

This project explores the work of polymath Jean Thenaud (c.1480-c.1542), a writer, court astrologer, kabbalist, and historiographer in the service of Louise of Savoy (1476-1531) and her son King Francis I of France (1494-1547). It is argued that Thenaud played a central role in popularizing the works of Lucian of Samosata in France, being the first to translate and adapt Lucian's "True Histories" and "Icaromenippus" into French for the royal family. Lucian quickly became the leading model of satire in early modern Europe, an inexhaustible source of inspiration for some of the most famous giants of world literature, from François Rabelais to Jonathan Swift. As Lucian mocks all philosophical schools and religions, he was early associated with atheism. The stakes of exploring Lucian's reception in the work of a highly placed court astrologer are therefore high.

Although there is an abundance of scholarship on Lucian's fortunes during the European Renaissance, Thenaud has been almost completely forgotten. Apart from a few articles and a collective work, no monograph exists and many of his works are still in manuscript form. However, his manuscripts were commissioned by the royal family, notably by Francis I, the great patron of humanism in Renaissance France. Thenaud was thus one of the main vectors for the transmission of ancient culture in France, in particular the stream of humanism, which encouraged intellectual exploration and freedom from rigid dogmatic attitudes. He truly deserves our scientific attention. It is precisely the scientific gap that the present project aims to fill.

A Renaissance man, Thenaud's work is encyclopedic in nature, but poses great problems of interpretation. Thenaud wrote an account of a very real journey to the Holy Land (his only published work), in which he mixed accounts of places that he had actually visited with descriptions of places that he had read about from other travelers. In his fictional works, he often mocked travelers who wrote by hearsay, and he himself incurred the mockery of Rabelais for the same fault. He made nativity charts and annual astrological prognostications for the royal family, but he also criticized astrology as a dangerous pseudoscience. He wrote the first two French textbooks on the Kabbalah, but he rejected it as mere superstition in the same books. He criticized religious orders, although he himself was a guardian of a Franciscan convent.

These contradictions can be explained if one considers that Thenaud actually applied the lessons of Lucian to his own life and works. Like virtually all Renaissance authors, Thenaud was not an independent writer. He was a man of the cloth and also the tutor of the royal family. Working on commission, writing tracts that sometimes did not reflect his beliefs, Thenaud aptly used satire and irony to reserve inner space for the kind of doubt that we associate with modernity. Though undogmatic and open to new knowledge, Thenaud accepted the ways of his time and place: he encouraged political and religious conservatism.

Over a period of three years, the PI plans to publish a critical edition of the manuscript containing the brilliant French adaptation of two dialogues from Lucian. Next, the project will result in three journal articles on broader topics in Renaissance studies related to the life and work of this court astrologer that will be reevaluated in a final monograph.