

REVIEW–DISCUSSION

Phlegon of Tralles' Book of Marvels. Translated with an introduction and commentary by William Hansen. University of Exeter Press, 1996. pp. xvi + 215.

Last Christmas after lunch, among the books on my mother-in-law's shelf, I came across a volume entitled *1001 Wonderful Things* by one Walter Hutchinson M. A., F.R.G.S., F.R.S.A., F.R.A.I., F.Z.S., Barrister-at-Law, Editor of *Story of the Nations*, *The Wonders of the World*, *Britain Beautiful*, *Hutchinson's Dog Encyclopedia*, *Marvels of the Universe*, *Animals of All Countries*, *Marvels of Insect Life*, etc., etc. True to its title the book consisted of exactly 1001 entries, in alphabetical order from Abu Simbel to Zuyder Zee, taking in Addressing Machine: the World's Fastest; Ant-Lion, Long-necked; Locust, Mouse-eating, and a collection of human freaks, monsters of the deep, athletic records, and the technological miracles of 1936. Quite apart from the fascination of its contents, the book intrigued me because it was not obvious who its intended readers were, nor how they were meant to approach the text. Although it posed as an educational volume, the arbitrary and miscellaneous nature of its selection and arrangement suggested that each item was a self-contained entity, and its journalistic prose and bizarre illustrations hinted that simple transference of factual information was not its true *raison d'être*: this was a *texte de jouissance*, an instrument of pleasure. Yet the space allocated on the title-page to its author's qualifications clearly defined him as a respectable polymath, a man to be trusted. Now, I have no idea whether anything quite so preposterous as the long-necked ant-lion actually exists (judged by the illustration it certainly has no right to, in a rational universe), but by and large the book avoided obvious and blatant fictions. Its unspoken programme was to explore the margins of believability, and by compelling belief in the barely believable to redraw some complacent mental categories. The pleasure it offered lay in the hesitation between belief and amazement: even while its overt rhetoric stressed the mind-boggling qualities of its subjects, a counter-rhetoric was at work to dragoon reluctant (but enjoyably given) credence: photographs (which can never lie), the sheer authority of Walter Hutchinson, and the interlarding of truly bizarre and poorly evidenced freaks with rather tedious items of common knowledge. The book would have failed totally in its purpose if at any point it toppled over into unbelievability, and equally if it degenerated into the dull and uninteresting.

Why this lengthy preamble? In the ancient world there existed a genre exactly comparable to *1001 Wonderful Things*, which we term paradoxography, though the term itself is not ancient. The fascination of Greek historians with the miraculous or marginally believable goes back to the very beginning. One of the programmes of Herodotos' *Histories* is to record *θήματα*. Much of his material does not earn its place in his text on any other criterion, and the shifting cultural sands of believability quite soon left some of his marvels beached, as lies. However, it was not until the 3rd century B.C. that anyone produced a work consisting of nothing but *paradoxa*, completely emancipated from any narrative or philosophical structure. The originator of the new form seems to have been Kallimachos, no less, the intellectual poet and chief librarian at Alexandria, who wrote a compendium of natural wonders, mainly concerning rivers, but also with items on stones, plants, animals and fire. Konrat Ziegler's essential article in Pauly-Wissowa¹ lists 39 known paradoxographical texts, most of them surviving only in the form of citations by other writers, but also including a few extant, anonymous compendia, compiled at uncertain dates.

Ancient paradoxography remains understudied, and it has to be said that the paucity and uncertain status of extant texts and the lack of critical orientation from antiquity renders it all but impossible to answer, except speculatively, vital questions about the readership and intellectual level of the genre, and the economics and sociology of its production and distribution. Nevertheless, we should be interested in paradoxography and its place in the ancient mentality, and in particular its relation to canonical historiography in one direction, and its possible bearing on the protocols of the ancient novel on the other. In both cases issues of truth and belief are paramount, and the paradox is by definition the difficult case on the margins of fact and fiction, truth and falsehood; paradoxography, in other words, might help us to map the conceptualisations that informed literary genres which are to our mind of greater intrinsic value. To give just one example; an intriguing novel by Antonius Diogenes was entitled *Τὰ ὑπὲρ Θούλην ἄπιστα*, literally 'The incredible things beyond Thoule'. The term *ἄπιστα*, however, is borrowed from paradoxography, where it was one of a number of alternatives to denote the indispensable fact-is-stranger-than-fiction idea. In paradoxography the incredible has to be true, or at least believable as truth, otherwise there is no point. Was Antonius Diogenes simply extending the licence this afforded, in order to impose a plot which he knew to be fiction on a readership who were intended to take it as fact? Or was he hijacking the

¹ 'Paradoxographoi', *RE* 18.3 (1949) 1137-66.

outward signs of a ‘truth-genre’ in order to create more complex protocols of plausibility and fictive belief?²

Within the relics of paradoxography, the fragments of Phlegon of Tralleis, a freedman of the emperor Hadrian,³ are untypical and, for that very reason, of uncommon interest. William Hansen has done a valuable service in placing them within easy reach of the Greekless reader or student toiling in either of the neighbouring fields. As one might expect from a scholar who has devoted many years to this author, there are virtually no nits to pick as regards the accuracy of the translation (the first into any modern language), and his introduction and commentary are both lucid and helpful in providing the necessary background information about paradoxography in general and specific problems of interpretation. My personal regret that room was not found for the Greek text itself, which is not otherwise in print and not easily accessible even in university libraries, is offset by the thought that it would have added to the cost of the book and might have been off-putting to some of its potential readers. The volume is more likely to be of interest to historiographers and literary theorists than to historians, but anyone who needs to know about Phlegon has no reason to hesitate in acquiring this handsomely produced and reasonably priced book.

Phlegon’s untypicality lies in the sensational quality of his material. Other paradoxographers maintained at least a pretence of purveying ‘scientific’ information, generally relating to the physical world. Phlegon on the other hand gives us a superb ghost-story, evinces an interest in side-show freaks and includes other ‘facts’ (like a thousand-year old Sibyl or items drawn from mythology) which fall outside even the most elastic definitions of plausibility. Is this simply because he was more gullible than other paradoxographers (Ziegler’s solution), or was he catering to a different market with a different agenda, concerned wholly with entertainment? Of course, even his first readers may have read his collection for all kinds of reasons, but Hansen’s comparisons with shock-horror tabloid journalism are not, to my mind, particularly helpful. As he acknowledges, the economic imperatives, cultural backgrounds and communication systems are so different that we cannot compare like with like. There is certainly no sense that Phlegon’s book was ever aimed at the subliterate masses. The literary level varies

² On Antonius Diogenes, and related issues, see ‘Make-believe and Make Believe: the Fictionality of the Greek Novels’, in C. Gill and T. P. Wiseman, edd., *Lies and Fiction in the Ancient World* (Exeter 1993), esp. 193ff.

³ There seem to be three works at issue: 1) the *Book of Marvels* (περὶ θαυμασιῶν); 2) *Long-lived Persons* (περὶ μακροβίων), which may or may not be part of the same work; 3) *Olympiads* (Ὀλυμπιάδες) originally in 16 books, a work of chronography, which seems also to have included some paradoxography which may have formed the basis of the separate book of marvels.

enormously; most of the book consists of extracts taken verbatim from earlier texts, some of which are far from an easy read. At the same time, while the best extracts at the beginning of the collection are high-quality literature, the later parts peter out in a series of short, thematically organised paragraphs and lists which in their present form do not afford much literary pleasure. It may be that Phlegon set out his rationale in a preface of some kind, but infuriatingly the extant text begins in mid-extract and the preliminary material has vanished without trace. Perhaps Hansen assumes too readily that what we have reflects Phlegon's original conception. Other paradoxographical compendia are clearly the work of redactors working at second or third hand, and it may well be that, before it found its way into its sole manuscript, Phlegon's work was subjected to the attentions of an editor or abbreviator whose interests and purpose were not those of the original compiler.

My reading of Phlegon is that he operates within the belief-protocols of mainstream paradoxography, which is to say that the text would lose its point and its ability to give pleasure if neither writer nor reader were able to believe it in a literal sense. His apparent gullibility is at least partly a product of imposing modern rationalist criteria of belief in an area—the supernatural—where pre-modern thought-systems were very different. In fact his penchant for lengthy verbatim transcription and honest documentation betoken a concern for authenticity that would have put many historians in the ancient world to shame. His problem—and herein lies the literary-theoretical interest—was that he was apparently prone to mistake the frame of conventions through which his extracts were intended to be read. Two examples demonstrate this with particular clarity.

The first of Phlegon's extracts (the one that has lost its beginning) is an elaborate story of a young female revenant who returns at night to seek the love of a lodger in her parents' house. It is presented in the form of a letter from a local magistrate, an eye-witness of some of the events, to his superior. We know from a much later summary (translated as an appendix by Hansen) of the same story by Proklos, who apparently knew it directly rather than as part of Phlegon's collection, that there was originally a series of letters, including at least one addressed by the superior, Arrhidaios, Macedonian governor of Amphipolis to king Philip II. This fixes the dramatic date between 356 and 336 B.C. Although the convention of ego-narrative with hindsight is employed to give authority to the story, it is clearly not a real letter about a real contemporary event. In fact several novels use similar apparatuses of provenance in order to create fictive belief, and it is clear that we are dealing with an accomplished fiction, of the late Hellenistic or even early Roman period, quite possibly, as Hansen argues, reworking widespread

folk-tale motifs.⁴ However, the very conventions by which a practised reader would have identified it as a realistic fiction lured Phlegon and Proklos into accepting it as fact, and it is as fact that it is included in Phlegon's collection. Thus Phlegon's reader is invited to read the self-same text with a different set of mental spectacles, and therefore with a different set of responses: a pleurably spooky epistolary fiction becomes one of a series of documentary proofs of the supernatural. The history of the piece becomes even more interesting in that it inspired Goethe's ballad, *The Bride of Corinth* (usefully given in another appendix), which reworks it as Gothic romanticism, distorting some details in a way that furnishes some modern readers with erroneous presuppositions as to what is happening in the story! Finally, a reader of Hansen's volume cannot but approach the translation through the frame of Phlegon's collection, which is no longer a 'truth-text' but a cautionary example of uncritical gullibility. We may be closer to the original audience's reactions to the ghost-story, but for us it is now a playfully enigmatic text which we can see to have outwitted at least two of its readers.

A similar process can be observed with the third fragment. This is a lengthy narrative concerning events after the battle between the Romans and Antiochos in 191 B.C., and contains oracles spoken first by a corpse on the battlefield and secondly by the possessed Roman general Publius including one delivered by his disembodied head after the rest of him has been devoured by a huge red wolf. For Phlegon this is a factual record of a supernatural event, which depends on its factuality to produce the required frisson of gothic horror. The words of the five oracles are less important to him than the gruesome narrative which frames them and the fact that the delivery of any oracle marks the intrusion of the supernatural into the historical world. However, close analysis of the passage⁵ demonstrates that the whole thing is a farrago put together by a redactor during the Mithridatic War, adapting and combining narrative and prophetic material from several earlier contexts. From the perspective of 88 B.C. the piece is clear propaganda of resistance to Rome, using earlier oracles to demonstrate its own validity but also pointing to future defeats for the Romans which never in fact occurred. For the redactor and the readers of his propaganda, the narrative was little more than a container for the rather disparate collection of oracles

⁴ A couple of similar ghost-stories are known from papyrus fragments (P.Mich.inv.5 + P. Lit. Palau Ribes 26; and P. Mich. inv. 3378; for texts and recent commentary see S. A. Stephens and J. J. Winkler, *Ancient Greek Novels: the Fragments* (Princeton 1995), 173ff., 422ff. Photios cites with distaste a collection of *paradoxa* and ghost-stories by Damaskios (cod. 130).

⁵ Most recently and persuasively by J.-D. Gauger, 'Phlegon von Tralleis, *Mirab.III*. Zu einem Dokument geistigen Widerstandes gegen Rom', *Chiron* 10 (1980) 225-61.

which provided the meat. Again we can see that simply by including it in his collection of *paradoxa*, while not altering a word of the text, Phlegon completely altered the item's meaning.

If the later entries do not live up to the interest and scale of the first three, that is hardly Hansen's fault. Their mere subject-matter—sex-changers and hermaphrodites, giant bones, monstrous and multiple births, abnormally rapid development, and an eye-witness report of a centaur are a fascinating index of the mentality of their period. The census-derived lists of the *Makrobioi*, while excruciatingly dull to read, no doubt contain nuggets of priceless information for social and economic historians. On all counts, then, this book is much to be welcomed, and provides a useful supplement to the Exeter collection of essays on lies and fiction in the ancient world⁶. It is exactly the kind of resource needed to introduce students to the intriguing margins of ancient historiography.

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⁶ Cited above n. 2.