

Auctoritas and Thaumasia: Authority in the Genre of Paradoxography

The genre of paradoxography, the cataloguing of wondrous phenomena, has traditionally received little attention from Classicists, and the attention which it has received tends to marginalize the genre as the tabloid literature of the ancient world. The content of the paradoxographical works, with their fabulous reports of live centaurs, three-headed babies, hermaphrodites, and ghosts challenges the modern reader steeped in the rationality found in other prose genres, such as historiography, geography, and philosophy. Although himself skeptical of the value of the paradoxographical genre, Aulus Gellius, writing in the second century AD, provides the modern reader with a unique window into the reception of such texts in the ancient world.

Gellius relates a charming anecdote about his acquisition and reading of paradoxographical texts [Aul.Gell.9.4]. While passing through Brundisium, he comes across a trove of such works as he browses in a bookstall. After purchasing the tattered and moldering volumes, Gellius spends the subsequent night losing sleep to pour over these texts. In the morning, Gellius determines that such works, while seductive, are of little intellectual value.

Despite this indictment, the vivid and atmospheric terms with which Gellius describes his encounter with paradoxography make it clear that the genre appeals more to the reader's emotional than his or her rational mind. Nevertheless, one of the problematic features of such texts, one which has undoubtedly played a part in modern scholars' dismissal of the genre, is precisely their constant appeal to the world of science. In fact, a defining feature of the genre is its culling of material predominantly from the scientific texts of big-name Peripatetic and Alexandrian scholars such as Aristotle, Theophrastus, and Callimachus.

Emilio Gabba has provided a means to understanding this inherent contradiction, arguing that the veneer of rationality serves to create the emotional response associated with credulity in the reader (Gabba, 1981). Rather than employing rationality to interrogate the text, the reader suspends belief in order to experience the emotional state of wonderment. The text creates for the reader an experience of what the world would be like if such things were true; the scientific flavoring of the text enhances the reader's sense of credulity.

Gellius provides us with an excellent framework on which to examine this aspect of the reader's emotional response to paradoxography when he raises the issue of *auctoritas* in the paradoxographical text. Gellius assigns *auctoritas* to wondrous phenomena related by authors such as Theophrastus, Onesicratus, and Pliny the Elder, therefore placing the onus of credibility outside of the text and on the shoulders of others. While this issue of authority has been addressed by such modern scholars Marincola (1997) in regard to the genre of historiography, no one has considered the *auctoritas* which Gellius emphasizes as a central feature of the genre of paradoxography.

Following Gellius' lead, this paper will take *auctoritas* to be a crucial element of the paradoxographical text. Close examination of the seven extant paradoxographies reveals that there are several mechanisms that create authority, including the citation of famous authors, the use of direct and indirect quotation to assign authority to a specific speaker, and the use of verbs of speaking in the passive voice, directing attention outside of the text. In order to illustrate these points, the text of Phlegon of Tralles will receive

special attention, as Phlegon's masterful creation of authority in his text at once differentiates his methodology from his predecessors and affirms the centrality of authority to the genre. The most notable features of Phlegon's text are the frequent mention of the Roman emperor, his family, and the imperial administration as a means of certifying his material. Thus Phlegon has effectively invested his paradoxa with the authority of the Roman principate.

Bibliography

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