Mr Lucian in Suburbia: links between *The True History* and *The First Men in the Moon*

Antony Keen

Abstract

Science fiction is often said to originate in classical literature.¹ This chapter aims to take a particular case study of a classical work and a “classic” science fiction novel, and discuss possible connections between Lucian of Samosata’s *True History* (second century CE) and H.G. Wells’ *The First Men in the Moon* (1901). Lucian is often seen as the first science fiction novel, mostly because of the lunar voyage contained in its first book, whilst Wells’ novel is both in a tradition of lunar voyages that follows works of Johannes Kepler (*Somnium*, 1634) and Cyrano de Bergerac (*L’autre monde: où les États et Empires de la Lune*, 1657), and can ultimately be traced back to Lucian, and also is an important part of Wells’ body of work, pivotal in the creation of modern science fiction. However, there is little detailed discussion of direct

¹ The material in this chapter was originally delivered at *Trips to the Moon & Beyond: Lucian to NASA*, a conference that took place in December of 2008 at Royal Holloway, University of London. It was subsequently re-presented at the H.G. Wells Society conference, *H.G. Wells: From Kent to Cosmopolis*, at the University of Kent, Canterbury, in July 2010. I would like to thank Professor Edith hall of Royal Holloway for the original invitation, the H.G. Wells society for the opportunity to present the arguments to a different audience, the audiences at both conferences for their comments, and Karen Ni-Mheallaigh for her advice on matters Lucianic.
influences of Lucian upon Wells. This chapter aims to correct that. After a brief introduction, there is a discussion of whether Lucian’s work can be considered science fiction. This is followed by detailed examination of potential links between the two works and the two authors, including drawing attention to the overt reference to Lucian in the epigraph of *The First Men in the Moon*. 
I. Introduction

*The True History* by the Greek writer of the Roman period (second century CE), Lucian of Samosata, is seen as an early example of what has been described as “ur-science fiction.” H.G. Wells (1866-1946) is rightly recognised as one of the key figures in the origin of the genre of science fiction as it is now known. Yet little has been written about the relationship between the two authors, and in particular on any relationship between Wells’ *The First Men in the Moon* (1901) and the lunar voyages of Lucian, found in his works *True History* and *Icaromenippus*. As will be seen, this overlooks that Wells’ novel opens with an epigraph taken from Lucian (an epigraph omitted from most modern editions, though not, as we shall see, from the 2005 Penguin Classic). I argue that there is in this novel a close relationship between Wells and Lucian, and that the Lucianic influence is perhaps more immediate and significant in Wells than commonly cited precursors such as Francis Godwin’s *The Man in the Moone* (1638), or Johannes Kepler’s *Somnium* (“Dream,” 1634). A number of passages in the Wells novel may be seen as echoing similar passages in Lucian’s works. But more importantly, the influence of Lucian may be also felt in the tone of

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2 I use the singular translation of the Greek title, *Alēthē Diēgēmata* (in Latin *Verae Historiae*) rather than the more pedantically-correct plural because I believe it is in slightly more common usage, at least outside the world of classical scholarship.


3 For the usually cited influences on Wells, see Nicolson 1948, 247-50.
the novel. A more direct engagement with the Lucianic satirical tradition may explain the differences in tone, as noted by critics such as Patrick Parrinder (1996, 63) and Frank McConnell (1981, 154), between this novel and the earlier scientific romances.

Lucian of Samosata was born on the banks of the River Euphrates, in modern Iraq, living in the second century CE. He was described at the time as a “sophist” (Lucian, Apology for “Salaried Posts in Great Houses” 15), that is, a teacher of display orators, though the term was sometimes (though not always) used a catch-all term for any intellectual of the period who wrote or spoke primarily in Greek. Lucian was extremely prolific, and a significant number of his writings survive. Critics of science fiction often single out from this corpus The True History, because of its voyage to the moon and interplanetary war. It has often been identified as the first science fiction novel.

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4 For an introduction to Lucian and his works, see Edwards, Browning and Anderson 2003; or for more detail, see Sidwell 2004, ix-xxvii.


6 The full Lucianic corpus includes 86 works (Sidwell 2004, 347-51), though some are certainly, and some others probably, spurious.

7 See for discussions Suvin 1979, 5, 10, 54, and Seed 2011, 2, though Seed himself would not go that far. Fredericks 1976 discusses the way in which Lucian anticipates many of the tropes of science fiction, though unfortunately
However, as Adam Roberts has argued, there are dangers to taking *The True History* out of the context of the rest of Lucian’s works. This will be addressed later in this chapter.

H.G. Wells is, of course, identified as being a key figure of the emergence of what is now recognised as science fiction, though Wells himself referred to the works as “scientific romances.”

Yet the issue of direct links between the two is not often discussed. Indeed, some commentators have deliberately distanced Lucian and science fiction. The genesis of this paper was a throwaway remark by Niall Harrison, then editor of the British Science Fiction Association’s critical journal *Vector*, made in a comment on a post in *Torque Control*, the *Vector* editorial weblog. In the course of a discussion about whether the Bayeux tapestry counts as comics or not, he said:

Lucian of Samosata wrote about a trip to the moon in the second century, but I don’t think it’s particularly useful to call that book “science fiction,” because without direct reference to Wells. Ashley 2011, 10, identifies *The True History* as an early (parodic) example of the tradition of the imaginary voyage. Clute 2011 writes “Lucian stands at the beginning of the somewhat problematic line of prose fictions that lead eventually to what we might legitimately think of as sf proper.” This is only a small selection of references to the identification of Lucian as at the head of the sf tradition.

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8 Roberts 2006a, 28.
9 As a single example of many texts expounding this view, see Crossley 2005.
10 Wells 1933.
it’s clearly not part of a tradition that gives rise to modern sf. (It anticipates sf, sure.)

In my response to Harrison, I said that I thought there might be more in common between *True History* and, as an example, Wells’ *First Men in the Moon* than Harrison would allow. This chapter examines how closely linked *are* the two works, through an investigation of the issues originally sparked by Harrison’s comment, though in the end I have moved away from the categorization debate Harrison was discussing to an examination of possible receptions of Lucian within Wells.

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12 Keen 2008.
II. **Is The True History science fiction?**

*The True History* is the fictional story of a voyage of exploration mounted by ‘Lucian’ who sets sail with fifty comrades to explore the Atlantic beyond the Pillars of Hercules (Gibraltar). After ‘Lucian’ and his crew visit an island where the rivers and trees are full of wine, their ship is caught up by a waterspout and then a burst of wind. It eventually reaches the Moon, where ‘Lucian’ becomes involved in a war over colonization rights between the people of the Moon and those of the Sun. This war settled, ‘Lucian’ and his comrades returns to Earth, where they are swallowed by a giant whale and live inside the beast for a while, encounter giants who row islands instead of ships, and speak to various famous dead people on the Isles of the Blest. The work ends with ‘Lucian’ promising to relate further adventures in future books, a promise which, as far as we can tell, was never fulfilled.

As noted, because of the lunar voyage and the space battle, *The True History* is often called the first science fiction novel. This is possibly controversial, and it must not be forgotten, as it sometimes is, that Lucian’s work is a parody of fantastic

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13 The narrator names himself at *VH* 2.28. I shall refer to the narrator as ‘Lucian’ in quotation marks, to distinguish him from the author of the work.

14 This sequence, one may suspect, inspired the fate of Gepetto in Carlo Collodi’s *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, 1883, who similarly ends up living inside a whale. This is best known from the Walt Disney movie version (USA, 1940).

15 Note the reference in Baxter 2006, 268, which treats *The True History* as a work firmly in the non-parodic fantastic voyage tradition.
voyage literature. This is something that Lucian clearly states in the opening of the work.\textsuperscript{16} As Adam Roberts states,\textsuperscript{17} *The True History* needs to be understood in the context of Lucian’s other works. To take it in isolation risks the reader missing some of the parodic intent and the extent to which Lucian is engaging in satire, especially at the expense of philosophers. This can result in taking *The True History* rather too seriously. This is further encouraged by the fact that the accidents of textual survival mean that whilst *The True History* survives, little contemporary “straight” fantastic voyage literature survives. As a result, Lucian has come to shape the genre, as found in later authors such as François Rabelais and Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726).\textsuperscript{18}

Harrison’s point, of course, is that, just because *The True History* features a lunar voyage, this does not mean that it is a work of science fiction in the same way as I suspect Harrison would think that *First Men* is. I think I am largely in accord with Harrison – *The True History* is not science fiction. My reasons will lead us, very briefly, into the mire of definitions of science fiction, about which several books can

\textsuperscript{16} Photius, *Bibliotheca* 166 (111a), states that it was specifically drawing on Antonius Diogenes’ *Ta Hyper Thoulē Apista* (*The Incredible Wonders Beyond Thule*), and this is followed by Fredericks 1976, 58, n.5; but Lucian is probably parodying the entire fantastic voyage genre, from Homer onwards, but especially those written by his contemporaries, rather than one specific work.

\textsuperscript{17} Roberts 2006a, 28.

\textsuperscript{18} Clute 2011.
be, and have been, written. Personally, I am attracted to the novelist and critic Damon Knight’s 1956 definition.

... it will do us no harm if we remember that [science fiction] means what we point to when we say it.\textsuperscript{19}

I believe that is, at one and the same time, the biggest cop-out in science fiction criticism and the only sensible thing it is actually possible to say about definition. It is extremely difficult to come up with watertight criteria for defining something as science fiction, yet most readers know what science fiction is when they see it.\textsuperscript{20} As any film studies student will say, it is equally hard to define genres in cinema. The definition of a western that most people work with is that a western is what people identify as a western.\textsuperscript{21}

The plural “we” in Knight’s definition needs to be emphasized – the definition is occasionally formulated in the singular, and that is not what Knight said, and not a definition with which I can be in accord. It is not enough for me to point to something and say “that is science fiction” – a majority, or at least a significant minority, consensus has to agree with me.

\textsuperscript{19} Knight 1996, 11.

\textsuperscript{20} Seeking to define who “most readers” are, or what it is they recognise as science fiction, merely leads recursively back to the problem of definition. The problem is that the more precise any definition of genre becomes, the more it will collapse in the face of exceptions.

\textsuperscript{21} For film studies’ fuzziness in defining genres in movies, see Hutchings 1995, especially 67.
But obviously, there must be something driving my feeling for whether a text is science fiction or not, and I cannot leave this unexamined. Inevitably, terms will get a little fuzzy here, and in my opinion, any attempt to produce a definition of science fiction that can always be applied without question to anything that I, or anybody else, will recognize as science fiction, other than the Knight definition, is doomed to failure; there will always be debatable regions at the definitional margins. But there is a formulation from Adam Roberts that I find very useful:

Fantasy is premised on magic, the supernatural, the spiritual … Science fiction is premised on a material, instrumental version of the cosmos.22

Roberts leads on from that into his conception of science fiction as a “Protestant” mode, as opposed “Catholic” fantasy, a notion developed more fully in his Palgrave History of Science Fiction,23 and by which I am rather less convinced. But the basic idea, that science fiction is driven by the rational and fantasy by the irrational, is one I am happy to embrace. And on that criterion The True History is not science fiction. Certainly, it belongs to the literature of the fantastic, as does a large amount of Graeco-Roman literature, from Homer through Euripides to Apuleius. This isn’t exactly surprising. As critics such as John Clute, Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James remind us, the separation of “realistic” or “mimetic” literature and the literature of the fantastic is a fairly recent phenomenon.24 But for me, too much of The True

22 Roberts 2006b, 119.
23 Roberts 2006a.
24 Mendlesohn and James 2009, 7; Clute 2011a, 20-21.
History relies on the irrational, on gods and the after-life, for it to be a work of science fiction as I understand sf.

Of course, there are other bases, more related to the forms rather than content of science fiction, on which one could argue that The True History is science fiction – Fredericks cites Darko Suvin’s notion of “cognitive estrangement,” and feels that Lucian provides that.25 On the other hand, Sarah Annes Brown26 says that The True History “lacks SF’s hallmark verisimilitude,” while Edith Hall comments that “one element missing … in comparison with sf is the science.”27 This is a debate that will run and run, and is possibly the wrong question to focus on – Russell Shone was already in 1999 asking whether there was any real distinction in ancient literature between works that might be conceived of (in modern terms) as science fiction and those that might be conceived of as fantasy,28 and there’s a good case for saying that there is not.

25 Fredericks 1976, 54, citing Suvin 1972, followed by Georgiadou and Larmour 1998, 46. Suvin’s most extended discussion of the term is in Suvin 1979. Suvin himself thought Lucian fulfilled this criterion for science fiction, and was quite clear that Lucian was at the head of a tradition that lead through Cyrano and Swift to Wells and beyond; see Suvin 1979, 5, 10, 54.


27 Hall 2008, 82-3. However, I am not sure that I accept that narratives of science are necessarily a defining feature of science fiction.

28 In an unpublished paper delivered at the 1999 Classical Association conference in Liverpool.
However, it is much more commonly agreed that *The True History* stands at the beginning of a tradition that leads eventually to science fiction. It is described as “ur-SF” by Seed. The influence of Lucian on various texts that are often considered “proto science fiction,” such as Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516), Cyrano de Bergerac’s *L’autre monde: où les États et Empires de la Lune* (“The other world, or the states and empires of the Moon,” 1657), or Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, is well-documented. I can happily accept that position (and here I do disagree with Harrison’s implications).

Now we come back to Wells.

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29 Seed 2011, 3.

30 The term goes back to Knight 1962, 78; see Prucher 2007, 157.

31 See Nicolson 1948, 163.

32 See Ashley 1997, 598.
III.  *The First Men in the Moon* and *The True History*

There is not a great deal written about any relationship between *The True History* and *First Men in the Moon*, or at least I have not been able to find much on the subject. Christopher Robinson’s book on Lucian’s influence wraps itself up in the eighteenth century, though he does write as if Lucianic influence on the fantastic voyage genre came to a close with Swift and Ludvig Holberg’s *Nicolai Klimii iter subterraneum* (“Niels Klim’s Journey Under Ground,” 1741). When *The True History* and *First Men* are mentioned together, the approach usually employed is that found when Arthur C. Clarke or China Miéville write introductions to editions of *First Men*, or Paul Turner, or Aristoula Georgiadou and David Larmour, do the same for Lucian. This is to place *The True History* as the fountainhead of a tradition to which Wells eventually contributes, at least in the sense of being seen as the originary work from a post-classical perspective.

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33 Robinson 1979, 129-44.
34 Clarke 1993, xxx; Miéville 2005, xiv.
36 There is one possible earlier lunar voyage narrative, Antonius Diogenes’ *The Incredible Wonders Beyond Thule*, discussed in Roberts 2006a, 26-7. This work, which clearly predates *The True History*, although it is unclear by how much; however, it is only known in a brief summary (Photius, *Bibliotheca* 166 [109a-112a]) that gives little detail of the lunar visit. Indeed, it is not entirely clear that the characters do go to the Moon, rather than just near the Moon. For a translation, see Pearse 2002.
There is not much written on direct influence of Lucian upon Wells. Suvin does say of Wells that he “approach[es] again the imaginative veracity of Lucian’s and Swift’s story-telling centred on strange creatures,” but he is not necessarily suggesting direct influence here. When Marjorie Hope Nicolson discusses the works on which Wells has drawn, she mentions Francis Godwin’s *The Man in the Moone* (1638), Cyrano de Bergerac, Ludvig Holberg, Athanasius Kircher’s *Mundus Subterraneus* (1664), Robert Paltock’s *The Life and Adventures of Peter Wilkins* (1751), and most of all Johannes Kepler’s *Somnium* (“Dream,” 1634) to which Wells makes specific reference (2005, Chapter 13, 87) as well as Swift and Milton. Nicolson does not mention Lucian.

Yet there is a definite shadow of romanitas over *First Men*, an idea that this is the work of an author firmly situated in the cultural tradition of Greece and Rome.

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37 Suvin 1979, 211.

38 Nicolson 1948, 247-50.

39 All page and chapter references are to the 2005 Penguin edition, which has different chapter numberings to some editions (see Parrinder 2005, xxxii, for an explanation). Steven McLean, in his note (Wells 2005, 209), thinks it unlikely that Wells’ Latin was good enough to read Kepler, at that point not yet translated into English (there was no published translation until Lear 1965). If Wells’ Latin was not up to the task, and personally I see no reason why it should not have been), he clearly obtained information about the books contents, possibly, as McLean suggests, from a friend. It is possible that there were summaries of the work published in the nineteenth century, though I have not been able to establish this.
Like any educated child of the nineteenth century, Wells had some degree of Classical background. He had been educated in Latin and Greek at Midhurst Grammar School, and had enjoyed the subjects. References to classical antiquity can be found in his earliest science fiction; his first time-travel story was entitled “The Chronic Argonauts.” There are allusions to Homer, and sequences of schoolboy Latin, in Wells’ third novel, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896).

It is established in the first sentence of *First Men* that the narrator is writing his account in southern Italy (Wells 2005, 5; it is later revealed in Chapter 21 [Wells 2005, “Mr Bedford at Littlestone”, 160] to be specifically Amalfi). The opening chapter of *First Men* includes a description of the Kent town of Lympne’s history as a Roman port (Wells 2005, 7). Other classical references include an allusion to Sybaris (Wells 2005, Chapter 1, 6) and the description of the lunar crater that the characters land in as an amphitheatre (Wells 2005, Chapter 7, “Sunrise on the Moon,” 49).

Later on there are overt references to William Cowper’s 1782 poem “Boadicea: An Ode” and its allusions to Caesar (Wells 2005, Chapter 11, 78), and to

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40 Wells 1934, 140. There is no evidence that he read Lucian at the time.

41 See Keen 2013.

42 See Batchelor 1985, 57. Wells wrote the novel whilst living at Sandgate, six miles from Lympne.

43 Despite McLean’s note (Wells 2005, 209) the reference is not necessarily to *Julius Caesar*. The reference, incidentally, survives in the 1964 movie version.
the Capitoline Hill at Rome (Wells 2005, Chapter 25, 191). This should be read in the context of the criticism of British imperialism that is central to the novel.

Moreover, Wells was clearly aware of Lucian’s work. Wells makes no mention of Lucian in *Experiment in Autobiography*. But in the 1931 edition of Wells’ historical non-fiction *magnum opus, Outline of History*, though not in the 1919 edition, Wells names Lucian as an honourable predecessor: “a great and original imaginative writer … who still commands our interest and admiration.” In the introduction to the 1933 collection of the *Scientific Romances*, Wells names a number of predecessors for the tradition in which he felt he was writing when he produced his scientific romances. Two of these are Classical texts – one is Apuleius’ *Golden Ass*

In 1902 the lines of Cowper to which Wells alludes were used on the base of the statue of Boadicea erected outside the Houses of Parliament. Did Wells know of this in advance?

Though the reference to “Ara Cœli” is, as McLean sees (Wells 2005, 213), to the Church of Santa Maria in Ara Coeli, Wells has stripped the allusion of any Christian referents, leaving only the pagan “altar of heaven.”

On the criticism of colonialism and imperialism in *First Men*, see Miéville 2005, xx-xxiv.

The 1919 first edition of *Outline of History* was castigated, at least as far as the Greek and Roman chapters were concerned, in an early publication by the great historian of Greece and commentator on Thucydidès, A.W. Gomme (1921).

Wells 1931, 491.

(or *Metamorphoses*), the picaresque adventures of Lucius, who is magically transformed into an ass. The other is *The True History*. It is clear from this that Wells acknowledged Lucian as an influence.

And there is a “smoking gun”. *The First Men in the Moon* actually carries an epigraph from Lucian (though not, as will be discussed later, from *The True History*). This epigraph is little-known, because most editions omit it (hence perhaps its absence from Hope Nicolson’s discussion). It is not in the 1926 From the Bookshelf edition, nor in my 1956 Collins hardback edition, not, nor the Everyman edition of 1993, or the Gollancz SF Masterworks edition, or The Modern Library Classics edition, or the BiblioBazaar edition. It is, however, in Patrick Parrinder’s 2005 Penguin edition, and, of course, on the title page of the 1901 George Newnes first edition. I shall return to this epigraph later.

There was clearly, therefore, some familiarity upon Wells’ part with *The True History*, and it seems reasonable to assume that this was the case when he wrote the novel in 1898-1901. Francis Hickes’ 1634 translation of *The True History* had been republished in 1894, with illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley, and this may have brought the work back to Wells’ attention. Wells did later claim that the first impetus

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49 The *Golden Ass* is itself based on a work that is attributed to Lucian, though it may not actually be his. It might be noted that Bedford sees himself as an ass in Chapter 20, “Mr Bedford in Infinite Space” (Wells 2005, 146).


52 For the date, see Parrinder 2005, xxxi.
for the novel was the idea of Cavorite, and only later was the journey to the Moon added.\footnote{Miéville 2005, xxi. Miéville himself is not convinced.}

Given that, it is worth asking whether there are any sequences in Wells’ novel that might echo Lucian. I would advance four (with a fifth that is much more arguable):

1. In Chapter 11, “The Mooncalf pastures” (Wells 2005, 76-9), the two explorers, the narrator, Bedford, and Professor Cavor, eat vegetation on the moon. They rapidly become intoxicated. Something similar happens to ‘Lucian’ and his companions when (before they have left the Earth) they eat fish from a river of wine in an island beyond the Pillars of Hercules (\textit{VH} 1.7).\footnote{Though the Lotus Eater sequence from Homer, \textit{Odyssey} 9, is probably also an influence on Wells (and also upon Lucian).}

2. ‘Lucian’ is transported to the Moon through a whirlwind (\textit{typhōn}) suddenly picking up his ship (\textit{VH} 1.9). Bedford and Cavour, of course, travel by using the gravity-opaque material Cavorite. But when this is first created (“The first making of Cavorite,” Wells 2005, Chapter 2, 20-6), it causes a near-disaster, as the air above the Cavorite becomes weightless, exerts no pressure on the surrounding air (Wells’ science becomes deliberately obscure here), and is pushed out by the surrounding air, which then itself becomes weightless, repeating the process. The rush of air, and the destruction it causes, is something that Cavor subsequently suspects will be explained as the product of a cyclone. The later external
observation of the launch of the sphere in Chapter 21 is less like Lucian’s ship, but it does go straight up in the air, “[l]ike … a rocket” (Wells 2005, 155).

3. Lucian includes what would now be described as a xenobiological description of the inhabitants of the Moon at The True History 1.22-6 (as well as a description of their armed forces earlier). Wells has a similar description, at least in approach, if not in detail of the Selenites, in Chapter 24, “The Natural History of the Selenites” (Wells 2005, 173-87). Of course, here Wells is more closely influenced by Victorian scientific publication, especially that of Charles Darwin and Wells’ mentor, T.H. Huxley. 55 [Huxley talks briefly about lunar people – where?]

4. Wells did not invent the term “Selenite” for his lunar inhabitants. Stephen McLean, in the notes for the Penguin edition, 56 states that the first use of the word appears to be in a letter of James Howell in c. 1645. 57 But this is only the first English usage. The word is derived from the Greek, 58 and hoi Selēnitai (οἱ Σελήνιται), derived, of course, from the Moon-goddess

55 Wells had written a similar speculative non-fiction piece in “The man of the Year Million” (Wells 1893).

56 Wells 2005, 208.

57 See also Prucher 2007, 179.

58 Prucher 2007, 179.
Selene, is Lucian’s term for the inhabitants of the Moon (VH 1.18). In Hickes’ translation, the term “Selenitans” is used. [What do other lunar voyages use?]

5. I also note a slight similarity between Claude Shepperson’s illustration of the Selenites in the first publication, and at least one of the beings illustrated in Lucian’s Strange Creatures by Aubrey Beardsley. This Beardsley illustration was created, with others, c. 1893 or 1894 for the new edition of the Francis Hickes translation of The True History, but this one was rejected. However, Shepperson, or indeed Wells, may have seen it.

Of course, I do not wish for a moment to suggest that Wells intended First Men to be a refiguring of True History. Wells is far too subtle for that. But I do think there are echoes of Lucian in Wells. Perhaps it is even more productive to search for these in the style and tone of Wells’ novel rather than the content. To do this, I would like to reposition First Men in the various traditions of fantastic lunar voyages.

59 The term had already been used, in the feminine form, by Herodorus (Fragment 28 Müller) in the fifth century BCE, but Lucian’s work will have been the more familiar in the Victorian period.

60 It was suggested to me that the illustrations might have been republished in The Yellow Book, a literary journal of the 1890s that Beardsley was co-editor of, but this is not the case.
IV. The First Men in the Moon and fantastic lunar voyages

Brian Stableford, in his article on “Moon” for the Encyclopedia of Science Fiction, identifies a number of different traditions about lunar voyages. One is “a standard framework for social satire,”61 into which category he places The True History. Wells’ novel is treated as being separate from that tradition, in a discussion about works that have a “serious interest in the Moon as a world in its own right.” But, as he notes, Wells’ setting is “no more than a convenient literary device” for the exploration of the Selenite society that follows, which is a variation of the Darwinist speculations he first worked with in The Time Machine.

I believe Wells is much more in a Lucianic satirical tradition than is often acknowledged, even more so than Wells’ other scientific romances, that Wells himself (as noted above) place in a tradition going back to The True History. That First Men is satire is, I think, established.62 But the influence of Wells’ earlier scientific romances can cloud perceptions of First Men. It is not a straightforward science fiction novel; as some have recognized, it is rather different from the likes of The Time Machine or The War of the Worlds. Patrick Parrinder, in Shadows of the Future, notes that it has fewer scientific ideas than earlier works, and Frank McConnell talks of the “dreamlike, comic quality” of the novel.63 Writing this sort of novel about the Moon and life on (or in this case, under) the satellite’s surface was, in

the late Victorian period, becoming harder and harder as scientific knowledge of the moon grew. Wells himself was well aware that, contrary to what he writes in the novel, there is no atmosphere on the moon; he demonstrated this in a popular science article he wrote in 1895. So First Men sits, if not necessarily consciously, at the end of a tradition that begins with Lucian (or Antonius Diogenes), but is subsequently replaced by more scientifically accurate visits to a barren rock, of the sort exemplified by the movie 2001: A Space Odyssey (USA, dir: Stanley Kubrick, wri: Stanley Kubrick & Arthur C. Clarke, 1968). When First Men was filmed in 1964 (USA, dir: Nathan Juran, wri: Nigel Kneale), a framing sequence involving modern astronauts had to be added to give the story more credibility to a contemporary audience, and references to the moon’s surface atmosphere were removed.

The influence of Lucian upon the tone of Wells’ novel can perhaps be seen not so much in the obvious science-fictional elements, such as the moon, and other elements mentioned above, but in the characterisation of the protagonists. Both ‘Lucian’ and Wells’ Bedford characterise themselves as being at least partially motivated by curiosity (for ‘Lucian’, see VH 1.5). But both tend to blunder from one misadventure to another, and both are ever-ready to turn to violence to solve problems. This can be seen in the readiness of ‘Lucian’ to join Endymion’s war against Sun, in which he has no real stake (VH 1.12) and to start wars within the whale (VH 1.36-9). Bedford’s violent nature is best show in Chapter 16 (“The Giddy Bridge”), where he resorts to violence in order to avoid crossing a bridge that he thinks is too narrow. For Wells, of course, the implication he wants to make is that

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64 Wells 1895.
the British empire was built by similarly bungling violent imperialists; such a criticism of empire is probably not so explicit in Lucian.
V. *The First Men in the Moon and the Icaromenippus*

I mentioned earlier that *First Men* has an epigraph from Lucian. But that epigraph is not from *The True History*; it is from a different work, the *Icaromenippus*.

Three thousand stadia from the earth to the moon … Marvel not, my comrade, if I appear to be talking to you on super-terrestrial and aerial topics. The long and the short of the matter is that I am running over the order of a Journey I have lately made.\(^{65}\)

*Icaromenippus* is Lucian’s other Moon-voyage narrative.\(^{66}\) In it the third-century BCE satirist and Cynic philosopher Menippus (a regular narrator in Lucian’s works) relates a journey of his to the Moon. There he meets the philosopher Empedocles, and subsequently goes to Olympus on a mission for Selene, the Moon-goddess. The *Icaromenippus* is less well-known than *The True History* (as a measure, Sidwell omits

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\(^{65}\) The source is *Icaromenippus* 1.1-13 (abridged). Stover 1998, 24, says that the translation is that of Hickes (using the common misspelling “Hicks”); it is not, though there are some similarities. The translation is therefore presumably Wells’ own. Steven McLean calls this a “loose translation” (Wells 2005, 205), but it is a perfectly fine rendition of the Greek. McLean’s reasons for his comment appear to be based on an over-reliance upon the loose translation of Turner. McClean’s comment that “‘order’ should actually be ‘total distance’,” uses Turner’s translation of ἀναλογίζομαι τῆς ἔναγχος ἀποδημίας (“I’m trying to calculate the total distance”; Turner 1961, 111).

\(^{66}\) For a translation, see Costa 2005, 45-60.
it from the selection in his recent Penguin edition). But it is also the work to which Aphra Behn refers when she cites Lucian in *The Emperor of the Moon* (1687).

This leads to the interesting observation that *First Men* might actually have more in common with the *Icaromenippus* than *The True History*.

In the *Icaromenippus*, Menippus travels to the Moon by attaching an eagle’s wing and a vulture’s wing. Of course, to a degree this is a version of the Icarus legend – hence the title *IcaroMenippus*. But it is also a pseudo-scientific explanation with more in common with Cavorite than the whirlwind that transports “Lucian” into space in *The True History* – here we find the interest in the means of travel that Edith Hall notes is lacking from *The True History*. Menippus observes the Earth from the Moon, in the same way as Bedford and Cavor observe the Earth from their sphere in Chapter 5, “The Journey to the Moon” (Wells 2005, 42-3), though there is also a brief scene of viewing the Earth from the Moon in *The True History* (1.10).

Menippus compares the people he observes on Earth to ants living in an ant-hill – can one see in that the germ of Wells’ ant-like Selenites? And are the narrator Menippus and the scientist he finds on the Moon, Empedocles, the models for Bedford and Cavor? I am wary about going too far down this road, as it risks


68 This is not clear in Miéville’s introduction to the Penguin edition of *The First Men* (Miéville 2005, xiv) when he cites Behn.

69 Compare the elevated, and far less detailed, view of Earth from Mars at the end of Wells’ 1897 story “The Star.”

70 There are ant-like creatures in *The True History* as well (1.16), but they are in the service of the Sun rather than the Moon.
becoming positivist. I could be on my own fantastic voyage here, moving into the unknown seas of speculation.

But it is clear that Wells did know Lucian, and knew both of the works that related to lunar voyages. It may not be easy to point clearly to specific moments in which Wells is receiving Lucian in First Men. But I feel sure that this is what he is doing. From this readers can get a clearer idea of how both The True History and The First Men in the Moon can be read in the context of the history of science fiction.
Works cited


