stop investigating the sky and seeking first beginnings and final ends; despise the syllogistic reasoning of the philosophers and, considering all such matters as rubbish, make it your one and only pursuit to arrange the present well and pass on laughing for the most part, and take nothing seriously."

PASSAGE 2: Lucianus *Nec.* 8:

αὐτὸς μὲν οὖν μαγικὴν τινα ἐνέδου στολήν τὰ πολλὰ εἰκουῖαν τῇ Μηδικῇ, ἐμὲ δὲ τουτοισὶ φέρων ἐνεσκεύασε, τῷ πύλῳ καὶ τῇ λεοντῇ καὶ προσέτι τῇ λύρᾳ, καὶ παρεκελεύσατο, ἦν τις ἔρηταί με τοῦνομα, Μένιππον μὴ λέγειν, Ἡρακλέα δὲ ἢ Ὀδυσσεά ἢ Ὀρφέα.

"He (sc. Mithrobarzanes) wore a magical garment, almost identical to that of the Medians and provided me with these items that I have on: the woollen hat, the lion skin and the lyre; and he

advised me, if someone should ask my name, not to say Menippus, but Herakles, or Orpheus, or Odysseus.”

PASSAGE 3: Lucianus *Nec.* 6:

ἔδοξεν εἰς Βαβυλῶνα ἐλθόντα δεηθῆναί τινος τῶν μάγων τῶν Ζωροάστρου μαθητῶν καὶ διαδόχων· ἤκουον δ' αὐτοὺς ἐπαυδαῖς τε καὶ τελεταῖς τισιν ἀνοίγειν τοῦ Ἅιδου τὰς πύλας καὶ κατάγειν ὃν ἂν βούλωνται ἀσφαλῶς καὶ ὀπίσω αὐθις ἀναπέμπειν.

“I resolved to go to Babylon, and beg help from one of the Magi, the disciples and successors of Zoroaster; I heard that by means of incantations they open the gates of Hades to send anyone they want safely down and bring them back again.”

PASSAGE 4: Lucianus *Nec.* 6:

ἐλθὼν δὲ συγγίγνομαι τινι τῶν Χαλδαίων σοφῷ ἀνδρὶ καὶ θεσπεσίῳ τὴν τέχνην [...] τοῦνομα δὲ ἦν αὐτῷ Μιθροβαρζάνης.

“Once arrived, I made the acquaintance of one of the Chaldeans, a wise man of wondrous skills [...] by the name of Mithrobarzanes.”

PASSAGE 5: Lucianus *Nec.* 7:

ῥῆσιν τινα μακρὰν ἐπιλέγων ἧς οὐ σφόδρα κατήκουον· ὥσπερ γὰρ οἱ φαῦλοι τῶν ἐν οἷς ἀγῶσι κηρύκων ἐπίτροχόν τι καὶ ἀσαφὲς ἐφθέγγετο.

“He delivered a long speech that I could not really understand since his pronunciation was hasty and indistinct as that of the inferior heralds at the games.”

### **The ambiguity of μάγος/μαγεία and magus/magia**

PASSAGE 6. APUL. *Apol.* 25.9 (ed. Hunink, V. 1997; my translation):

*Nam si, quod ego apud plurimos lego, Persarum lingua magus est qui nostra sacerdos, quod tandem est crimen sacerdotem esse et rite nosse atque scire atque callere leges ceremoniarum, fas sacrorum, ius religionum?*

“As I read in many authors, *magus* according to the Persian language is what we call priest; then what kind of crime is to be a priest and have due knowledge, science and competence in ceremonial rules, sacrificial duties, and religious laws?”

PASSAGE 7. APUL. *Apol.* 26.6:

*Sin vero more vulgari eum isti proprie magum existimant, qui communione loquendi cum deis immortalibus ad omnia quae velit incredibili[a] quadam vi cantaminum polleat, oppido miror cur accusare non timuerint quem posse tantum fatentur.*

“But if according to the vulgar fashion my prosecutors believe that *magus* is properly who can achieve any wondrous things that he wishes by means of powerful incantations and by communion of speech with the immortal gods, then I am surprised that they did not fear to accuse one whom they acknowledge to be so powerful.”

Pliny and magic: as the religion of the Persian (*Nat.* 30.3); Orpheus as *magus* (30.7); magic amongst the Jews (30.11); Thessalian magic (30.6); magic in the Twelve Tables (30.12); Druids as *magi* in Gaul and Britain (30.13).

Μάγος as 'evil enchanter' in Lucian, cf. *Alex.* 6; 21; *Demon.* 23; 25; *Philops.* 12; 14; 15; *Merc.Cond.* 27; *Ps.-Lucianus Asin.* 4. Cf. also Lucianus *Macr.* 4-5, where the Persian priests are associated again with goetic magic.

### The Chaldeans and the Magi

Magi in Herodotus: a Median tribe, cf. *Hdt.* 1.101; for their religious functions, cf. *Hdt.* 1.108; 1.132; 1.140; cf. also *Pl. Alc.* I. 121e-122a = *APUL. Apol.* 25.11; *D.Chr.* 38.41.

Chaldeans as priests of Babylon, cf. *Hdt.* 1.181; 1.183; *Diod. Sic.* 2.29-3; *D.L.* 1.6.

The pejorative semantic shift of *Χαλδαῖος/Chaldaeus*, cf. Lucianus, *Fug.* 8; *TAC. Ann.* 2.27; *TAC. Ann.* 2.32 (*mathematicis magisque*) = *C.D.* 57.15.8 (τούς τε ἀστρολόγους καὶ τοὺς γόητας); *GEL.* 1.9.6; *JUV.* 6.553-71; [*QUINT.*] *Decl.* 4 (*mathematicus* as 'astrologer'); *SHA Heliogab.* 9.1; *Hist. Alex. Mag. rec. vet.* 1.4.3-4; 3.30.6; *Cod. Theod.* 9.16.4 (*Chaldaei et magi et ceteri quos maleficos ob facinorum magnitudinem vulgus appellat*); *Adnot. Lucan.* 8.219; *Ps.August. Quast. Test.* 63 p.111, 19; *Hsch. s.v. Χαλδαῖοι; Frag. Bob. De nomine*, p.544, 1.19.

The distinction between Chaldeans and Magi, cf. *APUL. Fl.* 15.14; 15.16; *D.L.* 9.34; *Porph. VP* 6.

### The Magi in Babylon

Xerxes expedition and settling of the Magi in Babylon, cf. *PLIN. Nat.* 30.2.8.

On the Magusaeans (*Μαγουσαῖοι*), cf. *Basil. Serm.* 41, p.402; *Clem. Rom. Recogn.* 9.21; 9.27; *Eus. P.E.* 6.10.16; 6.10.38; *Epiphani. Ancor.* 113.2; *Suid. ed. Adler* A 4257; Γ 365; M 29; Π 1367.

Philostratus against the Babylonian μάγοι, cf. *Philostr. VA* 1.2; 1.26.

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