In Heaven unlike on Earth. Rhetorical Strategies in Julian's Caesars*

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The emperor Julian's Caesars is an extremely amusing dialogue whose richness, both in content and form, eludes its ascription to a single literary genre.\(^1\) The dialogue begins with an intervention by Julian in which he addresses an interlocutor\(^2\) to whom he will retell a myth that Hermes told him on how the gods celebrated the Saturnalia with a symposium to which Roman emperors (and similar powerful figures) were invited. The first lines of the dialogue explain why Julian felt compelled to write this work (306a–b):

> It is the season of the Kronia, during which the god allows us to make merry. But, my dear friend, as I have no talent for amusing or entertaining (γελοῖον δὲ οὐδὲν οὐδὲ τερπνὸν οἶδα ἐγὼ) I must methinks take pains not to talk nonsense (...) For by nature I have no turn for raillery, or parody, or raising a laugh (Πέφυκε γὰρ οὐδαμῶς ἐπιτήδειος οὔτε σκώπτειν οὔτε παρῳδεῖν οὔτε παρῳδεῖν οὔτε γελοιάζειν). But since I must obey the ordinance of the god of the festival, should you like me to relate to you by way of entertainment a myth in which there is perhaps much that is worth hearing?\(^3\)

These opening lines may well be considered authentically and truly autobiographical, reminding us of Julian's bitter and humorous Misopogon, a *rara avis*

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1 For the date and place of composition of this work, and its problematic transmission under different titles (Kronia, Caesars, Symposium), see Bowersock (1982: 160, n. 6); Gallardo (1972: 282–284); Pack (1946: 154, n. 9); Lacombrade (1964: 4–5); Relihan (1993: 119); Sardiello (2000: VII–XI, XXVII–XXXVI).

2 On the identity of the interlocutor, see Elm (2012: 285).

3 Translations of Julian's Caesars taken from Calver Wright (1913).
that shares with *Caesars* his unmistakable blend of autobiography, self-parody and social chastisement. His acknowledgment of a lack of any talent for joking, entertaining or deriding fits well with the emperor’s personality yet cannot conceal his rhetorical prowess and his taste for vitriol when it came to creating moral and philosophical invectives. Then Julian sets the scene by describing how the gods were accommodated in thrones and seats in the upper part of the sky, with emperors from Julius Caesar to Constantine and his sons walking onto the scene following a chronological order. The satyr Silenus, the most talkative character of the dialogue, takes the opportunity to make ironic puns about physical or moral aspects of the emperors. Not all of them are granted admission to the banquet: Nero, Caracalla, Heliogabalus or Carus are refused entry by Justice or Minos because of their misdeeds and atrocities. Once the emperors’ parade is over, Hermes organizes a contest of speeches among a short-list of emperors (Alexander, who was a late guest invited by Heracles, Julius Caesar, Octavian, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius and Constantine). At the conclusion of the contest, each emperor answers a number of questions posed by Hermes. The gods pronounce Marcus Aurelius the winner of the competition, but this passes almost unnoticed when Zeus commands that each emperor should choose a protector. Alexander selects Heracles; Octavian opts for Apollo, while Marcus for Zeus and Cronos, Trajan for Alexander; Julius Caesar is called by Ares and Aphrodite, and Constantine goes into the arms of *Truphe* and *Asotia* (the personifications of “pleasure” and “incontinence”) before meeting Jesus who is preaching the advantages of being baptised. Julian reserves the last lines of the dialogue for himself: Hermes announces to him that he has been put under the safe guidance of Mithras.  

From a literary viewpoint, the general framework of the dialogue is somewhat miscellaneous. Clearly modelled on Plato’s *Symposium,* Seneca’s *Apocolocyntosis,* Lucian’s *The Parliament of the Gods,* and Plutarch’s *Lives,* *Caesars* is a highly rhetoricized dialogue in which elements of different literary forms converge. Weinbrot and Relihan, for instance, have analysed the elements that

4 For the relationship between Mithra’s cult and the Saturnalia, see Beck (2000: 179–180). Pack (1946: 154) has highlighted the relationship between Julian’s *Or. 4.158b* and *Caes. 336c.*
6 Although this is not the place to make this case, I think that the assumption of a strong literary dependence on Lucian’s dialogue (see, for instance, Lacombrade 1964: 26–27; Relihan 1993: 122, 133) should be contested. The subtexts of Julian’s work, the topics he deals with and the literary techniques he uses vary from those in Lucian’s dialogue.