LUCIAN’S VINE-WOMEN (VH 1,6-9) AND DIO’S LIBYAN WOMEN (ORAT. 5): VARIATIONS ON A THEME

The first episode of Lucian’s Veræ Historiae brings the voyagers to an island in the western ocean where they encounter a series of marvels: a stele with an inscription that ‘Heracles and Dionysus came to this point’; two giant footprints, one of Dionysus, the other of Heracles; and a river of wine, flowing from a spring of wine and containing vinous fish (7). The travellers sample these fish and become drunk. Then they cross the river and encounter mysterious half-woman, half-grapevine creatures, the Vine-Women, whom Lucian compares to pictures of Daphne, changing into a laurel. When they are kissed on the lips the visitors immediately become reeling drunk. The two sailors who actually embrace the Vine-Women are held fast by the genitals, sprout branches and tendrils, and are about to bear fruit. These two are left behind, as the others return to the ship (8-9).

Various parallels for this incident have been gathered by Stengel and Anderson). The latter (27, n. 43) compares Dio Chrysostom, Orat. 5, 12 ff., referring to the so-called “Libyan Myth”. Nesselrath notes connections between Dio’s myth and one of Lucian’s prolitiae, De Dipsadibus, at the same time noticing significant differences: Dio emphasizes that his story is a myth, while Lucian “at least pretends to relate something real” (although in 6 he admits that he has never set foot in Libya). Nesselrath also comments on the absence of a moral in Lucian’s De Dips. and concludes that while Dio’s Libyan Myth “may in a very general way have inspired Lucian to develop a similar theme, Lucian clearly chose different subject-matter and a different way of presenting it”.

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The *De Dips.* suggests that Lucian was familiar with Dio’s Libyan myth; it is probable that he also modelled his Vine-Women episode in the *VH* on Dio’s *Orat.* 5. Neither Anderson nor Nesselrath, however, discusses the connections between Lucian’s Vine-Women and Dio’s Libyan women in detail. We do so here to shed some light on Lucian’s techniques of adaptation of his source-material.

Again, there are important differences in treatment: Dio is setting up the drawing of a moral: Lucian is presenting a Dionysian initiation into the fantasy-world of the *VH.* The voyagers become drunk on the fish from the wine river and from the kisses of the Vine-Women, and then embark on incredible adventures: a trip to the moon, a journey inside a whale and a visit to the land of the dead. The story of the Vine-Women has some of the characteristics of a *prolalia*, or introduction, to the main narrative of the *VH.* It is a self-contained episode, like the ecphrasis of the Celtic painting of Heracles in the *Heracles* or the account of Dionysus’ invasion of India in the *Dionysus.* Lucian, of course, does not warn his audience that his tale about the Vine-Women is a *mythos,* unlike Dio (5,1; 4), since he has prepared them generously in advance, by warning that they should not account believe what they hear (*VH* 1,4). Furthermore, Lucian does not resort to Dio’s pattern of myth followed by moral lesson, because the moral of the *VH*—that one should not accept fantasy and myth as fact—is to be apprehended from the whole content of the narrative, not through explicit authorial comment⁵. Nonetheless, the warning against believing lies corresponds closely to Dio’s introductory remarks (11) on the power of tradition. The lesson to be drawn from Lucian’s Vine-Women escapade resembles the basic advice in the *prolalia* which preceded his *VH* (the *Dion.* or *Her.*): “do not trust appearances”. The Vine-Women episode functions as an intellectual “rite of passage” and as a transition from the real world to the fictional world.

The creatures in Dio’s Libyan myth are said to have womanly upper parts (face, neck, breasts and bosom), and to be ‘extremely beautiful’ (12); in *VH* 1,8, the upper part is that of a woman, ‘entirely perfect from the waist up’. Dio next moves to artistic representation: the beauty of the women is such that it cannot be reproduced by any sculptor or painter (12), whereas Lucian comments that the Vine-Women were ‘like our pictures of Daphne turning into a tree when Apollo is first catching her’. In each case, the appearance of the women is conveyed by an artistic analogy, but with a difference: Dio says their beauty cannot be captured by a representation, Lucian that the Vine-Women look like Daphne in the paintings⁶. Lucian outdoes his predecessor by finding a suitable image to convey the appearance of his mysterious women. As for the other parts of the hybrids, the rest of the Snake-Women’s body is hard and protected by scales, while their lower parts are ‘all snake’ (13); the Vine-Women are tree-trunks up to the waist. The bark of the trunk is clearly analogous to the scales on the Libyans. In Dio, the men approach the creatures as if