Lucian: Zeus Tragoedus

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Zeus Tragoedus

By Lucian of Samosata, translated by H. W. and F. G. Fowler (1905)

Characters: Hermes. Hera. Colossus. Heracles. Athene. Poseidon. Momus. Hermagoras. Zeus. Aphrodite. Apollo, Timocles. Damis.

Context: Zeus summons the gods to consider assisting a Stoic in presenting his side of a debate with by an Epicurean by the name of Damis, who is successfully arguing that the gods take no part in human affairs.

Hermes. Wherefore art thou brooding, Zeus? Wherefore art thou apart, and palely pacing, as Earth's sages use? Let me thy counsel know, thy cares partake; and find thy comfort in a faithful fool.

Athene. Cronides, lord of lords, and all our sire, I clasp thy knees; grant thou what I require; A boon the lightning-eyed Tritonia asks: Speak, rend the veil thy secret thought that masks; Reveal what care thy mind within thee gnaws, Blanches thy cheek, and this deep moaning draws.

Zeus. Speech hath no utterance of surpassing fear, tragedy holds no misery or woe, but our divinest essence soon shall taste.

Athene. Alas, how dire a prelude to thy tale!

Zeus. O brood maleficent, teemed from Earth's dark womb! And thou, Prometheus, how hast thou wrought me woe!

Athene. Possess us; are not we thine own familiars?

Zeus. With a whirr and a crash, Let the levin-bolt dash — Ah, whither?

Hera. A truce to your passion, Zeus. We have not these good people's gift for farce or recitation; we have not swallowed Euripides whole, and cannot play up to you. Do you suppose we do not know how to account for your annoyance?

Zeus. Thou knowst not; else thy wailings had been loud.

Hera. Don't tell me; it's a love affair; that's what's the matter with you. However, you won't have any 'wailings' from me; I am too much hardened to neglect. I suppose you have discovered some new Danae or Semele or Europa whose charms are troubling you; and so you are meditating a transformation into a bull or satyr, or a descent through the roof into your beloved's bosom as a shower of gold. All the symptoms—your groans and your tears and your white face—point to love and nothing else.

Zeus. Happy ignorance, that sees not what perils now forbid love and such toys!

Hera. Is your name Zeus, or not? And, if so, what else can possibly annoy you but love?

Zeus. Hera, our condition is most precarious; it is touch- and-go, as they call it, whether we are still to enjoy reverence and honor from the earth, or be utterly neglected and become of no account.

Hera. Has Earth produced a new brood of giants? Have the Titans broken their chains, overpowered their guards, and taken up arms against us once more?

Zeus. Nay, fear not that; Hell threatens not the Gods.

Hera. What can the matter be, then? To hear you, one might think it was Polus or Aristodemus, not Zeus; and why, pray, if something of that sort is not bothering you?

Zeus. My dear, a discussion somehow arose yesterday between Timocles the Stoic and Damis the Epicurean. There was a numerous and respectable audience (which particularly annoyed me), and they had an argument on the subject of Providence. Damis questioned the existence of the Gods, and utterly denied their interest in or government of events, while Timocles, good man, did his best to champion our cause. A great crowd gathered round; but no conclusion was reached. They broke up with an understanding that the inquiry should be completed another day; and now they are all agog to see which will win and prove his case. You all see how parlous and precarious is our position, depending on a single mortal. These are the alternatives for us: to be dismissed as mere empty names, or (if Timocles prevails) to enjoy our customary honors.

Hera. This is really a serious matter; your ranting was not so uncalled-for, Zeus.

Zeus. You fancied me thinking of some Danae or Antiope; and this was the dread reality. Now, Hermes, Hera, Athene, what is our course? We await your contribution to our plans.

Hermes. My opinion is that an assembly be summoned and the community taken into counsel.

Hera. And I concur.

Athene. Sire, I dissent entirely; you should not fill Heaven with apprehensions, nor let your own uneasiness be visible, but take private measures to assure Timocles's victory and Damis's being laughed out of court.

Hermes. It cannot be kept quiet, Zeus; the philosophers' debate is public, and you will be accused of despotic methods, if you maintain reserve on a matter of so great and general interest.

Zeus. Make proclamation and summon all, then. I approve your judgment.

Hermes. Here, assemble, all ye Gods; don't waste time, come along, here you are; we are going to have an important meeting.

Zeus. What, Hermes? So bald, so plain, so prosy an announcement—on this momentous occasion?

Hermes. Why, how would you like it done?

Zeus. Some metre, a little poetic sonority, would make the style impressive, and they would be more likely to come.

Hermes. Ah, Zeus, that is work for epic poets or reciters, and I am no good at poetry. I should be sure to put in too many feet, or leave out some, and spoil the thing; they would only laugh at my rude verses. Why, I've known Apollo himself laughed at for some of his oracles; and prophecy has the advantage of obscurity, which gives the hearers something better to do than scanning verses.

Zeus. Well, well, Hermes, you can make lines from Homer the chief ingredient of your composition; summon us in his words; you remember them, of course.

Hermes. I cannot say they are exactly on the tip of my tongue; however, I'll do my best:

Let ne'er a God (tum, tum), nor eke a Goddess,

Nor yet of Ocean's rivers one be wanting,

Nor nymphs; but gather to great Zeus's council;

And all that feast on glorious hecatombs,

Yea, middle and lower classes of Divinity,

Or nameless ones that snuff fat altar-fumes

Zeus. Good, Hermes; that is an excellent proclamation: see, here they come pell-mell; now receive and place them in correct precedence, according to their material or workmanship; gold in the front row, silver next, then the ivory ones, then those of stone or bronze. A cross-division will give precedence to the creations of Phidias, Alcamenes, Myron, Euphranor, and artists of that calibre, while the common inartistic jobs can be huddled together in the far corner, hold their tongues, and just make up the rank and file of our assembly.

Hermes. All right; they shall have their proper places. But here is a point: suppose one of them is gold, and heavy at that, but not finely finished, quite amateurish and ill proportioned, in fact—is he to take precedence of Myron's and Polyclitus's bronze, or Phidias's and Alcamenes's marble? Or is workmanship to count most?

Zeus. It should by rights. Never mind, put the gold first.

Hermes. I see; property qualification, comparative wealth, is the test, not merit.—Gold to the front row, please.—Zeus, the front row will be exclusively barbarian, I observe. You see the peculiarity of the Greek contingent: they have grace and beauty and artistic workmanship, but they are all marble or bronze—the most costly of them only ivory with just an occasional gleam of gold, the merest surface-plating; and even those are wood inside, harbouring whole colonies of mice. Whereas Bendis here, Anubis there, Attis next door, and Mithras and Men, are all of solid gold, heavy and intrinsically precious.

Poseidon. Hermes, is it in order that this dog-faced Egyptian person should sit in front of me, Poseidon?

Hermes. Certainly. You see, Earth-shaker, the Corinthians had no gold at the time, so Lysippus made you of paltry bronze; Dog-face is a whole gold-mine richer than you. You must put up with being moved back, and not object to the owner of such a golden snout being preferred.

Aphorodite. Then, Hermes, find me a place in the front row; I am golden.

Hermes. Not so, Aphrodite, if I can trust my eyes; I am purblind, or you are white marble; you were quarried, I take it, from Pentelicus, turned by Praxiteles's fancy into Aphrodite, and handed over to the Cnidians.

Aphorodite. Wait; my witness is unexceptionable—Homer. 'The Golden Aphrodite' he calls me, up and down his poems.

Hermes. Oh, yes, no doubt; he called Apollo rich, 'rolling in gold'; but now where will you find Apollo? Somewhere in the third-class seats; his crown has been taken off and his harp pegs stolen by the pirates, you see. So you may think yourself lucky with a place above the fourth.

Colossus. Well, who will dare dispute my claim? Am I not the Sun? And look at my height. If the Rhodians had not decided on such grandiose dimensions for me, the same outlay would have furnished forth a round dozen of your golden Gods; I ought to be valued proportionally. And then, besides the size, there is the workmanship and careful finish.

Hermes. What shall I do, Zeus? Here is a difficulty again—too much for me. Going by material, he is bronze; but, reckoning the talents his bronze cost, he would be above the first class.

Zeus. What business has he here dwarfing the rest and blocking up all the bench?—Why, my excellent Rhodian, you may be as superior to the golden ones as you will; but how can you possibly go in the front row? Every one would have to get up, to let you sit; half that broad beam of yours would fill the whole House. I must ask you to assist our deliberations standing;

you can bend down your head to the meeting.

Hermes. Now here is another problem. Both bronze, equal aesthetically, being both from Lysippus's studio, and, to crown all, nothing to choose between them for birth—two sons of yours, Zeus—Dionysus and Heracles. Which is to be first? You can see for yourself, they mean to stand upon their order.

Zeus. We are wasting time, Hermes; the debate should have been in full swing by now. Tell them to sit anyhow, according to taste; we will have an ad hoc meeting another day, and then I shall know how to settle the question of precedence.

Hermes. My goodness, what a noise! What low vulgar bawling! Listen—'Hurry up with that carving!' 'Do pass the nectar!' 'Why no more ambrosia?' 'When are those hecatombs coming?' 'Here, shares in that victim!'

Zeus. Call them to order, Hermes; this nonsense must cease, before I can give them the order of the day.

Hermes. They do not all know Greek; and I haven't the gift of tongues, to make myself understood by Scythians and Persians and Thracians and Celts. Perhaps I had better hold up my hand and signal for silence.

Zeus. Do.

Hermes. Good; they are as quiet as if they were so many teachers of elocution. Now is the time for your speech; see, they are all hanging on your lips.

Zeus. Why—there is something wrong with me—Hermes, my boy —I will be frank with you. You know how confident and impressive I always was as a public speaker?

Hermes. I know; I used to be in such a fright; you threatened sometimes to let down your golden cord and heave up earth and sea from their foundations, Gods included.

Zeus. But today, my child—it may be this terrible crisis— it may be the size of the audience—there is a vast number of Gods here, isn't there—anyhow, my thoughts are all mixed, I shiver, my tongue seems tied. What is most absurd of all, my exordium is gone clean out of my head; and I had prepared it on purpose to produce a good impression at the start.

Hermes. You have spoiled everything, Zeus. They cannot make out your silence; they are expecting to hear of some terrible disaster, to account for your delay.

Zeus. What do you think? Reel off the exordium in Homer?

Hermes. Which one?

Zeus. Lend me your ears, Gods all and Goddesses.

Hermes. Rubbish! You made quite exhibition enough of yourself in that vein in our cabinet council. However, you might, if you like, drop your metrical fustian, and adapt any one of Demosthenes's Philippics with a few alterations. That is the fashionable method with speakers nowadays.

Zeus. Ah, that is a royal road to eloquence—simplifies matters very much for a man in difficulties.

Hermes. Go ahead, then.

Zeus. Men of—Heaven, I presume that you would be willing to pay a great price, if you could know what in the world has occasioned the present summons. Which being so, it is fitting that you should give a ready hearing to my words. Now, whereas the present crisis, Heavenians, may almost be said to lift up a voice and bid us take vigorous hold on opportunity, it seems to me that we are letting it slip from our nerveless grasp. And I wish now (I can't remember any more) to exhibit clearly to you the apprehensions which have led to my summoning you.

As you are all aware, Mnesitheus the ship's-captain yesterday made his votive offering for the narrow escape of his vessel off Caphereus, and those of us whom he had invited attended the banquet in Piraeus. After the libations you went your several ways. I myself, as it was not very late, walked up to town for an afternoon stroll in Ceramicus, reflecting as I went on the parsimony of Mnesitheus. When the ship was driving against the cliff, and already inside the circle of reef, he had vowed whole hecatombs: what he offered in fact, with sixteen Gods to entertain, was a single cock—an old bird afflicted with catarrh—and half a dozen grains of frankincense. These were all mildewed, so that they at once fizzled out on the embers, hardly giving enough smoke to tickle the olfactories. Engaged in these thoughts I reached the Poecile, and there found a great crowd gathered; there were some inside the Portico, a large number outside, and a few seated on the benches vociferating as loud as they could. Guessing correctly that these were philosophers of the militant variety, I had a mind to stop and hear what they were saying. I was enveloped in a good thick cloud, under cover of which I assumed their habit, lengthened my beard, and so made a passable philosopher; then I elbowed my way through the crowd and got in undetected. I found an accomplished scoundrel and a pattern of human virtue at daggers drawn; they were Damis the Epicurean and Timocles the Stoic. The latter was bathed in perspiration, and his voice showed signs of wear, while Damis goaded him on to further exertions with mocking laughter.

The bone of contention was ourselves. Damis—the reptile!— maintained that we did not concern ourselves in thought or act with human affairs, and practically denied our existence; that was what it came to. And he found some support. Timocles was on our side, and loyally, passionately, unshrinkingly did he champion the cause. He extolled our Providence, and illustrated the orderly discerning character of our influence and government. He too had his party; but he was exhausted and quite husky; and the majority were inclining to Damis. I saw how much was at stake, and ordered Night to come on and break up the meeting. They accordingly dispersed, agreeing to conclude the inquiry next day. I kept among the crowd on its

way home, heard its commendations of Damis, and found that his views were far the more popular, though some still protested against condemning Timocles out of hand, and preferred to see what he would say for himself to-morrow.

You now know the occasion of this meeting—no light one, ye Gods, if you reflect how entirely our dignity, our revenue, our honour, depend on mankind. If they should accept as true either our absolute non-existence or, short of that, our indifference to them, farewell to our earthly sacrifices, attributes, honors; we shall sit starving and ineffectual in Heaven; our beloved feasts and assemblies, games and sacrifices, vigils and processions—all will be no more. So mighty is the issue; believe me, it behooves us all to search out salvation; and where lies salvation? In the victory and acceptance of Timocles, in laughter that shall drown the voice of Damis. For I doubt the unaided powers of Timocles, if our help be not accorded him.

Hermes, make formal proclamation, and let the debate commence.

Hermes. Hear, keep silence, clamor not. Of full and qualified Gods, speak who will. Why, what means this? Doth none rise? Cower ye confounded at these momentous tidings?

Momus. Away, ye dull as earth, as water weak! But I could find plenty to say, Zeus, if free speech were granted me.

Zeus. Speak, Momus, and fear not. You will use your freedom, surely, for the common good.

Momus. Hear, then, ye Gods; for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. You must know, I foresaw all this clearly—our difficulty—the growth of these agitators; it is ourselves who are responsible for their impudence. I swear to you, we need not blame Epicurus nor his friends and successors, for the prevalence of these ideas. Why, what can one expect men to think, when they see all life topsy-turvy—the good neglected, pining in poverty, disease, and slavery, detestable scoundrels honored, rolling in wealth, and ordering their betters about, temple-robbers undetected and unpunished, the innocent constantly crucified and bastinadoed? With this evidence before them, it is only natural they should conclude against our existence. All the more when they hear the oracles saying that some one The Halys crossed, o'erthrows a mighty realm, but not specifying whether that realm is his own or his enemy's;or again O sacred Salamis, thou shalt slay full many a mother's son.

The Greeks were mothers' sons as well as the Persians, I suppose. Or again, when they hear the ballads about our loves, our wounds, captivities, thraldoms, quarrels, and endless vicissitudes (mark you, we claim all the while to be blissful and serene), are they not justified in ridiculing and belittling us? And then we say it is outrageous if a few people who are not quite fools expose the absurdity and reject Providence. Why, we ought to be glad enough that a few still go on sacrificing to blunderers like us.

And at this point, Zeus—this meeting is private; the human element is not represented among us (except by Heracles, Dionysus, Ganymede, and Asclepius, and they are naturalized)—at this point, answer me a question frankly: did your interest in mankind ever carry you so far as to sift the good from the bad? The answer is in the negative, I know. Very well, then; had not a

Theseus, on his way from Troezen to Athens, exterminated the malefactors as an incidental amusement, Sciron and Pityocamptes and Cercyon and the rest of them might have gone on battening on the slaughter of travelers, for all you and your Providence would have done. Had not an old-fashioned thoughtful Eurystheus, benevolently collecting information of local troubles, sent this energetic enterprising servant of his about, the mighty Zeus would never have given a thought to the Hydra or the Stymphalian birds, the Thracian horses and the drunken insolence of Centaurs.

If the truth must out, we sit here with a single eye to one thing— does a man sacrifice and feed the altars fat? Everything else drifts as it may. We get our deserts, and shall continue to get them, when men open their eyes by degrees and find that sacrifices and processions bring them no profit. Before long you will find we are the laughing-stock of people like Epicurus, Metrodorus, Damis, who will have mastered and muzzled our advocates. With whom does it lie to check and remedy this state of things? Why, with you, who have brought it on. As for Momus, what is dishonor to him? He was never among the recipients of honor, while you were still prosperous; your banquetings were too exclusive.

Zeus. He was ever a cross-grained censor; we need not mind his maundering, Gods. We have it from the admirable Demosthenes: imputations, blame, criticism, these are easy things; they tax no one's capacity: what calls for a statesman is the suggesting of a better course; and that is what I rely upon the rest of you for; let us do our best without his help.

Poseidon. As for me, I live ordinarily under water, as you know, and follow an independent policy in the depths. That policy is to save sailors, set ships on their way, and keep the winds quiet, as best I may. However, I do take an interest in your politics too, and my opinion is that this Damis should be got rid of before the debate. The thunderbolt would do it, or some means could be found; else he might win—you say he is a plausible fellow, Zeus. It would teach them that there is a reckoning for telling such tales about us, too.

Zeus. You must be jesting, Poseidon; you cannot have forgotten that we have no say in the matter? It is the Fates that spin a man's thread, whether he be destined to the thunderbolt or the sword, to fever or consumption. If it had depended on me, do you suppose I should have let those temple-robbers get off unblasted from Pisa the other day?—two of my curls shorn off, weighing half a dozen pounds apiece. Would you have stood it, when that fisherman from Oreus stole your trident at Geraestus? Moreover, they will think we are sensitive and angry; they will suspect that the reason why we get the man out of the way without waiting to see him matched with Timocles is that we are afraid of his arguments; they will say we are just securing judgment by default.

Poseidon. Dear, dear! I thought I had hit upon a good short cut to our object.

Zeus. Nonsense, there is something fishy about it, Poseidon; and it is a dull notion too, to destroy your adversary beforehand. He dies unvanquished, and leaves his argument behind him still debatable and undecided.

Poseidon. Then the rest of you must think of something better, if 'fishy' is the best word you have for me.

Apollo. If we beardless juniors were competent to address the meeting, I might perhaps have contributed usefully to the discussion.

Momus. Oh, Apollo, the inquiry is so important that seniority may be waived, and any one allowed his say. A pretty thing to split hairs about legal competence at a supreme crisis! But you are surely qualified by this time; your minority is prehistoric, your name is on the Privy-Council roll, your senatorial rank dates back almost to Cronus. Pray spare us these juvenile airs, and give us your views freely; you need not be bashful about your smooth chin. You have a father's rights in Asclepius's great bush of a beard. Moreover, you never had a better opportunity of showing your wisdom, if your philosophic seances with the Muses on Helicon have not been thrown away.

Apollo. Why, it does not lie with you to give me leave, Momus; Zeus must do that; and if he bids, I may find words that shall be not all uncultured, but worthy of my Heliconian studies.

Zeus. Speak, son; thou hast my leave.

Apollo. This Timocles is a good pious man, and an excellent Stoic scholar. His learning has gained him a wide and paying connection among young men; in private lessons his manner is indeed very convincing. But in public speaking he is timid, cannot produce his voice, and has a provincial accent. The consequence is, he gets laughed at in company, lacks fluency, stammers and loses his thread—especially when he emphasizes these defects by an attempt at flowers of speech. As far as intelligence goes, he is extremely acute and subtle, so the Stoic experts say. But he spoils it all by the feebleness of his oral explanations; he is confused and unintelligible, deals in paradoxes, and when he is interrogated, explains ignotum per ignotius. His audience does not grasp his meaning, and therefore laughs at him. I think lucidity a most important point; there is nothing one should be so careful about as to be comprehensible.

Momus. You praise lucidity, Apollo; your theory is excellent, though your practice does not quite conform. Your oracles are crooked and enigmatic, and generally rely upon a safe ambiguity; a second prophet is required to say what they mean. But what is your solution of the problem? How are we to cure Timocles of the impediment in his speech?

Apollo. If possible, we should provide him with an able counsel (there are plenty such) to be inspired by him and give adequate expression to his ideas.

Momus. Your sapience is beardless indeed—in statu pupillari, one may say. A learned gathering: Timocles with counsel by his side to interpret his ideas. Damis speaking in propria persona with his own tongue, his opponent employing a go-between into whose ears he privately pours inspiration, and the go-between producing ornate periods, without, I dare say, understanding what he is told—most entertaining for the listeners! We shall get nothing out of that device.

But, reverend sir, you claim the gift of prophecy, and it has brought you in good pay—golden ingots on one occasion?—Why not seize this opportunity of exhibiting your art? You might tell us which of the disputants will win; a prophet knows the future, of course.

Apollo. I have no tripod or incense here; no substitute for the divining-well of Castaly.

Momus. Aha! you are caught! you will not come to the scratch.

Zeus. Speak, my son, in spite of all; give not this enemy occasion to blaspheme; let him not flout thy powers with tripod and water and frankincense, as though thine art were lost without them.

Apollo. Father, it were better done at Delphi or at Colophon, with all the customary instruments to hand. Yet, bare and unprovided as I am, I will essay to tell whether of them twain shall prevail.—If the metre is a little rough, you must make allowances.

Momus. Go on, then; but remember, Apollo: lucidity; no 'able counsel,' no solutions that want solving themselves. It is not a question of lamb and tortoise boiling in Lydia now; you know what we want to get at.

Zeus. What will thine utterance be? How dread, even now, is the making ready! The altered hue, the rolling eyes, the floating locks, the frenzied gesture—all is possession, horror, mystery.

Apollo.

Who lists may hear Apollo's soothfast rede

Of stiff debate, heroic challenge ringing

Shrill, and each headpiece lined with fence of proof.

Alternate clack the strokes in whirling strife;

Sore buffeted, quakes and shivers heart of oak.

But when grasshopper feels the vulture's talons,

Then the storm-boding ravens croak their last,

Prevail the mules, butts his swift foals the ass.

Zeus. Why that ribald laughter, Momus? It is no laughing matter. Stop, stop, fool; you'll choke yourself.

Momus. Well, such a clear simple oracle puts one in spirits.

Zeus. Indeed? Then perhaps you will kindly expound it.

Momus. No need of a Themistocles this time; it is absolutely plain. The oracle just says in so many words that he is a quack, and we pack-asses (quite true) and mules to believe in him; we have not as much sense, it adds, as a grasshopper.

Heracles. Father, I am only an alien, but I am not afraid to give my opinion. Let them begin their debate. Then, if Timocles gets the best of it, we can let the meeting go on, in our own interest. On the other hand, if things look bad, I will give the Portico a shake, if you like, and bring it down on Damis; a confounded fellow like that is not to insult us.

Zeus. Now by Heracles—I can swear by you, I certainly cannot swear by your plan—what a crude—what a shockingly philistine suggestion! What! Destroy all those people for one man's wickedness? And the Portico thrown in, with the Miltiades and Cynaegirus on the field of Marathon? Why, if these were ruined, how could the orators ever make another speech, with the best of their stock-in-trade taken from them? Besides, while you were alive, you might possibly have done a thing like that; but now that you are a God, you surely understand that only the Fates are competent, and we cannot interfere?

Heracles. Then when I slew the lion or the Hydra, was I only the Fates' instrument?

Zeus. Of course you were.

Heracles. And now, suppose any one insults me, or robs my temple, or upsets an image of me, am I not to pulverize him, just because the Fates have not decreed it long ago?

Zeus. Certainly not.

Heracles. Then allow me to speak my mind; I'm a blunt man; I call a spade a spade.

If this is the state of things with you, good-bye for me to your honors and altar-steam and fat of victims; I shall be off to Hades. There, if I show my bow ready for action, the ghosts of the monsters I have slain will be frightened, at least.

Zeus. Oh, splendid! 'Thine own lips testify against thee,' says the book; you would have saved Damis some trouble by putting this in his mouth.

But who is this breathless messenger? Bronze—a nice clean figure and outline—chevelure rather out of date. Ah, he must be your brother, Hermes, who stands in the Market by the Poecile; I see he is all over pitch; that is what comes of having casts taken of you every day. My son, why this haste? Have you important news from Earth?

Hermagoras. Momentous news, calling for infinite energy.

Zeus. Speak, tarry not, if any peril else hath escaped our vigilance.

Hermagoras.

It chanced of late that by the statuaries

My breast and back were plastered o'er with pitch;

A mock cuirass tight-clinging hung, to ape

My bronze, and take the seal of its impression.

When lo, a crowd! therein a pallid pair

Sparring amain, vociferating logic;

'Twas Damis and—

Zeus. Truce to your iambics, my excellent Hermagoras; I know the pair. But tell me whether the fight has been going on long.

Hermagoras. Not yet; they were still skirmishing—slinging invective at long range.

Zeus. Then we have only, Gods, to look over and listen. Let the Hours unbar, draw back the clouds, and open the doors of Heaven.

Upon my word, what a vast gathering! And I do not quite like the looks of Timocles; he is trembling; he has lost his head; he will spoil everything; it is perfectly plain, he will not be able to stand up to Damis. Well, there is one thing left us: we can pray for him

Inwardly, silently, lest Damis hear.

Timocles. What, you miscreant, no Gods? No Providence?

Damis. No, no; you answer my question first; what makes you believe in them?

Timocles. None of that, now; the onus of proof is with you, scoundrel.

Damis. None of that, now; it is with you.

Zeus. At this game ours is much the better man—louder-voiced, rougher-tempered. Good, Timocles; stick to invective; that is your strong point; once you get off that, he will hook and hold you up like a fish.

Timocles. I solemnly swear I will not answer first.

Damis. Well, put your questions, then; so much you score by your oath. But no abuse, please.

Timocles. Done. Tell me, then, and be damned to you, do you deny that the Gods exercise providence?

Damis. I do.

Timocles. What, are all the events we see uncontrolled, then?

Damis. Yes.

Timocles. And the regulation of the universe is not under any God's care?

Damis. No.

Timocles. And everything moves casually, by blind tendency?

Damis. Yes.

Timocles. Gentlemen, can you tolerate such sentiments? Stone the blasphemer.

Damis. What do you mean by hounding them against me? Who are you, that you should protest in the Gods' name? They do not even protest in their own; they have sent no judgment on me, and they have had time enough to hear me, if they have ears.

Timocles. They do hear you; they do; and some day their vengeance will find you out.

Damis. Pray when are they likely to have time to spare for me? They are far too busy, according to you, with all the infinite concerns of the universe on their hands. That is why they have never punished you for your perjuries and—well, for the rest of your performances, let me say, not to break our compact about abuse. And yet I am at a loss to conceive any more convincing proof they could have given of their Providence, than if they had trounced you as you deserve. But no doubt they are from home—t'other side of Oceanus, possibly, on a visit to 'the blameless Ethiopians.' We know they have a way of going there to dinner, self-invited sometimes.

Timocles. What answer is possible to such ribaldry?

Damis. The answer I have been waiting for all this time; you can tell me what made you believe in divine Providence.

Timocles. Firstly, the order of nature—the sun running his regular course, the moon the same, the circling seasons, the growth of plants, the generation of living things, the ingenious adaptations in these latter for nutrition, thought, movement, locomotion; look at a carpenter or a shoemaker, for instance; and the thing is infinite. All these effects, and no effecting Providence?

Damis. You beg the question; whether the effects are produced by Providence is just what is not yet proved. Your description of nature I accept; it does not follow that there is definite design in it. It is not impossible that things now similar and homogeneous have developed from widely different origins. But you give the name 'order' to mere blind tendency. And you will be very angry if one follows your appreciative catalogue of nature in all its variety, but stops short of accepting it as a proof of detailed Providence. So, as the play says, Here lurks a fallacy; bring me sounder proof.

Timocles. I cannot admit that further proof is required; nevertheless, I will give you one. Will you allow Homer to have been an admirable poet?

Damis. Surely.

Timocles. Well, he maintains Providence, and warrants my belief.

Damis. Magnificent! Why, every one will grant you Homer's poetic excellence; but not that he, or any other poet for that matter, is good authority on questions of this sort. Their object, of course, is not truth, but fascination; they call in the charms of metre, they take tales for the vehicle of what instruction they give, and in short all their efforts are directed to pleasure.

But I should be glad to hear which parts of Homer you pin your faith to. Where he tells how the daughter, the brother, and the wife of Zeus conspired to imprison him? If Thetis had not been moved to compassion and called Briareus, you remember, our excellent Zeus would have been seized and manacled; and his gratitude to her induced him to delude Agamemnon with a lying dream, and bring about the deaths of a number of Greeks. Do you see? The reason was that, if he had struck and blasted Agamemnon's self with a thunderbolt, his double dealing would have come to light. Or perhaps you found the Diomede story most convincing?— Diomede wounded Aphrodite, and afterwards Ares himself, at Athene's instigation; and then the Gods actually fell to blows and went a-tilting—without distinction of sex; Athene overthrew Ares, exhausted no doubt with his previous wound from Diomede; and Hermes the stark and stanch 'gainst Leto stood.

Or did you put your trust in Artemis? She was a sensitive lady, who resented not being invited to Oeneus's banquet, and by way of vengeance sent a monstrous irresistible boar to ravage his country. Is it with tales like these that Homer has prevailed on you?

Zeus. Goodness me, what a shout, Gods! They are all cheering Damis. And our man seems posed; he is frightened and trembles; he is going to throw up the sponge, I am certain of it; he looks round for a gap to get away through.

Timocles. And will you scout Euripides too, then? Again and again he brings Gods on the stage, and shows them upholding virtue in the Heroes, but chastising wickedness and impiety (like yours).

Damis. My noble philosopher, if that is how the tragedians have convinced you, you have only two alternatives: you must suppose that divinity is temporarily lodged either in the actor—a Polus, an Aristodemus, a Satyrus—, or else in the actual masks, buskins, long tunics, cloaks, gloves, stomachers, padding, and ornamental paraphernalia in general of tragedy—a manifest absurdity. For when Euripides can speak his own sentiments unfettered by dramatic necessity, observe the freedom of his remarks:

Dost see this aether stretching infinite,

And girdling earth with close yet soft embrace?

That reckon thou thy Zeus, that name thy God.

And again,

Zeus, whatever Zeus may be (for, save by hearsay,

I know not)—;

and there is more of the same sort.

Timocles. Well, but all men—ay, all nations—have acknowledged and, feted Gods; was it all delusion?

Damis. Thank you; a timely reminder; national observances show better than anything else how vague religious theory is. Confusion is endless, and beliefs as many as believers. Scythia makes offerings to a scimetar, Thrace to the Samian runaway Zamolxis, Phrygia to a Month-God, Ethiopia to a Day-Goddess, Cyllene to Phales, Assyria to a dove, Persia to fire, Egypt to water. In Egypt, though, besides the universal worship of water, Memphis has a private cult of the ox, Pelusium of the onion, other cities of the ibis or the crocodile, others again of baboon, cat, or monkey. Nay, the very villages have their specialities: one deifies the right shoulder, and another across the river the left; one a half skull, another an earthenware bowl or platter. Come, my fine fellow, is it not all ridiculous?

Momus. What did I tell you, Gods? All this was sure to come out and be carefully overhauled.

Zeus. You did, Momus, and your strictures were justified; if once we come safe out of this present peril, I will try to introduce reforms.

Timocles. Infidel! Where do you find the source of oracles and prophecies, if not in the Gods and their Providence?

Damis. About oracles, friend, the less said the better; I shall ask you to choose your instances, you see. Will Apollo's answer to the Lydian suit you? That was as symmetrical as a double-edged knife; or say, it faced both ways, like those Hermae which are made double, alike whether you look at front or back. Consider; will Croesus's passage of the Halys destroy his own realm, or Cyrus's? Tet the wretched Sardian paid a long price for his ambidextrous hexameter.

Momus. The man is realizing just my worst apprehensions. Where is our handsome musician now? Ah, there you are; go down and plead your own cause against him.

Zeus. Hush, Momus; you are murdering our feelings; it is no time for recrimination.

Timocles. Take care, Damis; this is sacrilege, no less; what you say amounts to razing the temples and upsetting the altars.

Damis. Oh, not all the altars; what harm do they do, so long as incense and perfume is the worst of it? As for Artemis's altar at Tauri, though, and her hideous feasts, I should like it overturned from base to cornice.

Zeus. Whence comes this resistless plague among us? There is none of us he spares; he is as free with his tongue as a tub orator, And grips by turns the innocent and guilty.

Momus. The innocent? You will not find many of those among us, Zeus. He will soon come to laying hands upon some of the great and eminent, I dare say.

Timocles. Do you close your ears even to Zeus's thunder, atheist?

Damis. I clearly cannot shut out the thunder; whether it is Zeus's thunder, you know better than I perhaps; you may have interviewed the Gods. Travelers from Crete tell another story: there is a tomb there with an inscribed pillar, stating that Zeus is long dead, and not going to thunder any more.

Momus. I could have told you that was coming long ago. What, Zeus? pale? and your teeth chattering? What is the matter? You should cheer up, and treat such manikins with lofty contempt.

Zeus. Contempt? See what a number of them there is—how set against us they are already—and he has them fast by the ears.

Momus. Well, but you have only to choose, and you can let down your golden cord, and then every man of them with earth and sky and all thou canst draw up.

Timocles. Blasphemer, have you ever been on a voyage?

Damis. Many.

Timocles. Well, then, the wind struck the canvas and filled the sails, and it or the oars gave you way, but there was a person responsible for steering and for the safety of the ship?

Damis. Certainly.

Timocles. Now that ship would not have sailed, without a steersman; and do you suppose that this great universe drifts unsteered and uncontrolled?

Zeus. Good, this time, Timocles; a cogent illustration, that.

Damis. But, you pattern of piety, the earthly navigator makes his plans, takes his measures, gives his orders, with a single eye to efficiency. There is nothing useless or purposeless on board; everything is to make navigation easy or possible. But as for the navigator for whom you claim the management of this vast ship, he and his crew show no reason or appropriateness in any of their arrangements; the forestays, as likely as not, are made fast to the stern, and both sheets to the bows; the anchor will be gold, the beak lead, decoration below the water-line, and unsightliness above.

As for the men, you will find some lazy awkward coward in second or third command, or a fine swimmer, active as a cat aloft, and a handy man generally, chosen out of all the rest to—pump. It is just the same with the passengers: here is a jailbird accommodated with a seat next the captain and treated with reverence, there a debauchee or parricide or temple-robber in honorable possession of the best place, while crowds of respectable people are packed

together in a corner and hustled by their real inferiors. Consider what sort of a voyage Socrates and Aristides and Phocion had of it, on short rations, not venturing, for the filth, to stretch out their legs on the bare deck; and on the other hand what a comfortable, luxurious, contemptuous life it was for Callias or Midias or Sardanapalus.

That is how things go on board your ship, sir wiseacre; and who shall count the wrecks? If there had been a captain supervising and directing, in the first place he would have known the difference between good and bad passengers, and in the second he would have given them their deserts. The better would have had the better accommodation above by his side, and the worse gone below; with some of the better he would have shared his meals and his counsels. So too for the crew: the keen sailor would have been made look-out man or captain of the watch, or given some sort of precedence, and the lazy shirker have tasted the rope's end half a dozen times a day. The metaphorical ship, your worship, is likely to be capsized by its captain's incompetence.

Momus. He is sweeping on to victory, with wind and tide.

Zeus. Too probable, Momus. And Timocles never gets hold of an effective idea; he can only ladle out trite commonplaces higgledy-piggledy—no sooner heard than refuted.

Timocles. Well, well; my ship leaves you unconvinced; I must drop my sheet-anchor, then; that at least is unbreakable.

Zeus. I wonder what it is.

Timocles. See whether this is a sound syllogism; can you upset it?— If there are altars, there are Gods: there are altars; therefore, there are Gods. Now then.

Damis. Ha, ha, ha! I will answer as soon as I can get done with laughing.

Timocles. Will you never stop? At least tell me what the joke is.

Damis. Why, you don't see that your anchor (sheet-anchor, too) hangs by a mere thread. You defend on connection between the existence of Gods and the existence of altars, and fancy yourself safe at anchor! As you admit that this was your sheet-anchor, there is nothing further to detain us.

Timocles. You retire; you confess yourself beaten, then?

Damis. Yes; we have seen you take sanctuary at the altars under persecution. At those altars I am ready (the sheet-anchor be my witness) to swear peace and cease from strife.

Timocles. You are playing with me, are you, you vile body-snatcher, you loathsome well-whipped scum! As if we didn't know who your father was, how your mother was a harlot! You strangled your own brother, you live in fornication, you debauch the young, you unabashed lecher! Don't be in such a hurry; here is something for you to take with you; this broken pot will serve me to cut your foul throat.

Zeus. Damis makes off with a laugh, and the other after him, calling him names, mad at his insolence. He will get him on the head with that pottery, I know. And now, what are we to do?

Hermes. Why, the man in the comedy was not far out: Put a good face on 't, and thou hast no harm.

It is no such terrible disaster, if a few people go away infected. There are plenty who take the other view — a majority of Greeks, the body and dregs of the people, and the barbarians to a man.

Zeus. Ah, Hermes, but there is a great deal in Darius's remark about Zopyrus — I would rather have had one ally like Damis than be the lord of a thousand Babylons.