

THUCYDIDES ON *LOGOGRAPHOI*: A MODERN PARALLEL?

Thuc. 1.21.1:

as the prose writers have put together for the purpose of enticement to the audience rather than the truth, things that cannot be checked and the majority of them having won over owing to time untrustworthily into the mythical.

How exactly did the logographers' material 'win over into the mythical'? Tacitus seems to be referring to a similar phenomenon at *Annals* 3.19.2 on the avenging of Germanicus:

adeo maxima quaeque ambigua sunt, dum alii quoquo modo audita pro compertis habent, alii uera in contrarium uertunt, et gliscit utrumque posteritate.

The opposite of *uerum* is *fabula*, as is clear from 4.11.2-3 and 11.27, where Tacitus warns his readers against irresponsible versions created for the sake of sensation and eagerly accepted. But who did it, and how? What was the machinery for the creation of instant myth?

A somewhat similar complaint emerges from the *Journals* of the novelist Anthony Powell, who as one of the few surviving witnesses is much in demand as a first-hand authority on the literary history of the nineteen-twenties and thirties. In 1983 he was being interviewed about George Orwell: 'not easy to describe to someone of a younger generation, so much debris by now accumulated round George, most of it misleading, if not positively incorrect.' Ruminating on the problem, he concludes: 'these imaginings brought home the utter impossibility of reconstructing any "literary period" of the past.'

More interesting for our purposes is Powell's reaction to a BBC programme about Evelyn Waugh:²

I was not particularly anxious to take part in this, as TV programmes, camera crews, waste a whole day at least, while all the producer wants is to obtain agreement in what he himself thinks. Not in least interested in

¹ Anthony Powell, *Journals 1982-1986* (Heinemann 1995) 63, 87: 3 May and 27 October 1983.

² *Ibid.* 147: 27 April 1985.

the experiences, or views, of whosoever is being questioned. Indeed positively opposed to these (suppressing them), if they do not conform to his desired picture.

When the result was screened in April 1987, it confirmed his worst fears:³

Pansy Lamb was completely omitted, though producers had spoken highly of the interview with her in Rome. One suspects Pansy said things that did not fit in with the accepted Waugh canon, such as Evelyn not giving at all a reliable picture of the upper-class life. It is impossible to shake inaccurate legends, because anything that does is always removed by editors, whose endemic interests are to prevent any ideas not in the *idées reçues* from seeping in.

‘Inaccurate legends’ puts us in the world of *fabula* and *to muthodes* (‘the mythical’). Television producers and editors are precisely responsible for ‘*diulgata et incredibilia auide accepta*’ (Tac. *Ann.* 4.11.3).

Powell tackled his son Tristram (himself a television producer) about the Waugh and Orwell programmes, ‘in which friends/enemies are so many actors speaking his, the producer’s script, which represents his own picture of the person concerned. If their dialogue does not fit in with that script their lines are cut...’ And a couple of years later, provoked by the *South Bank Show* programme on ‘Writers and the War’ (‘an awful mess’), he returned to the acting metaphor:

‘My own appearance perfect example of the dictum that documentaries are simply plays written by the producer, those who appear in them actors who speak the lines, which are cut, if not what the producer wants.’⁴

Is this any help at all in illuminating the profoundly different literary and intellectual contexts of Thucydides and Tacitus? I think it may be. Thucydides’ *logographoi* are performance artists, and ‘for the purpose of enticement to the audience rather than the truth’ describes rather precisely the phenomenon to which Powell objects in the modern media. As for Tacitus, he does not specify the medium he has in mind for the creation of *fabulae*, but since it is also the word for a play (*OLD* s.v. 6) his readers may have thought more immediately than we do of the contemporary stage. We know that even under the emperors topical plays were performed (normally,

³ Idem, *Journals 1987-1989* (Heinemann 1996) 19-20: 18-20 April 1987.

⁴ Ibid. 22, 217: 2 May 1987, 12 Nov.1989.

of course, full of flattery of the princeps),⁵ and it should not be forgotten that our one surviving example of a *fabula praetexta* is about the horrors of the court of Nero.

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⁵ Suet. *Aug.* 89.3, Plin. *Paneg.* 54.1-2.