

## BOOK REVIEW

*Fantasy in Greek and Roman Literature*. By GRAHAM ANDERSON. London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2020. Pp. xii + 222. Hardback, \$112.00. ISBN: 978-0-367-13990-2.

Graham Anderson, who has published widely on such topics as fairy- and folktales in antiquity, the ancient novel and literature of the Second Sophistic, offers here an investigation of “fantasy” in ancient literature: where we can find it and how it manifests in different genres, writers and time periods. He defines fantasy as “any material that is felt to be impossible (or nearly so), in contrast to the normal workings of the real world” (1), but also considers important the Greek term *phantasia*, translated as “imaginative conception” (2).

Part I, “Themes of fantasy,” comprises over half the volume and is basically a typology of what Anderson considers to be the main types of ancient fantastic literature: “Otherworldly conversations” (Chapter 2) held with the dead or the gods, but also including fictionalized letters; fantastic beasts (Chapter 3), both the speaking animals of fable/Old Comedy and mythological monsters like the Minotaur and centaurs; “Fantastic voyages” (Chapter 4) such as travelers’ tales and stories of utopian societies like Atlantis; “Dreams, apparitions, horror” (Chapter 5), where dreams are treated in the same category as stories of cannibalism and necromancy; “Some fantastic aspects of myth” (Chapter 6) such as *katabaseis* but also including retellings of myths in general (e.g. Pan and Syrinx, 85-86); “The ultimate myth: Metamorphosis” (Chapter 7); dinners as sites of fantasy (Chapter 8), ranging from mythological banquets to discussions of dinners in the satirists and Petronius; and “Planting the phallus: sexual fantasy” (Chapter 9), discussing the inventiveness of the *Carmina Priapeia* alongside sex scenes from various texts.

Part II is comparative, considering how prose vs. poetry handles material such as Polyphemus’ love for Galatea, Europa’s abduction, and general erotic themes (Chapter 10, “Verse fantasy into prose”); and the ways Homer and Philostratus imagine a heroic past (Chapter 11, “Inventing the past in Homer and Philostratus”).

Part III (“Fantastic texts”) contains basically case studies in how different texts handle similar motifs. Anderson compares Old Comedy with Lucian’s dialogues

(Chapter 12) and the ascents to heaven in Lucian's *Icaromenippus* and Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* (Chapter 13), and does a deep dive into Lucian's *True Histories* (Chapter 14). Part IV considers the contexts in which fantastic stories may have been told in antiquity, such as to entertain children or guests at symposia (Chapter 15); discusses modern literary critics' definitions of and approaches to fantasy and shows how these have some overlap with the ancient material (ch. 16); and offers a few "Conclusions" (Chapter 17). The range of material on offer here is impressive: Anderson takes us through literature from Homer to the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, in Latin and Greek, with the occasional nod to possible Near Eastern antecedents.

Anderson states in the preface, "By the end of the book, I hope to have reached a point where I should have wished to have started in the first place" (ix). This remark encapsulates the book's shortcomings: even after finishing it, the reader may feel that little advancement has been made in terms of understanding what ancient fantasy is or why it matters. The lack of a clear definition of "fantasy" is an impediment. Only in the second-last chapter does Anderson begin to consider literary-critical definitions of the term. He mostly seems content to let his views on the subject emerge from the large volume of examples he assembles, and it seems that his preferred definition encompasses both the modern "fantasy" and the ancient *phantasia*.

It is not clear, therefore, how Anderson's "fantasy" is different from fiction; is there really no difference between the imagining of mundane things that could plausibly have occurred but did not and the creation of a story that is "impossible" given "the normal workings of the real world?" Anderson gestures toward, but does not explore, this difference (192). This broad-church approach means that it is difficult to understand what some examples are doing here. For instance, Lucan's terrifying, gory description of Erichtho's necromantic activities in *Pharsalia* 6 (70-71) appears in the same chapter as a *controversia*-subject of Seneca the Elder (10.5) in which the Athenian painter Parrhasius is put on trial for torturing a prisoner of war to create a model from which to paint a realistic Prometheus (73). How would an ancient reader have perceived Erichtho's violation of the laws of nature in comparison with Seneca's made-up but physically possible scenario? Would it even have occurred to him or her to put these two texts in the same mental box? In his quest to find similarities between texts that enable him to create a typology of fantastic story-types, Anderson misses opportunities to consider the richness of the differences between them.

Finally, 30-odd pages from the end of the book, after his discussion of Lucian's *True Histories*, Anderson has arrived at a more specific definition with which one could wish he had begun, but which also might exclude some of the material he has treated: "Greek fantasy ... has to be beyond reasonable possibility, with at least an element of the absurd or incredible and a tendency to exaggerate but, as so often, still never quite losing sight of the normal and logical as well" (174). Beginning from this point might have allowed Anderson to go beyond mere description and get at some deeper questions raised by the concept of fantasy. Still, the breadth of evidence presented means that nearly every reader will learn something from this book.

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