

## Lucian

### DE LUCTU (ON FUNERALS/ON MOURNING)

THE behaviour of the average man in a time of bereavement, his own language and the remarks offered him by way of consolation, are things that will reward the attention of a curious observer. The mourner takes it for granted that a terrible blow has fallen both upon himself and upon the object of his lamentations: yet for all he knows to the contrary (and here I appeal to Pluto and Persephone) the departed one, so far from being entitled to commiseration, may find himself in improved circumstances. The feelings of the bereaved party are in fact guided solely by custom and convention. The procedure in such cases--but no: let me first state the popular beliefs on the subject of death itself; we shall then understand the motives for the elaborate ceremonial with which it is attended.

The vulgar (as philosophers call the generality of mankind) <sup>2</sup>, implicitly taking as their text-book the fictions of Homer and Hesiod and other poets, assume the existence of a deep subterranean hole called Hades; spacious, murky, and sunless, but by some mysterious means sufficiently lighted to render all its details visible. Its king is a brother of Zeus, one Pluto; whose name--so an able philologist assures me--contains a complimentary allusion to his ghostly wealth. As to the nature of his government, and the condition of his subjects, the authority

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allotted to him extends over all the dead, who, from the moment that they come under his control, are kept in unbreakable fetters; Shades are on no account permitted to return to Earth; to this rule there have been only two or three exceptions since the beginning of the world, and these were made for very <sup>3</sup>urgent reasons. His realm is encompassed by vast rivers, whose very names inspire awe: Cocytus, Pyriphlegethon, and the like. Most formidable of all, and first to arrest the progress of the new-comer, is Acheron, that lake which none may pass save by the ferryman's boat; it is too deep to be waded, too broad for <sup>4</sup>the swimmer, and even defies the flight of birds deceased. At the very beginning of the descent is a gate of adamant: here Aeacus, a nephew of the king, stands on guard. By his side is a three-headed dog, a grim brute; to new arrivals, however, he is friendly enough, reserving his bark, and the yawning horror of <sup>5</sup>his jaws, for the would-be runaway. On the inner shore of the lake is a meadow, wherein grows asphodel; here, too, is the fountain that makes war on memory, and is hence called Lethe. All these particulars the ancients would doubtless obtain from the Thessalian queen Alcestis and her fellow-countryman Protesilaus, from Theseus the son of Aegeus, and from the hero of the Odyssey. These witnesses (whose evidence is entitled to our most respectful acceptance) did not, as I gather, drink of the waters of Lethe; because then they would not <sup>6</sup>have remembered. According to them, the supreme power is entirely in the hands of Pluto and Persephone, who, however, are assisted in the labours of government by a host of underlings: such are the Furies, the Pains, the Fears; such too is <sup>7</sup>Hermes, though he is not always in attendance. Judicial powers are vested in two satraps or viceroys, Minos and Rhadamanthus, both Cretans, and both sons of Zeus. By them all good and just men who have followed the precepts of virtue are sent off in large detachments to form colonies, as it were, in the Elysian

[paragraph continues] Plain, and there to lead the perfect life. Evil-doers, on the<sup>8</sup> contrary, are handed over to the Furies, who conduct them to the place of the wicked, where they are punished in due proportion to their iniquities. What a variety of torments is there presented! The rack, the fire, the gnawing vulture; here Ixion spins upon his wheel, there Sisyphus rolls his stone. I have not forgotten Tantalus; but he stands elsewhere, stands parched on the Lake's very brink, like to die of thirst, poor wretch! Then there is the numerous class of neutral characters; these<sup>9</sup> wander about the meadow; formless phantoms, that evade the touch like smoke. It seems that they depend for their nourishment upon the libations and victims offered by us upon their tombs; accordingly, a Shade who has no surviving friends or relations passes a hungry time of it in the lower world.

So profoundly have the common people been impressed with<sup>10</sup> these doctrines that, when a man dies, the first act of his relations is to put a penny into his mouth, that he may have wherewithal to pay the ferryman: they do not stop to inquire what is the local currency, whether Attic or Macedonian or Aeginetan; nor does it occur to them how much better it would be for the departed one if the fare were not forthcoming,--because then the ferryman would decline to take him, and he would be sent back into the living world. Lest the Stygian Lake should prove<sup>11</sup> inadequate to the requirements of ghostly toilets, the corpse is next washed, anointed with the choicest unguents to arrest the progress of decay, crowned with fresh flowers, and laid out in sumptuous raiment; an obvious precaution, this last; it would not do for the deceased to take a chill on the journey, nor to exhibit himself to Cerberus with nothing on. Lamentation follows. The women wail; men and women alike weep and<sup>12</sup> beat their breasts and rend their hair and lacerate their cheeks; clothes are also torn on the occasion, and dust sprinkled on the head. The survivors are thus reduced to a more pitiable condition

than the deceased: while they in all probability are rolling about and dashing their heads on the ground, he, bravely attired and gloriously garlanded, reposes gracefully<sup>13</sup> upon his lofty bier, adorned as it were for some pageant. The mother--nay, it is the father, as likely as not,--now advances from among the relatives, falls upon the bier (to heighten the dramatic effect, we will suppose its occupant to be young and handsome), and utters wild and meaningless ejaculations; the corpse cannot speak, otherwise it might have something to say in reply. His son--the father exclaims, with a mournful emphasis on every word,--his beloved son is no more; he is gone; torn away before his hour was come, leaving him alone to mourn; he has never married, never begotten children, never been on the field of battle, never laid hand to the plough, never reached old age; never again will he make merry, never again know the joys of love, never, alas! tipple at the convivial board among<sup>14</sup> his comrades. And so on, and so on. He imagines his son to be still coveting these things, and coveting them in vain. But this is nothing: time after time men have been known to slaughter horses upon the tomb, and concubines and pages; to burn clothes and other finery, or bury it, in the idea that the deceased will find a profitable use for such things in the lower world.<sup>15</sup> Now the afflicted senior, in delivering the tragic utterances I have suggested above, and others of the same kind, is not, as I understand it, consulting the interests of his son (who he knows will not hear him, though he shout louder than Stentor), nor yet

his own; he is perfectly aware of his sentiments, and has no occasion to bellow them into his own ear. The natural conclusion is, that this tomfoolery is for the benefit of the spectators; and all the time he has not an idea where his son is, or what may be his condition; he cannot even have reflected upon human life generally, or he would know that the loss of <sup>16</sup>it is no such great matter. Let us imagine that the son has

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obtained leave from Aeacus and Pluto to take a peep into the daylight, and put a stop to these parental maunderings. 'Confound it, sir,' he might exclaim, 'what is the noise about? You bore me. Enough of hair-plucking and face-scratching. When you call me an ill-fated wretch, you abuse a better man than yourself, and a more fortunate. Why are you so sorry for me? Is it because I am not a bald, bent, wrinkled old cripple like yourself? Is it because I have not lived to be a battered wreck, nor seen a thousand moons wax and wane, only to make a fool of myself at the last before a crowd? Can your sapience point to any single convenience of life, of which we are deprived in the lower world? I know what you will say: clothes and good dinners, wine and women, without which you think I shall be inconsolable. Are you now to learn that freedom from hunger and thirst is better than meat and drink, and insensibility to cold better than plenty of clothes? Come, I see you <sup>17</sup>need enlightenment; I will show you how lamentation ought to be done. Make a fresh start, thus: Alas, my son! Hunger and thirst and cold are his no longer! He is gone, gone beyond the reach of sickness; he fears not fever any more, nor enemies nor tyrants. Never again, my son, shall love disturb your peace, impair your health, make hourly inroads on your purse; oh, heavy change! Never can you reach contemptible old age, never be an eyesore to your juniors!--Confess, now, that my <sup>18</sup>lamentation has the advantage of yours, in veracity, as in absurdity.

'Perhaps it is the pitchy darkness of the infernal regions that runs in your head? is that the trouble? Are you afraid I shall be suffocated in the confinement of the tomb? You should reflect that my eyes will presently decay, or (if such is your good pleasure) be consumed with fire; after which I shall have no occasion to notice either light or darkness. However, let that pass. But all this lamentation, now; this fluting <sup>19</sup>

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and beating of breasts; these wholly disproportionate wailings: how am I the better for it all? And what do I want with a garlanded column over my grave? And what good do you suppose you are going to do by pouring wine on it? do you expect it to filter through all the way to Hades? As to the victims, you must surely see for yourselves that all the solid nutriment is whisked away heavenwards in the form of smoke, leaving us Shades precisely as we were; the residue, being dust, is useless; or is it your theory that Shades batten on ashes? Pluto's realm is not so barren, nor asphodel so scarce with us, that we must apply to you for provisions.--What with this winding-sheet and these woollen bandages, my jaws have been effectually sealed up, or, by Tisiphone, I should have burst out laughing long before this at the stuff you talk and the things you do.'

<sup>20</sup>And at the word Death sealed his lips for ever.

Thus far our corpse, leaning on one side, supported on an elbow. Can we doubt that he is in the right of it? And yet these simpletons, not content with their own noise, must call in professional assistance: an artist in grief, with a fine repertoire of cut-and-dried sorrows at his command, assumes the direction of this inane choir, and supplies a theme for their woful acclamations<sup>21</sup>. So far, all men are fools alike: but at this point national peculiarities make their appearance. The Greeks burn their dead, the Persians bury them; the Indian glazes the body, the Scythian eats it, the Egyptian embalms it. In Egypt, indeed, the corpse, duly dried, is actually placed at table,--I have seen it done; and it is quite a common thing for an Egyptian to relieve himself from pecuniary embarrassment by a timely visit to the pawnbroker, with his brother or father deceased<sup>22</sup>. The childish futility of pyramids and mounds and columns, with their short-lived inscriptions, is obvious. But<sup>23</sup>

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some people go further, and attempt to plead the cause of the deceased with his infernal judges, or testify to his merits, by means of funeral games and laudatory epitaphs. The final<sup>24</sup> absurdity is the funeral feast, at which the assembled relatives strive to console the parents, and to prevail upon them to take food; and, Heaven knows, they are willing enough to be persuaded, being almost prostrated by a three days' fast. 'How long is this to go on?' some one expostulates. 'Suffer the spirit of your departed saint to rest in peace. Or if mourn you will, then for that very reason you must eat, that your strength may be proportioned to your grief.' At this point, a couple of lines of Homer go the round of the company:

Ev'n fair-haired Niobe forgat not food,

and

Not fasting mourn th' Achaeans for their dead.

The parents are persuaded, though they go to work at first in a somewhat shamefaced manner; they do not want it to be thought that after their bereavement they are still subject to the infirmities of the flesh.

Such are some of the absurdities that may be observed in mourners; for I have by no means exhausted the list. And all springs from the vulgar error, that Death is the worst thing that can befall a man.