

CEMP – Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes

The paradox as a discursive device unveiling a deeper order of things underneath surface contradictions is rooted in a long-standing Greek tradition, beginning with the archaic age. Scholars have foregrounded the enigmatic component of archaic thinking, illustrating the earliest phases of this tradition up to Heraclitus. With the sophists, the paradox becomes an argumentative tool, as famously exemplified by Gorgias' and Isocrates' encomia of Helen, and, more generally, it is exploited in that phase of the late fifth-century Greek culture which has become known as 'the Athenian Enlightenment'. Examples of paradoxical techniques include the judiciary forms of argumentation that can be found in Antiphon's *Tetralogies* and the political rhetoric Thucydides employed to unveil the truth of deeds (*erga*) beneath words (*logos*).

Often cast in narrative form, the paradox reflects the wonder of inexplicable natural phenomena (*thaumastà*) and of apparently contradictory behaviours. The genre of the 'problem' thus becomes close to it. Political and judiciary oratory offer paradigmatic cases of uses of the paradox as an instrument of persuasion. A 'higher' philosophical use is aimed at disclosing what language conceals.

The emphasis on contradiction, on the conflict between appearance and reality, and on an awareness of the limits of language substantiates the homotopic, boundary-crossing quality of literary genres infused with a sense of wonderment, from paradoxography to narratives of natural marvels (*thaumasiographia*) and *problemata* (a collection is included in the Aristotelian corpus). In the imperial age, the Second Sophistic will recuperate the legacy of the First one and with Lucian and Dio Chrysostom it will display a literary quality that will make it akin to the novellas and romances of first BCE – fifth AD. Significantly, alongside the 'high' literature represented by narrative and poetic genres endowed with cultural prestige, several examples of this paradoxical literature are amongst those which most interested fifteenth-century humanists. Not coincidentally, Leonardo Bruni translated the *Oratio de Troia non capta* – Dio Chrysostom's paradoxical rewrite of the entire course of ancient history. This interest was boosted by Lucian, by some of Plutarch's *Moralia* and, eventually, by the rediscovery of *thaumasiographia* (some collections were already printed in the first half of the sixteenth century). In England, Cicero's *Paradoxa Stoicorum* was translated by Thomas Newton in 1569, and penetrated, together with sceptical doctrines, controversial writings of the sixteenth century.

Not surprisingly, in his *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589) George Puttenham inventively called the figure of the paradox "the Wonderer". He was neither the first nor the last one to connect the poet's imaginative power with this figure. The suggestion was, as Cicero famously put it, that things admirable contradict common opinion ("Quae quia sunt admirabilia contraque opinionem omnium", *Paradoxa Stoicorum*), and notoriously what is extraordinary shares in the power of artistic creation. John Florio too was to notice that the paradox is a "marvellous, wonderfull and strange thing to hear, and uncertain to the common received opinion" (*A World of Words*, 1598), and Henry Peacham that it was "to be used, when the thing which is to be taught is new, straunge, incredible, and repugnant to the opinion of the hearer", so that old men and travellers are the best to employ it, being the "messengers of old times" and the "Ambassadors of farre places", respectively (*The Garden of Eloquence*, 1593).

In the early modern period, the paradox encoded the puzzlement of an entire age before 'the new', whether that 'new' meant the discovery of the ancient past, or of distant unimagined places. Both a rhetorical figure and a literary genre, the paradox became epidemic, suggesting an urgent need to interrogate received ideas and articulate fresh questions on new ways of thinking and knowing.

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