Locating Invisibility in Oral-Narrative Genres

In 2017 William Hansen proposed a new taxonomy of Greek and Roman oral-narrative genres, arguing that "for a clearer understanding of traditional narrative and its manifestation in antiquity we need a holistic vision of ancient story." (5) Within this framework he broadly distinguishes between credence narratives ("stories that ancient narrators shaped in such a way as to present, or imply, a claim to historicity") and traditional fictions ("[stories] grouped together under the umbrella-term folktale, or simply tale…and presented by narrators as fictional"). In this paper I will illustrate how such a taxonomy can be useful for locating different kinds of invisibility scenes in the ancient Mediterranean world. At the same time, a closer examination of such invisibility "narratives" reveals that those found in ritual texts are not directly addressed by Hansen's taxonomy, even though the use of ritual ingredients in such texts reflects popular beliefs and contemporary folklore about invisibility ritual (with folklore being defined as "anonymously transmitted culture," Anderson 2006, 4).

Keeping in mind that invisibility should be broadly defined (Phillips 2009, 24), it is possible to locate or categorize invisibility scenes within many (but not all) of Hansen's various categories of traditional credence narratives (for the sake of brevity, I will only offer a couple examples per category): myth (The Cyclopes give Pluto the cap of Hades, Apollod. 1.2.1; Hermes, wearing the cap of Hades, kills Hippolytus in the Gigantomachy, Apollod. 1.6.2); heroic legend (Odysseus travels amidst the Phaeacians safely covered in a mist, Hom, Od. 7.14-17, 142-145; Perseus uses the cap of Hades to kill Medusa, Hes. Sc. 226-227, Apollod. 2.4.2); historic and religious legend (Gyges discovers a magical ring and uses it to his advantage, Pl. R. 359c-360d; Apollonius disappears before Domitian, Philostr. VA 8.5; Jesus of Nazareth becomes invisible before the two on the road to Emmaus, Ev.Luc. 24.31; the mysterious woman who

delivers the Sibylline books disappears, D.H. 4.62.1-4); belief legend (that the Armenian King Papa and his men use incantations of invisibility to escape the Roman army is questioned, Amm.Marc. 30.1.17; a heliotrope invisibility amulet is called the shamelessness of Magi, Plin. Nat. 37.60.165); personal narrative (Eucrates recalls to his friends a personal story about how the Egyptian holy man Pancrates disappears, Lucian, Philops. 34-36). In addition to appearing in credence narratives, invisibility scenes periodically appear in stories of traditional fiction as well: e.g. wonder tale (disembodied voices serve Psyche, Apul., Met. 5.2) and animal tale (Zeus turns humans into ants, Perry 166).

Hansen's taxonomy seeks to address oral-narrative genres, but one wonders whether it should not be expanded to encompass ritual or, in this case, invisibility ritual. In regard to medicine and magic, Graham Anderson (2006, 175) has noted the tendency of scholars to neglect the intersection of ritual practice with folklore: "It is in these two naturally overlapping areas that our sources for ancient folklore are probably best documented and yet probably most prone to be studied from any perspective other than that of folklorist." Indeed many of the invisibility rituals from the Graeco-Egyptian papyri and two from Pliny the Elder's Natural History employ ritual analogy and in doing so turn to commonly accepted folklore for ingredients (e.g. the eye of a small night eye or *aglaophōtis* plant, PGM I 223 or 249; heliotrope stone and plant, Nat. 37.60.165, and the left foot of a chameleon along with the plant of the same name, 28.29.115, on which see Phillips 2019). However, because the outcome of such rituals by nature cannot be known, it is not possible to follow Hansen's taxonomy to evaluate whether they are "shaped in such a way as to present, or imply, a claim to historicity," even though the rhetoric of formulary titles (an "indispensable," "tested," or "marvelous" spell for invisibility" PGM I 221 and 247; XIII 234-5) often encourages belief by affirming their efficacy. If we could instead expand upon

Hansen's definition and invoke belief or disbelief in relationship to invisibility rituals rather than historicity, it might be possible to speak of credence narrative in relationship to them. In this way such ritual texts could then be included in the spectrum of religious legend or even belief legend, if one, like Pliny (see above), is cynical about their efficacy.

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