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An American Classic: Hillman and Cullen's Dialogues of the Courtesans

A 1928 privately printed New York translation of the Dialogues of the Courtesans begins with an oddly suggestive introduction, one that demonstrates that the translator, A. L. Hillman, had more on his mind than strict fidelity to Lucian's prose:

The translator has endeavored to keep constantly in mind the kindly humanism with which Lucian wrote these tales so descriptive of one phase of Greek life. Lucian discusses intimate sex details with the frankness of one not immoral, but influenced by a system of morals that finds everything that is natural both beautiful and good. These dialogues can hardly be offensive to the intelligent modern; for, somehow, our own civilization is changing, and as it becomes richer and fuller, it seems to have more in common with the civilizations of antiquity.

Only after comparing Hillman's translation to Lucian's Greek does it become apparent that this introduction is actually programmatic: Hillman systematically modifies his translation so that in essence it becomes more 'frank', more 'natural', and more appealing to the 'intelligent modern'. In this case, the intelligent moderns appear to be the coterie of gay men associated with progressive sexual politics in both the Harlem Renaissance and greater New York; moreover, Hillman joined in partnership with Charles Cullen, a risk-taking Art Deco illustrator, in order to fashion a Lucian that is a product of the civilizations of antiquity as well as the civilizations of Manhattan.

Cullen's art deco renderings of several scenes enhance or magnify the changes made in Hillman's translation. Previously the illustrator for Countee Cullen's poetry, Charles Cullen (no relation) deploys again his stylistic trademarks, including sensual nudity, highly suggestive poses, and above all a homoerotic sheen. Cullen's over-the-top 'orgy' scene constitutes one instance (of many) in which Lucian's text has been translated into an excuse for 1920s-era erotica. Privately printed by "The Press of Classic Lore," the volume was as well as a press of modern lore, as it pushed the boundaries of what was (and what was not) acceptable for publication. At a time when the sexual mores of America were undergoing a great change, Hillman perceived the opportunity to re-appropriate the classics as a tool to help that change: the result is the weirdly wonderful Dialogues of the Courtesans, crafted to be 'frank' (and occasionally fictional).