

MYTHOLOGIES OF OUTER SPACE

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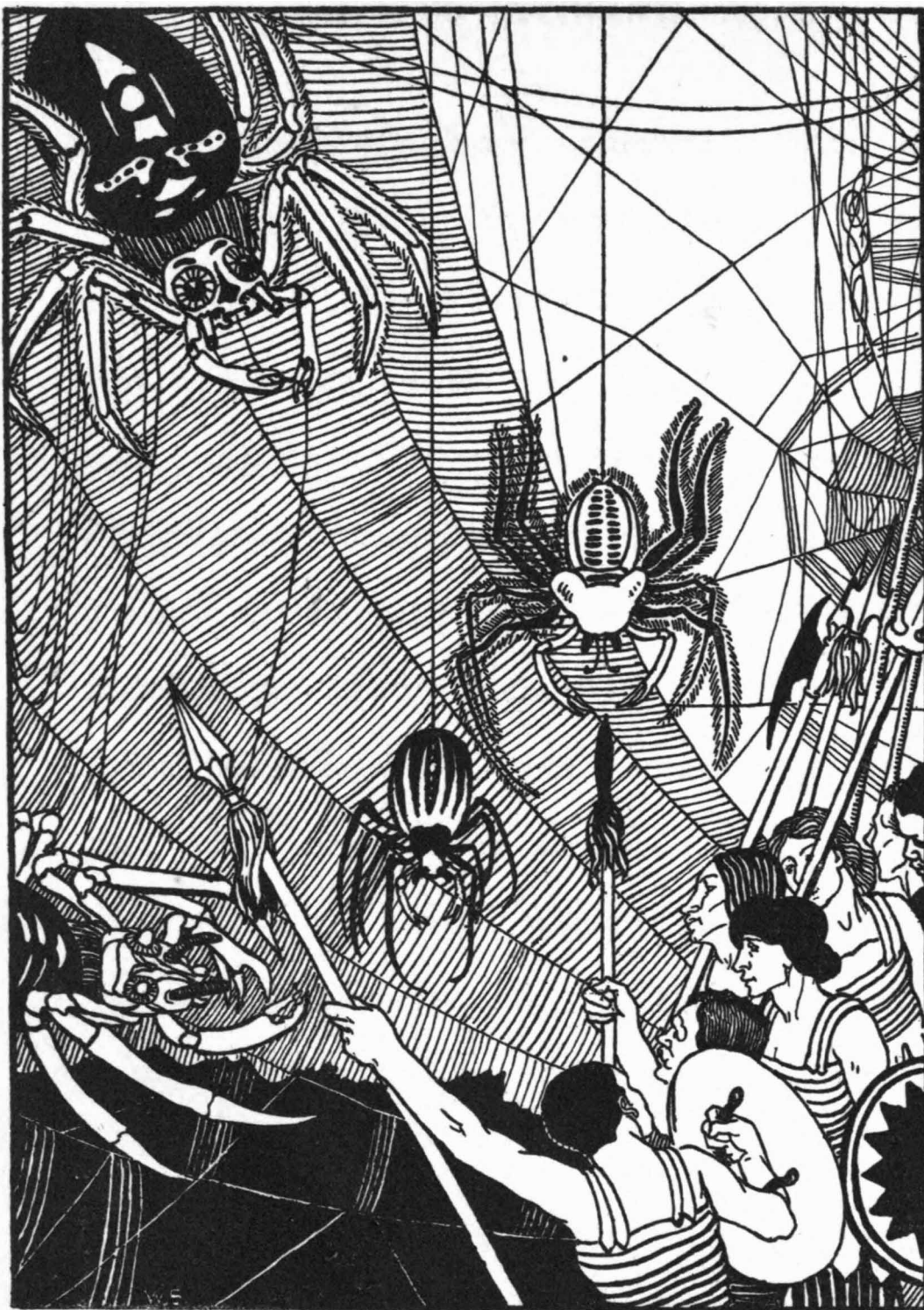
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"Spiders of Mighty Bigness." Illustration by William Strang from *Lucian's True History*, translated by Francis Hickeys (London 1894), p. 41.

translation by **keith sidwell**

lucian's voyage to the moon

The following imaginary voyage to the Moon is but one of a series of fantastical voyages described in a work by Lucian of Samosata (ca. 125–180 CE) entitled *True Histories*. The work begins with a prologue in which the author warns his readers that he has written this story—in which he himself is the protagonist—so as not to be left out of the current mania for telling lies and that they should not believe a word he says in it. Moreover, the stories consist of parodies of the writings of poets, historians, and philosophers, which the astute reader will recognize from their knowledge of Greek literature and use as food for intellectual inquiry. It is worth noting that Lucian's parodic play with ancient literary models is very evident in the description below of the war between the Heliots and the Selenites. The catalogue of troops looks back to the "Catalogue of Ships" in Homer, *Iliad* 2, and the general description of the battle deliberately recalls several passages from well-known late fifth- and early fourth-century BCE historical works by the Athenian writers Thucydides and Xenophon. In particular, for those who know their Thucydides, the change of mind of the victorious Heliots over the fate of the Selenites specifically evokes the Mytilenean debate in book 3 of Thucydides's work, and the form of the final treaty resembles that made between the Athenians and Spartans in book 5 of Thucydides.

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The narrative itself begins right on the edge of the known world, at the Pillars of Hercules (i.e., the Strait of Gibraltar). Setting sail, after eighty days the ship makes landfall on a remarkable island, where the narrator, Lucian, and his crew encounter vines in female form who seduce some of them (who then remain rooted, as it were, to the spot). Re-embarking at dawn, they sail on, and it is here that their adventure to the Moon begins (*True Histories* 1.9-28).



About midday, when the island was no longer in sight, a whirlwind arose. It twirled the ship around and lifted it into the air about three hundred stades. But it didn't set it back down onto the sea. Instead, as it hung up above in mid-air, a wind struck the sails and carried it along, belying out their cloth. For seven days and an equal number of nights we ran across the ether. Then on the eighth we spotted a large land, like an island in the sky, bright and spherical and lit up by a great light. We approached it, dropped anchor, and disembarked. On reconnoitering the ground, we found that it was both inhabited and under cultivation. While by day we could see nothing from there, when darkness came on, we could distinguish many other islands nearby, fire-coloured, some larger, some smaller. And there was another land below, with cities on it and rivers, seas, forests, and mountains. We inferred that this was the one inhabited by us.

When we determined to go even farther inland, we were taken prisoner on encountering the Vulture-Riders, as they are called by the inhabitants. The Vulture-Riders are actually men riding on enormous vultures and managing the birds like horses. The reason they can do this is that the vultures are enormous and mostly three-headed. You might be able to understand their size from the following analogy: each of the wings they have is longer than the mast of a large merchant ship. The task entrusted to these Vulture-Riders is to patrol the land by flying around and to bring to the king any strangers they might find. And that is why when they had taken us into custody, they brought us before him. He took one look at us and, guessing from our clothing, said, "So you are Greeks, then, strangers?" When we said we were, he asked, "So how did you get here with so much space to get through?" And we told him the whole story. Then he began to relate to us his own tale. He, too, was a human. His name was Endymion. He had been asleep one time when he was spirited away from our Earth and on arrival had become king of the country. He told us that his land was the one that appeared to us down below as the Moon. Nonetheless, he bade us be of good cheer and not to suspect any danger. We would have to hand everything we needed. He continued, "And if I win the war that I am currently waging against the inhabitants of the Sun, you will have the happiest of

lives among us.” We in turn inquired who the enemy were and what was the reason for the dispute. Endymion replied, “Phaethon, the king of the Sun’s inhabitants (I need to tell you that that celestial body is also lived on, just like the Moon) has been warring against us for a long time now. The reason it began was as follows. One time I gathered together the neediest of those living under my jurisdiction because I wished to send out a colony to the Morning Star. It was empty and no one lived there. So Phaethon was jealous and stopped the party of settlers by meeting them on Ant-Riders in the middle of their journey. Well, we were defeated then because we were no match for their army and retreated. But as things stand now, I want to start the war again and to send out the colony. If you are willing, join me in my expedition and I will give each one of you vultures of the kingly class and all the rest of the equipment of war. It is tomorrow that we shall be making our sortie.” I replied, “Make it so, since you think it a good idea.”

For the moment, then, we stayed with him and feasted. But in the morning, we got up and into fighting order. This was because the scouts were telling us that the enemy were close by. Now our army was 100,000 strong, not counting the bearers, the engineers, the infantry, and the foreign allies. Of these 80,000 were Vulture-Riders and 20,000 were mounted on Herb-Wings. The latter is also a huge bird, which is covered all over by shaggy herbs, while its wing feathers are pretty much like lettuce leaves. Next to these the Millet-Slingers and Garlic-Warriors were stationed. He also had allies come to him from the Great Bear, 30,000 Flea-Archers and 50,000 Wind-Runners. Of these the Flea-Archers ride on gigantic fleas—and this is how they get their name. Each of these fleas is the size of twelve elephants. The Wind-Runners are infantry soldiers, but they ride the air without wings. The way they manage this is as follows. They wrap themselves in tunics reaching to their feet, then they let them belly out in the wind like sails and are carried along as though they were ships. For the most part soldiers like these act as peltasts during battles. It was said that 70,000 Sparrow-Acorns and 50,000 Crane-Riders were to arrive from the stars above Cappadocia. But I did not see them, because they never arrived. This is why I have not had the courage to describe their natures, as monstrous and unbelievable things were said about them.

Such was the force under Endymion. They were all equipped the same way: their helmets were made from beans, as they have massive and strong ones there. Their cuirasses all have scales made of lupine, since they make them by sewing together the pods of these plants; the ones they grow there have husks as unbreakable as horn. Their swords and shield, however, are just like the Greek ones. When the moment came, they were arranged in the following order. The Vulture-Riders and the king, with his best warriors around him,

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held the right wing, and we were with them. The Herb-Wings took the left wing and the allies the centre in the order they themselves decided upon. The infantry numbered around 60,000,000 and they were arranged thus: they have among them many massive spiders, each one much larger than one of the Cyclades islands. They were ordered to spin a web over the space between the Moon and the Morning Star. They completed this task very quickly and produced a plain on which Endymion marshalled the infantry. Their leader was Nighty, the son of Prince Calm, one of the three commanders.

Turning to our enemies, the Ant-Riders held the right wing and among them was Phaethon. These are enormous beasts, with wings and looking like our own ants—except for their size, for the largest of them was two hundred feet long. It was not just their riders who fought, however. The beasts themselves also did so with their antennae. Their number was said to be somewhere around 50,000. On their right wing the Air-Gnats were stationed, they, too, numbering around 50,000. They were all archers mounted on enormous gnats. Behind them were the Air-Prancers, lightly armed and on foot, but also formidable warriors. They used their slings to fire oversized radishes from a distance. Anyone they hit did not hold out for long but died when a stinking infection set in to their wound. They were said to smear their missiles with mallow poison. Close by them were positioned the Stalk-Mushrooms, hoplites and hand-to-hand fighters, 10,000 in number. They were called Stalk-Mushrooms because they used mushrooms for shields, and for spears the stalks of asparagus plants. Near to them stood the Dog-Acorns, sent to Phaethon by the inhabitants of the Dog-Star, Sirius, 50,000 of them. They are dog-faced men who fight on winged acorns. Phaethon, too, so it was said, had allies who delayed their arrival, namely the slingers he had sent for from the Milky Way and the Cloud-Centaurs. The latter did in fact arrive, when the battle was already decided and there was no need of them anymore. The slingers did not appear at all, however, and for this reason they say that Phaethon became angry with them afterwards and burned their country.

This was the army that Phaethon had when he advanced. The two sides clashed and started fighting after the standards had been raised and the asses had brayed on each side—I must explain that they employ these instead of trumpeters. The left wing of the Heliots fled at once without even coming to grips with the Vulture-Riders, and we pursued them, killing as we went. But their right wing defeated our left and the Air-Gnats sallied and pursued our force as far as the infantry. But when, at this point, they came to help, the enemy turned and fled, especially when they realized that the forces on their left wing had been defeated. The rout was triumphant, and many were taken prisoner, while many also were done to death. The blood ran in great quantity over the

clouds. Consequently, I was led to conjecture that it might have been some such occurrence in ancient times that made Homer suppose that Zeus had rained blood at the death of Sarpedon.

We turned back from our pursuit and set up two trophies, one on the spider's web for the infantry battle, the other on the clouds for the aerial battle. But just as these were being constructed, news was brought by our scouts that the Cloud-Centaurs, who were supposed to have come to Phaethon before the battle, were attacking. And indeed, we could see them approaching, a most paradoxical sight, a combination of winged horses and human beings. The men were the size of the Colossus of Rhodes from halfway up, and the horses as big as a large merchant ship. Still, I have not registered here their number, for fear that it might actually appear unbelievable to anyone, so great was it. Their leader was the archer from the Zodiac. When they realized that their friends had been defeated, they sent a message to Phaethon telling him to attack again and then, assuming battle order, fell upon the Selenites themselves while they were in disorder and scattered because of the pursuit and the search for spoils. They routed them all, chased the king all the way to the city, and slaughtered most of their birds. They also pulled down the trophies, traversed the whole of the plain woven by the spiders, and captured me and two of my companions. Phaethon arrived presently and once more other trophies were being constructed by their side.

We were led off to the Sun the very same day, our hands tied behind us with a hank of spider webbing. They decided, however, not to besiege the city. Instead, they turned back and walled off the middle of the air, with the consequence that the Sun's rays could no longer reach the Moon. The wall was double and made of cloud. Consequently, there was a quite apparent eclipse of the Moon and the whole place was gripped by continual night. Endymion, constrained by these circumstances, sent envoys to beg for the wall to be removed and that they should not stand by and watch them living their lives in darkness. Phaethon's advisers met in assembly twice. The first day they remitted none of their anger. But on the next day they changed their minds, and a peace-treaty was agreed on the following terms.

The Heliots and their allies have made an agreement as follows with the Selenites and their allies. First, that the Heliots shall destroy the dividing wall and never again attack the Moon and shall return their prisoners of war each for a fixed amount of money. Second, that the Selenites shall allow the rest of the stars at any rate to govern themselves and that they shall not deploy arms against the

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Heliots. Third, that each side shall come to the aid of the other, should anyone attack them. Fourth, that every year the king of the Selenites shall pay in tribute to the king of the Heliots 10,000 amphoras of dew and shall hand over 10,000 hostages from their own people. Fifth, that the two sides shall colonize the Morning Star together and that anyone of the other states who wishes may participate. Finally, that the treaty shall be engraved upon a pillar of amber and set up in the middle of the air on the frontier between the two states. Swearing to uphold the agreement were the following: for the Heliots, Fiery, Summery, and Flamey, for the Selenites, Nighty, Monthly, and Bright-Shiny.

Such was the peace treaty that was made. The wall was taken down immediately and they handed us prisoners over. When we arrived back at the Moon, our comrades and Endymion himself came out to meet us and welcomed us with tears. Endymion for his part thought we should stay with him and take part in the colonizing project, promising to give me his own son in marriage (I must explain that there are no women there). I could in no way be persuaded but thought he should send us back down to the sea. When he realized that it was impossible to persuade me, he feasted us for seven days and then sent us on our way.

Now I want to tell you the novel and paradoxical things I noticed while staying on the Moon. First of all, they are not born of woman, but of males. The thing is that they have males as their brides and do not even know the word "woman." Each of them is a bride up to the age of twenty-five, and after that becomes a husband. They do not carry their babies in the womb, but in the calf of the leg. As soon as the leg receives the embryo, it starts to swell. Sometime later, they make an incision and bring the fetus out dead. They then expose it with its mouth open to the wind and bring it to life. I think that this is where the Greeks got the word "womb-calf," because among the Selenites that is what takes the place of the womb for pregnancies. But there is something even more singular I have to relate. Among them there is a race of beings called Dendrites, which is generated in the following manner. They cut off the right testicle of a man and bury it in the Earth. From this there grows a very tall tree, fleshy, like a phallus, but with branches and leaves. The fruit it bears is a crop of acorns, each a cubit in length. When these are ripe, they harvest them and hatch the men. They have prosthetic genitals, however, some of ivory, though the poor make do with wood. These are what they use for sexual intercourse and intimate relations with their spouses. When a man grows old, though, he does not die, but dissipates into air like smoke. All of them are nourished the same way. They light a fire and roast frogs over the embers (I must explain that there

are many of these croaking creatures flying about in the air). As the frogs are roasting, they sit down as though around a table, snaffle the smoke from the vapours, and feast royally. This, then, is the way they eat. But for their drink they use air squeezed into a cup, which sends out a liquid like dew. Nevertheless, they do not urinate or defecate, because they have no orifices as we do. Nor do young boys present their buttocks for intercourse, but the back of the knee above the calf, where they do have an opening.

Among the Selenites anyone who is bald and hairless is considered a beauty. The long-haired they actually loathe. On the comets, however, it is the long-haired who are thought beautiful (I know this because some people who had travelled there told me about them). Moreover, they also grow beards a little above their knees. They have no nails on their toes, either, but are all single-toed. Above their buttocks each one has a long cabbage growing, like a tail. It is always luxuriant and does not get crushed when they fall on their backs. When they blow their noses, the product is a very sharp honey, and whenever they work hard or are exercising, they sweat so much milk from every pore of their bodies, that they can make hard cheeses from it, by dripping in a little bit of the honey. They make an oil from onions that is very rich and as sweet-smelling as myrrh. They have many water-bearing vines. The grapes on the bunches are like hailstones and, in my opinion, whenever the wind gets up and shakes those vines, it is at that point that hail falls on us, as the bunches burst open. They use their stomachs like sporrans, placing in them whatever they need, the reason being that they can be opened and closed again, as they seem not to have any intestines in them. The only thing is that they are hairy and shaggy within, so that when it is freezing their children can hunker down inside.

For clothing the rich wear malleable glass, but the poor woven copper (the reason being that the regions there are rich in this metal, and they work it like wool, softening it with water). About the sort of eyes they have, I am reluctant to speak, in case people think I am lying because the tale is unbelievable, but nonetheless I shall do so. They have eyes that can be removed, so whoever wishes can take them out and keep them safe until he needs to see again. In this way, when he puts them back in, he has his vision back. Many who have lost their own borrow them from others and so are able to see. There are those who keep many spare sets (the rich, naturally). Their ears are plane leaves, except that the men generated from trees are the only ones to have merely wooden ones.

There was yet another wonder that I saw in the king's palace. There is a huge mirror set above a shallow well. If you descend into the well, you can hear everything that is being said by those on our Earth. And if you look up at the mirror, you will see all the cities

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and all the nations as though you were standing next to each of them. At that time, I personally saw my relatives and the whole of my native land, but whether they could see me as well, I am no longer able to tell you for sure. If anyone does not believe that things are as I have described them, if he ever gets there himself, he will know that I am telling the truth.

Then we said farewell to the king and his entourage, got on board our vessel, and set sail. Endymion also gave me gifts, two of the glass tunics and five of the copper ones, plus a complete set of the lupine armour. All of these I later left behind in the whale. He also sent with us a thousand Vulture-Riders to accompany us for the first five hundred stades. We passed by many other lands on our voyage, but we did put in at the Morning Star (which was just in the process of being colonized), disembarked, and topped up our water supplies. After re-embarking en route for the Zodiac, we passed by the Sun on our left, grazing the land as we sailed past. We did not disembark, although my comrades very much desired to, because the wind was against it. We were able, however, to look at the land, which was flourishing, rich, well-watered, and full of many good things. When the Cloud-Centaurs saw us, however—they were mercenaries of Phaethon’s—they flew up to our ship. But when they learned that we were protected under the treaty, they retreated. The Vulture-Riders had already left by this time.



After a couple more stops in their space journey, Lucian’s ship is finally set down on the sea, where he and his crew encounter more paradoxical adventures—being swallowed by a whale, for example, and visiting the Isles of the Blest, where Lucian meets Homer. As a final great lie, after his arrival on “the other continent,” the author promises to relate what happened there in a third book—which, of course, he never writes.

For more on Lucian, including a full translation of the *True Histories*, see Keith Sidwell, *Lucian: Chattering Courtesans and Other Sardonic Sketches* (London: Penguin, 2004).

