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Sailing to the Underworld on a Sea of Milk: Orphic Allusion and the Transition to the Underworld in Lucian’s *Verae Historiae*

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**INTRODUCTION**

A text is like a safe; all its treasure is locked away tight. The reader needs the proper combination to get in. Lucian gives us the combination to the lock of the *Verae Historiae* by telling us that he alludes to many other authors in his work: ἀλλ' ὅτι καὶ τῶν ἱστορουμένων ἐκαστὸν οὐκ ἀκωμῳδήτως πρὸς τίνας ἤνικται τῶν παλαιῶν ποιητῶν τε καὶ συγγραφέων καὶ φιλοσόφων...καὶ ὀνομαστὶ ἄν ἔγραφον, εἰ μὴ καὶ σὺτω σοι ἐκ τῆς ἀναγνώσεως φαίνεσθαι ἐμελον “each thing I wrote contains some tacit illusion, not without humor, to ancient poets and historians and philosophers...and I would have mentioned them by name, if they themselves would not be known to you from the reading.” (*VH* I.21). Understanding this text is all about intertextuality, and even though Lucian tells us that he will not

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1 Luciani (1972, ch. 2).

2 Intertextuality, referencing another text either by quoting it directly or by creating a scene that should remind the reader of the other text, is a staple of the authors of the so called Second Sophistic. This was one of the means by which the Greek authors of the Roman period showed off their education. Along with using intertextual allusions, these authors would write in the Atticistic style, an artificially constructed dialect of Greek, the aim of which was to mimic the classical Greek of Athens. For further reading on the Second Sophistic, c.f. Whittmarsh (2001); Whitmarsh (2005); and Schmitz (1997).
mention the names of the authors he is alluding to, since his readers are so educated that they will recognize them on their own, we are presented with a list of examples of the authors he is not naming (VH I.3), along with these are πολλοὶ δὲ καὶ ἄλλοι, “many others.”

A strange adventure begins the Second Book of the Verae Historiae, the voyage through the Sea of Milk (VH II.3-4) searching for allusions, as Lucian tells us to, in order to discover who these πολλοὶ δὲ καὶ ἄλλοι are; this adventure seems to form part of the Underworld episode, and plays upon a religious phenomenon, the Underworld as understood in the world of the mystery cults, specifically as a play on the use of milk as described by the Gold Tablets of the Orphics.

I do not wish to imply that Lucian is dealing with anything more than a superficial view of the Underworld, as held by the mystery cults. Lucian often uses this way of dealing with religion, pointing it out without dealing with it in any deep sense - we see this in The Passing of Peregrinus, in which a large section of the work deals with Christianity. Yet we hear very little of the actual beliefs of Christianity, other than Christ being the “Crucified Sophist.” Nor do I suggest that the entire Sea of Milk scene alludes only to the Orphic mystery cult. Instead I am following Wolfgang Iser’s concept of the ‘implied reader.’ Lucian does not give concrete allusions, but offers signals to the “… addressee ‘it (the work) anticipates…” that, in this case, open the door to such an interpretation. This way of working often offers multiple interpretations for each scene in the text, giving Lucian the breathing room, so to speak, to offer the “tacit illusions” he promises in the preface.

We can find other possible allusions to a Sea of Milk, for example, following Fritz Graf’s interpretation of milk. Milk plays on the foreign quality of this scene, as milk was drunk by the barbarians, not by Greeks. This also serves to contrast

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3 How, however, does some of the important secondary literature deal with the Sea of Milk? In Georgiadou, and Larmour (1998, pp. 178-180), the commentators also interpret this scene in a religious sense, connecting the Sea of Milk back to the Milky Way and the milk sweat of the Moonmen in Lucian VH I.16 (c.f. 111 and 179), which they connect with the Pythagorean belief that the Milky Way was the place of the soul before and after birth. In von Möllendorf (2000, pp. 272-275), the commentator does not mention any Underworld connection in the Sea of Milk, he focuses on the persons of Galatea and Tyro the goddess and ruler of this island respectively (ibid). In Rütten (1997), the Sea of Milk is not discussed.

4 Lucian. The Passing of Peregrinus 11-16.

5 C.f. The Passing of Peregrinus 13.

6 As laid out in Eagleton (1983, p. 84).

7 Eagleton (1983, p. 84).

and, through this contrast, to connect\(^9\) the Island of Cheese with the Island of the Vine Women, on which the mariners find a more Greek beverage in a river of wine. The use of milk in descriptions of the paradisic golden age\(^10\) helps to foreshadow the bliss of the Island of the Blessed, and further helps to tie the Sea of Milk to the Underworld scene that follows it.

The recently published edition on the Getty Hexameters shows milk in used in another context - magical incantations:

\[\text{ὀσσα κατὰ σκιαρῶν ὄρεων μελαναύγει χώρῳ Φερσεφόνης ἐκ κήπου ἄγει πρὸς ἀμολογῶν ἄνάγκη[i] τὴν τετραβήμονα παῖς ἁγίην Δήμητρος ὀπηδόν, αἰγ’ ἀκαμαντορόα νασμοῦ θαλεροῖο γάλακτος βριθομένην.} \text{(GH 8-13)}\]

“whenever he leads the sacred four footed attendant of the child of Demeter, by force, down from the dark mountains to the dark gleaming land of Persephone, out of the garden, in the dark of night, laden with the rich unwavering stream of milk from the goat.”

Although the mention of Persephone in this text seems to indicate an origin in the Orphic religion,\(^11\) the commentators on the text, while pointing out the relationship between the two bodies of religious literature,\(^12\) put the Getty Hexameters in their own category, as a body of magical incantations for various purposes, rather than specifically for the journey to the Underworld.\(^13\) Such a distinction, if even made in late antiquity, since the text does seem to become identified with Orpheus, may be a moot point, as Lucian is far more interested in creating interesting allusions than in maintaining such distinctions.

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9. See below for more on the contrast and connection of these two scenes.
11. As we see in the quotations from the Gold Tablets below.
THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE SEA OF MILK AND THE GOLD TABLETS

What, then, is the connection between the Orphic gold tablets and the Sea of Milk? Several times the tablets mention an animal leaping or falling into milk. For example, in a 4th century B.C. tablet from Pelinna we read:

You have just died and have just been born, thrice happy, on this day. Tell Persephone that Bacchus himself has liberated you. A bull, you leapt into the milk. Swift, you leapt into the milk. A ram, you leapt into the milk. You have wine, a happy privilege and you will go under the earth, once you have accomplished the same rites as the other happy ones.

Another 4th century tablet from Thurii states:

Yet when the soul leaves the light of the soul behind, you must go to the right thiasos, keeping everything well. Hail, after having had an experience such as you never had before. You have been born a god, from the man that you were. A kid, you fell into the milk. Hail, hail; take the path to the right toward the sacred meadows and groves of Persephone.

There are three main opinions as to what exactly these tablets mean. The deeper meaning behind these texts need concern us. A cursory reading fits into the paradigm of the ‘implied reader,’ laid out in the introduction. Lucian has no desire to deal with the actual theology of the Orphic religion, but to give his readers as many allusions as possible, testing their knowledge of literature to its limits. It is also

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14 For a more comprehensive look at Orphism as well as the Orphic Gold Tablets, please see (among others): Guthrie (1993), Burkhert (1977), and Bernabe (2008).


17 The first possibility is that falling into the milk alludes to some sort of Orphic baptism, in which the initiate would be immersed in milk; this type of ritual is, however, nowhere attested. The second possibility links the animal falling into milk with the practice of sacrificing a goat and cooking it in milk as part of an initiation rite in some Oriental cults. This does not explain the other animals falling into the milk, since the Oriental cults only include the sacrifice of a goat. The third possibility, which is the one Bernabe and Jimenez san Cristobal give the most credence to, has the initiate drinking milk, putting him symbolically back into the condition of a child. Bernabe and Jimenez san Cristobal (2008, pp. 76-79).
unlikely that Lucian would be aware of any deeper meaning, unless he was an initiate in the mystery himself, which, given his willingness to satirize various religious forms, seems not to have been the case. If we make a cursory reading of these tablets we see that the journey to the Underworld is begun by falling into milk and only after this happens, can one go “under the earth” or into the “sacred meadows and groves of Persephone.” Falling into the milk seems to be the transition point for the initiate between life and death, perhaps the moment of death itself, and it is this function of milk as this transition that Lucian uses the Sea of Milk. The mariners go to the Underworld; this is impossible for someone who is still alive. Only the greatest heroes such as Hercules, Odysseus, and Orpheus can enter the Underworld while still alive and hope to return to the world of the living. Therefore the mariners must be dead, but how did they die? There was no scene of violence in which the entire crew was massacred. Instead Lucian plays upon the Orphic image of falling into the milk as the moment of death to give his mariners a metaphorical death, which has its counterpoint in their metaphorical resurrection on the Island of Dreams. The Sea of Milk as a metaphorical death is underscored by the fact that they do not fall into this milk, but rather sail across it, as if in the boat of Charon the ferryman.

FURTHER ALLUSIONS TO ORPHISM IN THE VERAE HISTORIAE

Thus far, we have been discussing the Sea of Milk episode in terms of the Orphic mystery cult. There are, however, other mystery cults in which milk plays an important part, and these may be alluded to by Lucian in this passage as well. Another mystery cult in which milk plays an important role is the cult of Isis. Milk has played an important role both in the ritual and in the iconographic/theological expression of the cult, in so far as these can be differentiated from each other. The ritualistic use

18 For example in his work On Sacrifices.
19 The view of Lucian as driven by anti-religious sentiment is an antiquated one, however, it is uncontested that he constantly uses religion and philosophy as a focus of his satire; a strange attitude if he were convinced of their veracity.
20 This is the view of Edmonds, though he believes that it is also the moment of rebirth (2011, p. 325).
21 Entering the Underworld while still alive may itself be a reference to Orpheus.
22 Kristen Gentile, for example, interprets the Sea of Milk scene and the Orphic Gold Tablets as an allusion to the Dyonisiac mystery religion. Gentile (2008).
of milk is seen at the end of the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius. In a rare glimpse into the workings of a mystery cult, Apuleius describes his conversion to the cult and a procession. The use of milk as a libation in the ritual, especially since it is poured from a vessel shaped like a woman’s breast, connects the liturgical role of the milk to the iconographic/theological role that milk plays in this cult. Isis’ most important role is as a mother figure, not only as a mother to the initiates, but also to her son, Horus. There are numerous representations of Isis and Horus together, such as the one in the Louvre. These representations are nearly identical: Isis sits on a throne with Horus seated in her lap on the left side and Horus is depicted nursing from her breast.

Although there does not seem to be an immediate connection between the Cult of Mithras, an important soldiers’ cult of late antiquity whose underground sanctuaries dot the Roman Empire, and the use of milk, such as there was with the Isis cult, Cumont points out that milk, along with oil and honey, were offered in sacrifices by the Magi in Cappadocia and out of this tradition rose the mysteries of Mithras.23 That Lucian would be aware of these mysteries, and could play upon them in his writing is entirely possible: “Lucian of Samosata, in a passage apparently inspired by the practices he had witnessed in his own country, could still deride the repeated purifications, the interminable chants, and the long Medean robes of the secterians of Zoroaster. Furthermore, he taunted them with being ignorant even of Greek and with mumbling an incoherent and unintelligible gibberish.”24 Despite the use of milk in other mysteries and references to these mysteries in other works, the importance of Orpheus and the Orphics in other parts of the *Verae Historiae* brings them into focus here.

Perhaps the least contentious allusion to the Orphics lies in Lucian’s description of the idealized Island of Reward for the bodiless souls of the “Blessed.”25 This is, though, not the only similarity between this Underworld and the afterlife of Orphic eschatology.26 A terrible place of punishment for the “Condemned,” awaits the

23  Cumont (1903, p. 26).
24  Cumont, referencing Lucian *Menippus*, c. 6 and Lucian *Deorum Concilium*, c. 9 (1903, pp. 27-28).
25  See below.
26  Lucian’s Underworld also has an indirect reference to Orpheus himself. A lengthy scene in the Underworld is the Symposium of the Blessed, in which many famous personages make music for the souls of the blessed (c.f. *VH* II.15.) Among the various famous musicians mentioned in this section, Orpheus is conspicuously absent. We meet many historical and quasi-historical figures in the Underworld; it is strange that Orpheus is missing, especially since he would be the natural choice to sing the poems of Homer to the blessed souls. I believe that this can be explained by Orphic iconography found on vases in southern Italy.
unjust in the Orphic religion as well. The guards who capture the mariners as they wander across the Island of the Blessed remind one of the guardians of the Orphic Underworld whom the initiate had to appease with the passwords given to them. Lucian may also use the Orphic idea of the soul as air in his description of the souls on the Island of the Blessed. The Island of the Damned, however, gives a more interesting possible allusion specifically regarding who is being punished. Guthrie says: “The good state was for the Orphic represented by purity. This could not be attained without initiation...which as we have seen included moral goodness...” Punishment is meted out, not for major hubris against the gods, but against those who refuse to be initiates and who are not righteous. In Lucian the lack of morality seems to be basis for punishment: καὶ μεγίστας ἁπασῶν τιμωρίας ύπέμενοι οἱ ψευσάμενοι τι παρά τὸν βίον καὶ οἱ μὴ τάληθή συγγεγραφότες “those who lied during their life, and those who did not write the truth awaited the greatest and most fearsome punishments” (VH II.31). Similar to Orphism, however, not merely a lack of morality causes the punishment, but also the refusal to follow certain religious obligations. In the case of the Orphics, we see the refusal to be initiated; in the case of Lucian, we see the refusal to tell the truth.

Rereading the first Book with this Orphic context in mind yields even more Orphic allusions. Lucian and his companions travel to the moon and to the sun. In the teachings of the Pythagorean School, the sun and moon were considered to be the Islands of the Blessed. The close association of the Pythagoreans and the Or-

Here Orpheus is depicted playing his lyre in the Underworld, either in the presence of maenads or of the underworld deities. There are no deities in the Underworld of Lucian, not even Hades or Persephone are present, only temples to the gods. If there are no gods present, then, because of his strong association with the deities, there can also be no Orpheus.

27 See the description of a dualistic Underworld above; though the Orphics also believed in the transmigration of souls, which does not come up in Lucian.

28 Guardians in the Underworld also come up in Plato's myth of Er; c.f. Pl. Politeia. 614b-614d.

29 See Guthrie (1993, p. 94). This may, though, be an allusion to the description of the souls of the dead in the Underworld of Homer (Odyssey Book 11) or perhaps it is an allusion to both.

30 c.f. VH II.12.


32 It is on the Island of the Dreams that we see the religious aspect of the truth in Lucian (VH II.33): πλησίον ναοί δύο, Ἀπάτης καὶ Αλήθειας... (“and nearby were two temples, to Lie and Truth...”). By turning truth into a godhead he creates a sort of truth cult, and those uninitiated, those who do not tell the truth, are punished in the Underworld.

33 c.f. Iamblichos. Vit. Pyth. 82.
Orphics allow us to see an Orphic allusion here. The moon plays an important role in the Orphic religion proper as well; the moon and sun were created by Phanes, the progenitor of the gods, and are inhabited. Phanes fits in well with Lucian’s description of the moon men, because he was of both sexes, so that he could give birth to the gods; the people of the moon in Lucian also have to bring forth children without women, so each one has to function as both man and woman.

It is, then, the combination of the Sea of Milk as the moment of death and the use of Orphic allusion in other parts of the Verae Historiae that puts the intertextual connection here in the context of the Orphic Mysteries.

**Further Allusions to the Gold Tablets**

Other instances in which Lucian alludes to the gold Tablets support the contention that Lucian uses the Sea of Milk as a reference to Orphic belief are. Although the authors were not themselves members of these cults, they could have had access to these texts is explored by Reinhold Merkelbach in his (not uncontested) work, Roman und Mysterien in der Antike. The very setup of the Island of the Blessed seems to be another allusion to the eschatology laid out in the Gold Tablets:

“The Gold Tablets don’t say much about what ultimately awaits the initiate…What little they do say, however, aligns well with Hesiod’s paradisiacal vision: the initiates expect to dwell among meadows and groves (3.6, 27.4), to enjoy abundant wine (26 a.6 and b.6), to be happy and blessed – gods instead of humans (5.9), to dwell among the blessed (6.7, 7.7, 26a.7) or to live among the heroes, as a hero (2.11, perhaps 8.2).”

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34 There are even Orphic poems attributed to Pythagoras; c.f. Guthrie (1993, p. 217).
36 For the moon as a reference to the Orphics and the Pythagoreans, see Georgiadou and Larmour (1998, pp. 39, 84-85, 125, 129, 144).
37 Perhaps the Bacchic mysteries as well; c.f. Gentile (2008).
38 Merkelbach (1962).
On the Island of the Blessed, the inhabitants enjoy their eternal symposium: τῷ Ἑλυσίῳ καλουμένῳ πεδίῳ λειμών ἐστιν κάλλιστος καὶ περὶ αὐτόν ὄλη παντοτική "on the plain of Elesium, which is a most beautiful meadow, and round about it is a dense wood." (VH II.14). Copious amounts of wine certainly play a major part in the Symposium of the Blessed in Lucian as well:

άλλ’ ἔστι δένδρα περὶ τὸ συμπόσιον ύλινα μεγάλα τῆς διαυγεστάτης ύλη, καὶ καρπός ἐστι τῶν δενδρων τούτων ποτήρια παντοτικά καὶ τὰς κατασκευὰς καὶ τὰ μεγέθη. ἐπειδὰν οὖν παρίῃ τις ἐς τὸ συμπόσιον, τρυγήσας ἕν ἢ καὶ δύο τῶν ἐκπωμάτων παρατίθεται, τὰ δὲ αὐτίκα οἶνον πλήρη γίνεται. (VH II.14)

“But there are large trees around the symposium, made of translucent glass, the fruit of these trees are cups of various sizes and shapes. Whenever they go to the symposium, he plucks one or two of the fruits, which he places next to him, these fill up immediately with wine.”

It is not only the wine, though, that brings happiness to those on the Island of the Blessed: πηγαί εἰσι δύο παρὰ τὸ συμπόσιον, ἡ μὲν γέλωτος, ἡ δὲ ἡδονῆς “there are two springs by the symposium, one of laughter and the other of happiness.” (VH II.16). These springs keep those involved in the symposium in the constant state of happiness and blessedness promised to the initiate. Lucian encounter the heroes indicated in the Gold Tablets: Βούλομαι δὲ εἰπεῖν καὶ τῶν ἐπισήμων ὁστίνας παρ’ αὐτοῖς ἐθεασάμην πάντας μὲν τοὺς ἡμιθέους καὶ τοὺς ἐπὶ Ἰλιον στρατεύσαντας “I wish to speak about the famous persons I saw among them; all of the demigods and those who fought at Troy.” (VH II.17). Lucian does not meet these personages though he is promised a place among the best of them after he returns. Not only is the Island of the Blessed is laid out just as in the Gold Tablet, but Lucian even receives the reward promised the initiate of the Orphic mystery in those tablets.

40 As discussed above.
The Sea of Milk as Part of the Underworld.

As one reads the Sea of Milk scene, any connection to the mystery cults seems to be the furthest thing from Lucian’s mind. He seems, rather, by mentioning Galatea, to be operating in the realm of the ‘standard’ Greek myth. There is also nothing in the description of the Island of Cheese that points to the rituals of the paradisic afterlife of an initiate in a mystery cult. Using Iser’s theory, however, we must be on the lookout for even small indications that a reference is being made. If we look at the position of the Sea of Milk in the larger narrative, we see that the Sea of Milk serves as the introductory adventure for the Underworld episode because it serves as one end of a chiasmus formed between the first and third episodes.41

Two islands, the Island of the Vine Women and the Island of Cheese, respectively introduce the first and third episodes. Both of these islands have extraordinary types of vines: those on the Island of the Vine Women provide ready made wine for the river; those on the Island of Cheese exude milk. On both islands we also see traces of divinity.42 On the Island of the Vine Women, there is the River of Wine:

τινα στήλην χαλκού πεποιημένην, Ἑλληνικοῖς γράμμασιν
cataγεγραμμένην, ἀμυδροῖς δὲ καὶ ἐκτετριμμένοις, λέγουσαν “Ἄχρι
toúτων Ἡρακλῆς καὶ Διόνυσος ἀφίκοντο. ἦν δὲ καὶ ἴχνη δύο πλησίον
ἐπὶ πέτρας, τὸ μὲν πλεθριαῖον, τὸ δὲ ἔλαττον ἐμοὶ δοκεῖν, τὸ μὲν τοῦ
Διονύσου, τὸ μικρότερον, θάτερο δὲ Ἡρακλέους. (VH I.7)

Some stela was there, made of bronze, inscribed with Greek letters, faint and rubbed out. It said: ‘Dionysus and Herakles reached up to here.’ Nearby there were two footprints in the rock, the one was a plethra long, the other was smaller, it seemed to me, the smaller one was that of Dionysos, the other that of Herakles.

41 It is important to note that this is only one interpretation of the Sea of Milk; there are other interpretations, many of which have been discussed by Gregoriadou and Larmour, and Möllendorf, among others. In the complex and layered works of Lucian, there are multiple aspects to many of his allusions. I do not wish to contradict others who have offered interpretations of this passage, but to point out another possible “aha” moment offered by Lucian.

On the Island of Cheese, there is the milk, but here too the mariners come upon material proof of a godhead:


There was a temple built in the middle of the island, dedicated to Galatea the Nymph, which the inscription showed.

On both of these islands, there is also a potential for interaction. On the Island of the Vine Women, this interaction occurs when two of the mariners in Lucian’s crew have sexual relations with the women and turn into vines themselves, and their companions abandon them in horror and return to the ship.\textsuperscript{43} On the Island of Cheese, a similar scene leads the reader to believe a similar interaction will take place. There is, however, no such moment: the mariners stay on the island for five days, but meet with no new creatures.\textsuperscript{44}

Both these episodes also conclude with two more islands. The first episode ends in Lampopolis and the third on The Island of Dreams. In Lampopolis the mariners are greeted with a strange sight: lamps that can move and can speak.\textsuperscript{45} But what would naturally come as a shock, living lamps, is made familiar by giving the lamps social status as in human society.\textsuperscript{46} The scene becomes even more familiar when the narrator happens to find his own lamp among those in the city, and the lamp is able to give him all the latest news from home.\textsuperscript{47} These lamps do not threaten the mariners, and even offer to take them up as guest-friends, but the mariners are terrified,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{43} c.f. \textit{VH} I.8.
  \item \textsuperscript{44} c.f. Möllendorf (2000, pp. 273-274). No interaction occurs because there are no strange creatures that dwell on the island. The name Galatea, however, brings with it an implicit connection to the Cyclops Polyphemus; where one is we would expect to find the other. This expectation is not fulfilled, and the Cyclops is never seen.
  \item \textsuperscript{45} c.f. \textit{VH} I.29.
  \item \textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{47} By telling Lucian about what is happening back home, the lamp also gives him proof that his story is true. Lucian can now return home knowing what went on in his absence, knowledge he could only gain from something that has access to his household (for the idea that lamps know what is happening in the household, c.f. Möllendorf (2000, pp. 198-199)).
\end{itemize}
so scared in fact that they can neither eat nor sleep. Here we have an example of potential interaction, as on the island of Tyroessa. The offer of guest-friendship by the lamps leads the reader to expect the mariners to have an adventure with them, while the fear expressed by the mariners leads us to believe something terrible will happen to them. This expectation, though, is not fulfilled, and the mariners can continue on their journey without any harm coming to them.

The concluding adventure of the third episode takes place on the Island of Dreams. Here the mariners find dreams that, just like the lamps, walk and talk, have social status, and take them in as guest friends. The mariners even find dreams that are familiar to them and learn tidings of their home from them. Again we would expect the mariners to be afraid; if they were so terrified of living lamps, how much more should they be afraid of living dreams? But the mariners are not, and allow themselves to be taken care of and feted by the dreams. Here the potential interaction, passed up by the mariners in Lampopolis, occurs. The mariners stay with the dreams until they are ripped from their sleep by a loud clap of thunder and immediately supply their ship and disembark.

In this way the episodes are structured chiastically: the introductory adventure of the first episode culminates in interaction, which is missing in the third episode. In the concluding adventure, this is reversed: the first episode ends in the potential for interaction, while, in the third episode, this interaction takes place. This chiasmus shows that all of these adventures should be examined in the context of the whole episode and not as individual, unrelated scenes.

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48 c.f. VH I.29.
49 c.f. VH II.34.
50 c.f. VH II.34.
51 c.f. VH II.35.
52 See figure 1.
**Figure 1: The Chiastic Structure of Episodes I and III.**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Episode I: The Voyage to the Moon</th>
<th>Episode III: The Underworld</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introductory Adventure:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Introductory Adventure:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Island of the Vinewomen</td>
<td>Sea of Milk and Island of Cheese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Actual Interaction: Death</td>
<td><em>Potential Interaction: Expected interaction with inhabitants of the Island never occurs.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of several mariners at the hands of the Vinewomen.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Main body of Action:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Main body of Action:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Capture by the Moon men.</td>
<td>1. The Corkfooters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Welcome at the Court of Endymion.</td>
<td>2. Capture by the border guards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Battle against the Sun people.</td>
<td>3. Welcome by Rhadamanthys.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Leavetaking.</td>
<td>5. Funeral games and invasion by the inhabitants of the Island of the Damned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Concluding Adventure:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Concluding Adventure:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lampopolis</td>
<td>The Island of Dreams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Potential Interaction: The Mariners are terrified, and therefore do not interact with the lamps.</em></td>
<td><em>Actual Interaction: The Mariners are accepted and feted by the dreams.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What are the implications if the chiastic adventures act as introduction and conclusion to their respective episodes? These adventures seem to act as a transition from the normal world to the extraordinary world in which the main action takes place. This idea of transition is supported by the isolation of the Underworld from the rest of the world. The battle between the souls of the heroes and the souls of the damned shows that these two areas are connected; the battle is only possible because the souls of the damned are able to sail from their island to the Island of the Blessed. We find out, however, that the souls are not able to sail anywhere, but must stay within the confines of the Underworld. When Helen and Kinyras decide to elope and flee the Island together, they nearly escape but, in fact, fail. They almost reach the Island of Cheese. If the Island of Cheese marks a point beyond which the souls of the heroes cannot sail, then that part of the Sea of Milk is within the bounds of the Underworld and part is not, thus making the Island a transition point from the land of the living to the land of the dead.

SYMBOLIC DEATH

To cross the Sea of Milk, then, is to die. The mariners, though, are alive: τί παθόντες ἔτι ζῶντες ἱεροῦ χωρίου ἐπιβαίημεν “what have you suffered that we come, alive, to the holy land,” (VH II.10). This question of Rhadamanthys seems, at first, to be clear - the mariners are also to be punished for their curiosity, but only after they die, since they are alive and therefore out of the jurisdiction of Rhadamanthys. Lucian, however, as he admits in the preface, is constantly lying, and the living state of the mariners is soon put to question. Kinyras, one of the crew falls in love with Helen, and decides to flee with her. How, though, can these two interact? Kinyras is a living man and Helen is ἀναφεῖς καὶ ἄσαρκοι εἰσὶν “they are untouchable and fleshless” (VH II.12). Thus, no physical interaction should be possible between these two lovers. However these two manage their love, they make their escape, but are quickly apprehended and brought back to face judgment. Kinyras (along with his confederates) is bound up, tortured, and dragged off for punishment on the Island of the Damned. If Kinyras was not under the authority of Rhadamanthys when they

53  c.f. VH II.23.
54  c.f. VH II.26.
55  c.f. VH II.25.
56  c.f. VH II.26.
arrived, why is he now? And if they were under his authority then, why were they not punished? The punishment foreseen by Rhadamanthys for the rest of the crew too, seems to have been abandoned:

αὐτοὶ μέντοι παρεμυθοῦντο λέγοντες οὐ πολλῶν ἐτῶν ἀφίξεσθαι πάλιν ὡς αὐτούς, καὶ μοι ἤδη εἰς τούπιὸν θρόνον τε καὶ κλισίαν ἐπεδείκνυσαν πλησίον τῶν ἀρίστων. (VH II.27)

“they consoled me, saying that I would return to them before too many years went by, and they showed me the throne and couch, prepared for me near the best of them.”

Despite this uncertainty, Rhadamanthys’ question places our mariners in the tradition of heroes who undergo a *katabasis*. Certainly this can be interpreted as one of the many allusions to the *Odyssey* in the *Verae Historiae*. But this also puts Lucian and his men in the same tradition as other heroes such as Heracles and Orpheus. That Lucian stands in this tradition helps us in our interpretation. Heracles, before he journeys to the Underworld, becomes an initiate in the Eleusynian mysteries; and Orpheus is himself the pseudo-historical founder of a mystery religion. The connection with Orpheus is an important one, as Lucian seems to be using the position of the Sea of Milk to allude specifically to a certain aspect of the Orphic mystery cult.

CONCLUSION

Did Lucian use Orphic imagery for his ‘implied reader’? Since the introductory adventures of the episodes are transitional, bringing the mariners into the sphere where action takes place; and since this action takes place in the Underworld, then the Sea of Milk can be considered to be the Orphic symbol of the transition from life to death. Guthrie, who claims that the Tablets were quotations out of a longer eschatological literature which had a great impact on, for example, Plato, answers the question of how Lucian and other authors would have gotten access to these Tablets.58 This eschatological literature, then, provided Lucian with his allusions. It would be too much of a coincidence that the transition from life to death in Lucian would be marked by milk without some tacit illusion to the Orphic Gold Tablets, in which falling into the milk marks the moment of the initiates’ death.

Works Cited


