LOVE FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE:
THE EPISTOLARY GHOST-STORY IN PHLEGON OF TRALLES

J.R. Morgan

The collection of paradoxa (often referred to as the Mirabilia) attributed to Phlegon of Tralles, a freedman of the emperor Hadrian, is preserved in a single manuscript, of which the beginning is missing. It is a curious production, comprising three fairly lengthy pieces treating the supernatural at the beginning, and petering off into summary lists of persons of ambiguous gender, discoveries of giant bones, monstrous and multiple births, unusually rapid development, sightings of live centaurs, and people who lived to be a hundred. No doubt has ever been raised as to the authenticity of the collection or the validity of its attribution, but it is so disparate, in form as well as content, and so obviously, in the case of the first three items, copied verbatim from other texts that one must query whether what we have is the deliberate creation of anyone. This may be of importance in the matter of dating; if the attribution to Phlegon is correct, we are committed to a Hadrianic dating or earlier for the original composition of the lengthier pieces literally transcribed in the compilation. I shall refer to the collection non-committally as “Phlegon”.

This paper deals with the first item in the collection, a justly famous story of the supernatural, which has enjoyed a considerable Nachleben, in the work of Goethe, Washington Irving, Théophile Gautier, and Anatole France, to name but four. It has not exactly been over-studied in modern

1 The Suda Φ 527 calls him a freedman of the emperor Augustus, relegating the Hadrianic connection to a “some-say” alternative. He is mentioned in the Historia Augusta (Hadr. 16.1), which suggests that his works were in fact composed by the emperor; cf. also Sept. Sev. 20.1. The excerpt from Phlegon’s Olympiads, preserved in the same manuscript as the Mirabilia, is attributed to “Phlegon the freedman of the Emperor Hadrian”. For an overview of what is known about Phlegon’s life and work, see Frank 1949.


3 Goethe, Die Braut von Korinth (1797); Théophile Gautier, “La morte amoureuse”, a short story published in La Chronique de Paris (1836); Washington Irving, “Adventure of the German
scholarship, and interest has focused predominantly on what it tells us about ancient belief in ghosts, reconstruction of a putative Urgeschichte, and its relation to similar stories in the folklore of other cultures. Little attention has been paid to its extraordinarily sophisticated narratology, its epistolary form, and the nature of its fictionality. In fact the loss of the opening of the text adds to the effects of mystery and disorientation which must always have been part of its appeal. In Genettian terms, the disjunction between histoire and récit is exaggerated by the absence of the first part of the récit, leaving some vital parts of the histoire to emerge by implication and in a radically anachronic order. Our estimation of the precise effect depends on how we reconstruct the missing opening of the text and how much of the back-story it had revealed to its readers, but it is clear that anachronicity was an important property of the narrative even in its complete form.

As we shall see, “Phlegon” is not our only witness to the original form of the text, and has radically changed its meaning by incorporating it in a paradoxographical miscellany. However, in the interest of surprise and suspense, I shall postpone the introduction of the second testimony, and begin by analysing our decapitated version of “Phlegon”, in order to illustrate the themes and protocols of the narrative. For a modern reader, much of the text’s fascination and power derives from the fragmentary condition of its narrative. It would be nice to imagine, in defiance of the evidence, that it was deliberately composed as a fragment. Nevertheless, both the narratology and the impact of our text must differ in important respects from those of the original. We are in effect dealing with two different texts, requiring different reading strategies. I begin with a sequential first reading of what we have, which springs a few more surprises than the original may have done. Readers of this chapter who might wonder what it is doing in a volume on epistolary narratives will discover the answer in due course.

---

5 Although the concepts are basic, there is a bewildering lack of agreement about terminology. By ‘histoire’ I mean a series of events abstracted from the text and rearranged in their chronological order; this is sometimes termed ‘fabula’ or ‘story’. By ‘récit’ I mean the events as ordered and presented in the text; this is sometimes called ‘story’ or ‘narrative’.
6 See Morgan 1999 on this theme.