

AUTHENTICATING THE MARVELLOUS: *MIRABILIA* IN PLINY THE YOUNGER, TACITUS, AND SUETONIUS*

What can a reader reasonably be expected to believe? Roman literature is filled with strange and inexplicable creatures, objects, and occurrences, from centaurs to ghostly apparitions to volcanic eruptions. And these are not confined to the world of myth. Accounts of the natural world often focus on phenomena that may seem outlandish or impossible: authors like Pliny the Elder present as true things that a rational modern audience would find it difficult or even impossible to take seriously.¹ And historical and biographical writing, which ostensibly deals with political reality to the exclusion of mythical elements, frequently include portents and omens, supernatural material which a modern historian would exclude from consideration as fictitious.²

But what might an ancient audience have thought of such material? In this paper, I shall examine the place of *mirabilia*³ in the literary culture of the early second century AD. How did authors writing under Trajan and Hadrian deal with the outlandish? In particular, I am interested in understanding what kinds of things these authors seem to have thought it might be difficult for their readers to believe, as reflected in their presentation of their material. Frequently, an author will go out of his way to include certain details that vouch for a story's veracity or ground it in familiar everyday reality, as if he thinks the reader will doubt the truth of a report, and therefore his own credibility as an author, unless he manages to convince the reader that it is true. But this is not always the case, and sometimes the boundary between 'strange but true' and 'strange and therefore false' is much more hazy. Thus thinking about *mirabilia* can be an important way into thinking about authorial attitudes to truth and falsehood and their proper place in literature.

Many other authors could be usefully subjected to similar analysis,⁴ but for the purposes of this paper I have confined my investigations primarily to Pliny the Younger,⁵ Tacitus, and Suetonius because they seem to share a special interest in *mirabilia*, and in similar types of *mirabilia* (particularly uncanny apparitions, implausible creatures, and

* I am grateful to Kai Brodersen for his helpful remarks on this paper; any remaining errors or infelicities are, of course, the fault of the author.

¹ For examples and an examination of Pliny the Elder as a paradoxographer, see Beagon 1992, 8–11; Healy 1999, chap. 5; Beagon 2011; Naas 2011. On the problem of talking about 'belief' in such phenomena, see particularly the remarks of Lehoux 2012, 14 and *passim*.

² The ancients had their own conception of the different kinds of subject matter appropriate to history as opposed to poetry, which does not always correspond to ours, as has been well documented. As Woodman 1988, 114 n. 141 rightly points out in relation to Cic. *Leg.* 1.5, 'The context, and in particular the reference to *fabulae*, suggests that *veritas* = 'real life'... That is: *veritas* embraces the *verisimile* and is contrasted with *fabula*.' Servius (*ad Aen.* 1.235) similarly differentiates *fabula*, 'the report of something against nature, whether or not it happened, as about Pasiphae,' from *historia*, 'whatever is reported according to nature, whether or not it happened, as about Phaedra,' cf. Wiseman 1993, 130. Yet despite this broad conception of what was appropriate in history, there was still a distinction between 'true' and 'false' history (Gabba 1981; Seneca *NQ* 7.16.1, which implicitly equates *miracula* and *incredibilia relatu* with *mendacium*).

³ I use this term throughout, interchangeably with other terms like 'uncanny occurrence' or 'the marvellous', to refer to subject matter traditional to paradoxographical texts. The material is diverse, but its defining feature is its unexpected, counterintuitive, or even unnatural quality. Cf. Deremetz 2009, 114–5: Paradoxography 'concerns itself with all that tradition has to report on monstrous beings, extraordinary phenomena, and strange customs. The marvellous denotes the element of a literary work which creates an impression of surprise and disorientation, due in general to improbable events, to the intervention of supernatural beings, implying the existence of a universe not bounded by the laws of nature.'

⁴ Plutarch would be particularly interesting to consider: his *Lives* show an interest in unnatural, portentous occurrences similar to Suetonius' in the *Caesares*, yet his treatise *On Curiosity* (*Moralia* 515B–523B) 'criticizes... sensation- and horror-seeking' tendencies because 'they are a waste of the intellect and amount to indiscriminate destruction of the senses rather than intellectual discipline' (Beagon 1992, 10).

⁵ Henceforth referred to simply as 'Pliny;' his uncle is 'Pliny the Elder.'

animals behaving unusually) although they write in different genres. Furthermore, Pliny addresses letters dealing with miraculous subjects to both Tacitus and Suetonius. *Ep.* 1.18 is Pliny's response to Suetonius' request to delay the date of a trial after an ominous night-time vision, giving Pliny the opportunity to reflect on the nature of such visions (are they real apparitions with portentous significance, or no more than empty dreams?). In two letters to Tacitus (*Ep.* 6.16 and 6.20), Pliny describes the cataclysmic eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79 in ways that highlight its marvellous qualities (6.16.5 *ascendit locum ex quo maxime miraculum illud conspici poterat*; 6.20.8 *multa ibi miranda, multas formidines patimur*), while also reflecting explicitly on notions of truth and particularly eyewitness testimony (e.g. *Ep.* 6.16.22).⁶ Pliny and Tacitus also both treat the story of the strange vision of Curtius Rufus (*Ann.* 11.21, *Ep.* 7.27.2-3), indicating that both authors shared a common interest in such supernatural apparitions.⁷ This nexus of Plinian correspondence thus seems to reflect a thriving intellectual interest in *mirabilia* during the time period under consideration.

By way of introduction, I will also consider Phlegon of Tralles' *περὶ θαυμασίων* as an example of the 'genre' of paradoxography that is roughly contemporary with Pliny, Tacitus, and Suetonius. A brief look at Phlegon will demonstrate the continuing popularity of wonder-literature as a genre in its own right. The ways Phlegon attempts to authenticate his implausible material will serve as *comparanda* for strategies employed in the three more 'mainstream' authors. I will then consider Pliny, Tacitus, and Suetonius in turn, analyzing in each case what types of marvellous material each includes and what strategies he uses to authenticate it as true. It is also worth asking what, if anything, is unique to these authors and this time period that was not characteristic of previous authors' treatment of *mirabilia*: what is distinctly Trajanic/Hadrianic about their presentation of the marvellous? I shall return to this question at the end of the paper.

I. PHLEGON OF TRALLES AND THE 'GENRE' OF PARADOXOGRAPHY

P. Aelius Phlegon, originally from Tralles in Asia Minor, was a freedman of Hadrian. The *Suda* (s.v. Φλέγων Τραλλιανός) preserves the titles of his works: in addition to writings on Sicily, Roman religion and topography, and a chronographical work entitled *Olympiads*, Phlegon wrote a work on long-lived persons (*Περὶ μακροβίων*) and one on marvels (*Περὶ θαυμασίων*).⁸ All of these indicate 'ein antiquarisches Interesse und eine hervorragende Bildung' that chime well with Hadrian's own antiquarian literary tastes.⁹ Little is known about Phlegon's life, but what evidence we have seems to indicate that he was an integral part of Hadrian's court. A Byzantine source suggests the *Olympiads* were dedicated to P. Aelius

⁶ The Vesuvius letters are not treated here but will be the subject of a separate forthcoming study. Bibliography on the relationship between the Plinies, especially as revealed in the Vesuvius letters, is extensive: see recently Jones 2001; Henderson 2002, 80–82; Marchesi 2008, 171–189; Gibson 2011; Gibson and Morello 2012, 106–115.

⁷ Tacitus' inclusion of Curtius Rufus' vision is all the more striking because Curtius Rufus is the only person in the text who is not a member of the imperial family to experience such a vision (cf. Davies 2004, 175). The apparition is not part of the expected narrative of imperial destiny, but is included to make a broader point about the nature of such apparitions (see Shannon 2012, 14).

⁸ The two works are preserved together in the same 9th century manuscript (the *Codex Palatinus Graecus* 398 in Heidelberg, which also contains extracts from Phlegon's *Olympiads* and other paradoxographical texts) and are listed together in the *Suda* (*Περὶ μακροβίων καὶ θαυμασίων*), leading Hansen 1996, 17 to suspect they should be considered as one work. While the list of unnaturally long-lived persons is in a way another catalogue of *mirabilia* (cf. Stramaglia 2011, x), Brodersen 2002, 12 emphasizes their stylistic distinctiveness.

⁹ Fein 1994, 193–4. On Hadrian's archaizing tastes, see den Boer 1955; Fein 1994, 32. Fein (p. 194) even suggests that the *Περὶ μακροβίων* and *Περὶ θαυμασίων* were commissioned by Hadrian himself. Cf. Stramaglia 2006, 302 on the relationship between paradoxographers and emperors.

Alciades, a bodyguard of Hadrian originally from Nysa,¹⁰ and the *Scripta Historia Augusta* suggests that Hadrian actually had his autobiography published under Phlegon's name.¹¹ Although scholars now regard this as unlikely, the mere existence of such an anecdote suggests that Phlegon was well known in his time and closely connected to the emperor.¹²

The Περὶ θαυμασίων¹³ is also part of a long line of literature dealing with wondrous or implausible phenomena of various types that scholars assign to the 'genre' of paradoxography, though the ancients had no specific name for it.¹⁴ Paradoxographical elements had traditionally occurred in a wide range of other genres, particularly geography and historiography (e.g. Herodotus' extensive description of the wonders of Egypt).¹⁵ Yet paradoxographical stories could also stand on their own in specialist collections, and the Hellenistic period saw a flowering of this type of work. These books contained descriptions of wondrous phenomena of various types excerpted from other sources and grouped together in compendia. Many such works survive in fragmentary form; the first,¹⁶ perhaps entitled Θαυμασία or Ἐκλογή τῶν παραδόξων,¹⁷ is by Callimachus. The work seems to have been organized geographically, describing wonders from different regions of the world, and describes various natural phenomena: rivers and springs, animals, plants, stones, etc.¹⁸ This focus on the natural world would continue to be common to later Greek paradoxographers (miraculous waters, for example, remained a favourite topic throughout the genre's history),¹⁹ as well as to Roman writers like Mucianus and Pliny the Elder.²⁰ Such natural-historical interests last through to the period under consideration here (for example, Pliny *Ep.* 4.30 and 8.20 on wondrous water features, and Suetonius' descriptions of unusual animal behaviour such as *Tib.* 14.2, *Galba* 1).

How did these authors approach the question of what I shall refer to as 'authentication,' that is, convincing the reader that the *mirabilia* reported are actually true? One noteworthy characteristic of paradoxography is its bookishness. Since these works take the form of collections of anecdotes, it is unsurprising that paradoxographers frequently cite the authors from whom they took the stories they include; reliance on autopsy is the exception rather than the rule.²¹ Searching out *mirabilia* from only the most reliable sources,

¹⁰ Photius *Bibl.* (*FrGrHist* II B, 257 T 3); see Fein 1994, 198 n. 505.

¹¹ *SHA Hadrian* 16.1.

¹² Fein 1994, 39–40; Brodersen 2002, 11.

¹³ Latin title *De Rebus Mirabilibus*, hereafter abbreviated as *Mir.*

¹⁴ Cf. Schepens and Delcroix 1996, 415.

¹⁵ Cf. Giannini 1964, 99; Johnson 2006, 174; Deremetz 2009, 114–5.

¹⁶ Giannini 1964, 100–104 cites examples of paradoxographical fragments from authors predating Callimachus, but these *mirabilia* may not have been grouped together in stand-alone books, but rather were perhaps originally embedded in other historical narratives. Given the fragmentary state in which these earlier works survive, however, it is impossible to make any definitive observations about their form.

¹⁷ Giannini 1964, 105.

¹⁸ Giannini 1964, 107; cf. Schepens and Delcroix 1996, 393.

¹⁹ Rivers, springs, marshes, etc. were treated by Callimachus, Philostephanus, Antigonos of Carystus, and Polemon of Ilium in the Hellenistic period; Apollonius and Isigonos of Nicaea in the second and first centuries BC; and in the imperial period by Alexander of Mindus and Sotion the Tiberian peripatetic philosopher. See Giannini 1964, 107, 110, 116, 120, 123, 125, 128. Other examples include Mucianus (Williamson 2005 fragments 1, 2, 608, 27, 28) and Ps.-Plutarch *de fluviis*.

²⁰ On Mucianus, see Williamson 2005 (who prefers to see Mucianus' work as a memoir of his career rather than as a work of paradoxography; see *ibid.* p. 237); Ash 2007a. For Pliny see above, n. 1.

²¹ Schepens and Delcroix 1996, 389 (though cf., e.g., the strategies of the Hellenistic writer Antigonos of Carystus [Giannini 1964, 116]). This bookishness also makes the emergence of paradoxography a product of its time, when the library of Alexandria made such wide-ranging reading possible (Schepens and Delcroix 1996, 402). Cf. Williamson 2005, 240: Mucianus' apparently extensive focus on autopsy makes him exceptional among paradoxographers.

and scrupulously documenting one's research through punctilious citation of these authorities, seems to have granted sufficient authority.

Phlegon, however, represents a partial departure from the way previous paradoxographers had done things, both in terms of subject matter and in terms of authentication. Phlegon includes a variety of material: dead people coming back to life (*Mir.* 1-3); hermaphrodites and spontaneous sex changes (4-10); monstrously large bones (11-19); unusual births, including deformed babies (20-21, 25), humans producing animal offspring (22-24), men giving birth (26-7), and astounding multiple births (28-31); unusually speedy aging processes (32-33); and living centaurs (34-35). When compared with previous paradoxographers, then, Phlegon seems more interested in the supernatural than the natural – in things that seem to violate the natural order of things by crossing the boundaries between life and death, male and female, human and non-human, rather than in features of the natural world that astonish but present less of a challenge to the reader's conception of how the world works. Gone are the reports of marvellous springs, rivers, and plants that had been so characteristic of Callimachus and, as far as we can tell, most of his successors.²² Pliny, Tacitus, and Suetonius are more interested in the natural world than Phlegon is, but they also share his interest in the activities of the dead after death, and in human and animal oddities.

Another salient characteristic of Phlegon is his interest in the meaning of the material he reports: his willingness to interpret *mirabilia* as signs. Prophecies and oracles are a strong feature of Phlegon's work: sometimes his strange creatures pronounce dire predictions (2.11, 3.4, 3.14), give rise to pronouncements from Delphi (3.6) or the Sibylline Oracles (10.2),²³ or are themselves interpreted as bad omens (22). This, as we shall see, is also characteristic of Pliny, Tacitus, and Suetonius when they report *mirabilia*.

Schepens and Delcroix have claimed that Phlegon is less scrupulous in his bookishness than his Hellenistic predecessors.²⁴ For the first three marvels he reports, Phlegon makes a show of his extensive reliance on the authority of previous writers: *Mir.* 1 takes the form of a letter reporting an eyewitness account,²⁵ the ghost of Polycritus is taken from 'Hieron of Alexandria – or Ephesus' (*Mir.* 2.1), and the tale of Bouplagus and Publius came from 'Antisthenes the Peripatetic Philosopher' (*Mir.* 3.1).²⁶ After these three episodes, which are narrated at great length and in a fair amount of detail, the style of the work becomes much sparser, and there is less elaboration on each marvel.²⁷ In fact, in what follows, Phlegon does continue to cite other authors to lend their authority to what he reports (e.g. *Mir.* 11.1, 13).²⁸ But it is true that Phlegon also uses other strategies alongside bookish citation. He frequently tries to anchor a story in reality by reporting the exact place and/or time the miraculous event took place, often giving the date by listing both the Athenian

²² Giannini 1964, 129–30.

²³ On Phlegon and the Sibylline Oracles, see Stramaglia 2011, 34.

²⁴ Schepens and Delcroix 1996, 431: 'The para-scientific context falls out. So Phlegon does not always indicate his sources.'

²⁵ The narrative suddenly begins to use first-person pronouns at the end of *Mir.* 1.12: ταχέως ἐγένετο διὰ πόλεως τὸ πρᾶγμα περιβόητον καὶ μοι προσηγγέλη. The loss of the beginning of the text in the manuscript means the name of the eyewitness letter-writer is missing, though the original readership would have known the story was a first-person account from the now-lost salutation at the beginning of the letter (Hansen 1996, 75).

²⁶ On these figures see Hansen 1996, 85–6, 103. Both Hieron and Antisthenes may be fictional.

²⁷ This difference in style between the two part of the work could be, as Schepens and Delcroix claim, due to a genuine lack of interest in citation on Phlegon's part, but it is also possible that the later parts of the work have been excerpted for inclusion in the 9th century manuscript, itself a collection of miscellaneous texts (see above, n. 8), some of them excerpts or pseudepigrapha. I am grateful to Kai Brodersen for discussion of these points.

²⁸ Pace Stramaglia 2011, viii.

archon and the Roman consuls.²⁹ Sometimes this temporal authentication is not very precise,³⁰ as if the *flavour* of exactness is enough to make a report convincing. For example, the hermaphrodite Sumpherousa in Epidaurus changed sex 'around the same time' (*Mir.* 8 κατὰ τοὺς αὐτοὺς χρόνους) as the more precisely dated Philotis in the previous chapter.³¹ The centaur discovered in Arabia is brought to 'Caesar' (*Mir.* 34), but Phlegon apparently does not feel the need to tell us *which* Caesar.³²

In addition to citations and the temporal-geographical 'coat hooks' on which he hangs his improbable stories, Phlegon sometimes relies on autopsy. In support of his claim that a certain Aitete in Syria underwent a sex change and became a man in 116 AD, he claims to have met her/him personally (*Mir.* 9 τοῦτον καὶ αὐτὸς ἔθεασάμην), 'presumably to lend credence to the report.'³³ Again, this can really only provide the flavour of authenticity: seeing a man who claims to have once been a woman is not the same as having visual evidence of the improbable transformation itself. Even more interestingly, and uniquely when compared with previous paradoxographers,³⁴ Phlegon sometimes uses autopsy to involve the reader directly in the process of authentication. The centaur's body remains in the imperial storehouse to dispel the doubt of any who don't believe its existence (*Mir.* 35: τὸν δὲ πεμφθέντα εἰς Ῥώμην εἴ τις ἀπιστεῖ, δύναται ἱστορῆσαι· ἀπόκειται γὰρ ἐν τοῖς ὀρυκτοῖς τοῦ αὐτοκράτορος τεταριχευμένος, ὡς προεῖπον³⁵). If he chooses not to trust in Phlegon's authority, the reader is invited to do his own research, to see it for himself.³⁶

Phlegon's strategies of authentication thus partly mirror those of his paradoxographical predecessors, in which the author's persona, established as authoritative through scrupulous citation of sources and attempts to ground *mirabilia* in reality, goes a long way toward convincing the reader that the marvellous stories he reports are true. As Schepens phrases it,

An astonishing item can only be termed θαυμάσιον if, indeed, it belongs to the real world, if it is witnessed or reported to have happened or to have been observed. ... The unusual will not produce its proper effect on the reader unless this reader is brought to believe that the phenomenon described is part of reality and ... does not merely exist

²⁹ E.g. *Mir.* 6.1: καὶ ἐν Ἀντιοχείᾳ δὲ τῇ πρὸς Μαϊάνδρῳ ποταμῷ ἐγένετο ἀνδρόγυνος, ἄρχοντας Ἀθήνησιν Ἀντιπάτρου, ὑπατευόντων ἐν Ῥώμῃ Μάρκου Βινικίου καὶ Τίτου Στατιλίου Ταύρου, τοῦ Κουρβίνου ἐπικληθέντος; cf. 7.1, Cf. Brodersen 2002, 12.

³⁰ Cf. Giannini 1964, 129: 'Tutti questi *mirabilia* non sono che in parte documentati.'

³¹ Cf. Hansen 1996, 119.

³² In all other cases when Phlegon refers to an emperor, he includes his name. Emperors can be referred to as Καίσαρ (6.4 – Claudius; 24 – Domitian), αὐτοκράτωρ (14.4 – Tiberius; 25 – Hadrian, Trajan; 29 – Trajan), or by name alone (13.1 – Tiberius; 20 – Nero). It is possible that the lack of a name means the current emperor Hadrian is to be meant; note that although Hadrian is named as αὐτοκράτωρ at 25, the year referred to is that of his Athenian archonship in 112 AD, before the beginning of his reign. Yet it is also possible that Phlegon is referring indirectly to the centaur that Pliny the Elder says was brought to Claudius preserved in honey (*HN* 7.35). There are differences in the two accounts, but some similarities perhaps indicate Phlegon was drawing on, or at least aware of, Pliny: Claudius' centaur also arrived in Rome via an unexplained intermediary stop in Egypt, and Claudius is referred to as 'Caesar' in the first line of Pliny's report.

³³ Hansen 1996, 120.

³⁴ Schepens and Delcroix 1996, 432: 'As far as I know he is the first paradoxographer to do so.'

³⁵ Here I take ὡς προεῖπον closely with τεταριχευμένος, since Phlegon has in fact referred to the embalming of the centaur (34 ὑπὸ τῆς ταριχείας). Yet it is also possible that the phrase refers to the whole sentence, and indicates that Phlegon referred to the centaur's presence in some previous mention of the imperial storehouse that has now been lost. If this interpretation is correct, it may provide evidence that Phlegon's text was excerpted for inclusion in this manuscript. I am grateful to Kai Brodersen for discussion of this point.

³⁶ Phlegon uses the same strategy when describing the giant bones in Egypt at *Mir.* 15.1: οὐ χρὴ δὲ ἀπιστεῖν τῷ εἰρημένῳ, ἐπεὶ καὶ τῆς Αἰγύπτου Νιτρ<ι>αι εἰσὶν τόπος, ἐν αἷς δεικνύται σώματα οὐκ ἐλάττω τούτων... οὔτε συγκέχυται οὔτε συμπεφύρηται, ἀλλ' ἐν τάξει κεῖται, ὡς γνωρίζαι προσελθόντα τοῦτο μὲν μηρῶν ὀστᾶ, τοῦτο δὲ κνημῶν καὶ τῶν ἄλλων μελῶν.

in the imagination of the paradoxographer. Hence, for the paradoxographers, to uphold certain standards of credibility is vital to their aim; the trustworthiness of the report is intrinsically bound up with the very idea of θαῦμα.³⁷

In other words, something can be strange but true, but for that combination to be effective, it has to be both strange *and* true. Yet Phlegon seems to complicate this slightly: by introducing the element of autopsy, both his own and the reader's, he acknowledges the possibility of scepticism and invites the reader to take a more active role in the determination of truth within the text. How do Pliny, Tacitus, and Suetonius compare?

II. PLINY'S *LETTERS: MIRABILIA* IN DIALOGUE

Pliny's *Letters* contain material that would be perfectly at home in a work of paradoxography:³⁸ marvellous springs and rivers (*Ep.* 4.30, 8.8, 8.20), animals behaving in unexpected ways (the dolphin of 9.33), and especially ghostly apparitions and other supernatural visions (1.18, 3.5.4, 5.5.5-6, 7.27, 9.13.24-5). The authentication of these *mirabilia* is closely tied to their epistolary form. In a sense, *mirabilia* as described in letters constitute gifts; Pliny passed on information about these marvellous occurrences 'because stories about wonderful things, or *mirabilia*, were in themselves collectible entities, and within the channels of a privileged friendship might circulate as tokens of esteem.'³⁹ Yet as we shall see, *mirabilia* are not mere collectibles to be placed on metaphorical shelves and admired: Pliny often invites the addressee to consider, and even debate with him, what these phenomena mean, or whether they are true at all.

Pliny's *mirabilia* letters are also in dialogue with a figure conspicuous by his absence: Pliny the Elder. The letters on waters deal with phenomena that Pliny's uncle had also treated, yet the *Historia Naturalis* is never mentioned as a source for Pliny's information. Recently, Gibson has persuasively challenged the assumption that Pliny had not read the *HN*, also asserting that Pliny assumes a relatively high level of familiarity with the text on the part of his reader, who should be able to recognise when Pliny is engaging with it.⁴⁰ This suppression of the *HN* in the *Epistulae* has direct bearing on the question of authentication: while Pliny does not abandon source citation or reports of others' eyewitness accounts, in several of these letters Pliny emphasizes his own autopsy by highlighting visual language. This perhaps suggests that Pliny is presenting himself and his *Epistulae* as better guarantors of truth than his uncle's massive work.

(a) Ghosts and visions: Are they real, and why does it matter?

Pliny's letter to Licinius Sura on ghosts (*Ep.* 7.27) provides a useful way into thinking about truth and *mirabilia*, particularly supernatural ones. The addressee, also the recipient of 4.30 on the miraculous spring which I shall discuss below, seems to have been a go-to person for explaining the inexplicable.⁴¹ Here, Pliny opens by explicitly framing the *mirabilia* he is about to recite in terms of truth: *igitur perquam uelim scire, esse phantasmata et habere propriam figuram numenque aliquod putes an inania et vana ex metu nostro imaginem accipere* (*Ep.* 7.27.1). From the beginning, the question is about whether *phantasmata*, which

³⁷ Schepens and Delcroix 1996, 382-3.

³⁸ Cf. Lefèvre 1988, 244, who views certain of Pliny's letters as belonging to the subgenre of *mirabilia*-literature. On the *Epistulae* as 'miniaturizations' of other genres, see Gibson and Morello 2012, 79.

³⁹ Murphy 2004, 60, speaking about *Ep.* 9.33.

⁴⁰ Gibson 2011, 194-5. Instances of this assumed familiarity, Gibson maintains, cannot precisely be classed as allusions, but are rather 'reward[s] lying in wait for readers of the Younger who know their text of the Elder well.'

⁴¹ Based on these letters, Bardon 1956, 183 suspects that Sura himself may have authored a work on *mirabilia*.

seem so unbelievable, really exist. Pliny comes down on the side of the believers, and backs up his opinion with three examples. First is Curtius Rufus' vision in Africa: *ego ut esse credam in primis eo ducor, quod audio accidisse Curtio Rufo* (7.27.2). Next is the story of a haunted house in Athens: *iam illud nonne et magis terribile et non minus mirum est quod exponam ut accepi?* (7.27.4). Finally, Pliny tells a story from his own life about a nocturnal apparition that cuts the hair of one of his slaves: *et haec quidem adfirmantibus credo; illud adfirmare aliis possum* (7.27.12). As Baraz has noted, Pliny's strategy relies heavily on his authorial persona: 'To believe the story is to express trust in your source. If Sura believes in Pliny, he has to believe his story and follow his lead in interpreting it.'⁴² This reliance on an authorial persona is characteristic of paradoxographers, as we have seen.

Pliny does give details apparently intended to ground these stories in reality,⁴³ but some of these details are rather vague, a far cry from Phlegon's consular dates and precise geographical locations. Athenodorus' haunted house is in Athens, but for Curtius Rufus Pliny omits the detail that he first saw the vision in Hadrumetum (cf. Tacitus *Ann.* 11.21.1). Neither Curtius Rufus nor Athenodorus is situated in a particular time. Indeed, the figures that could possibly be identified as Athenodorus lived at a range of times between the third century BC and the late Republic.⁴⁴ Pliny's letters are notoriously timeless: he often strips out exact references to time and place.⁴⁵ This raises the question of whether we are even supposed to assume that Athenodorus is a specific individual, or merely the stock character of the unflappable philosopher, included 'to demonstrate that a reasonable, rational person starting from a point of view of non-belief can and should change his assumptions when the circumstances warrant it.'⁴⁶ Perhaps this was not a problem for Pliny's original readership, who may have known exactly who was meant by 'Athenodorus.' Or perhaps Pliny's 'Athenodorus' is like Phlegon's 'Caesar': naming a figure with multiple possible identities makes the reader think they know whom, or at least the *kind* of person whom, Pliny means, and this is enough to provide a veneer of authenticity that strengthens Pliny's position.⁴⁷

Only for the last story, about his slave's mysterious haircut, can Pliny offer personal testimony to those who question the existence of ghosts, relying on the testimony of others for the other two (7.27.2 *audio*; 7.27.4 *accepi*); unlike a paradoxographer with his scrupulous citations, Pliny does not specify who told him these stories.⁴⁸ Nor does he claim to have witnessed the mysterious occurrences personally. Despite the bravado of Pliny's *illud*

⁴² Baraz 2012, 125.

⁴³ Curtius Rufus' second sighting of his phantasm is located in Carthage (7.27.3). Athenodorus' approaching the magistrates to see to the proper burial of the remains he has discovered (7.27.11) also has the effect of grounding the story in the institutions of real life (Baraz 2012, 124; cf. the meeting of the assembly at Phlegon *Mir.* 1.16-17, where the marvel of Philinnion's resurrection moves 'from the private environment of the family home to the public environment of the community as a whole' [Hansen 1996, 76]). Pliny's third apparition is said to have happened during the reign of Domitian (7.27.14).

⁴⁴ He could be either the Stoic philosopher from Tarsus who was a contemporary of Octavian and Cicero, another Stoic philosopher also from Tarsus whom Cato the Younger brought to Rome in 70 BC, or Athenodorus of Soli from the third century BC (the only one of the three actually known to have a connection to Athens). See Sherwin-White 1966, 436; Felton 1999, 67-8; Baraz 2012, 119 n. 40.

⁴⁵ Cf. Gibson and Morello 2012, 78-79.

⁴⁶ Baraz 2012, 121. Cf. Felton 1999, 68. Gibson and Morello 2012, 114 n. 39 note, for example, that 'the detail of concentrating on one's books in a climate of fear' is characteristic of both Athenodorus and of Pliny the Elder during the eruption of Vesuvius.

⁴⁷ Sherwin-White 1966, 436 thinks the 'well-known' late Republican Athenodorus is being referred to. On the other hand, Felton 1999, 68 allows the possibility that Athenodorus is merely a generic figure: 'In [a] sense, his exact identity is of little importance.'

⁴⁸ In the case of Curtius Rufus, eyewitnesses of the previous generation would have been able to tell Pliny of his apparition. With Athenodorus, if we are supposed to be thinking of one of the two older philosophers, *exponam ut accepi* (7.27.6) becomes perhaps a less clear guarantee of truth, since the story would then have to have been handed down for several generations.

adfirmare aliis possum (7.27.12), it was not he himself who saw the vision, but his slave, and he can only vouch for it second hand (as he himself admits with the parenthetical *ita narrat*, 7.27.13). He does not even claim to have literally seen the shorn slave and hair clippings himself (7.27.13 *hunc quoque tonsum sparsosque circa capillos dies ostendit* – Pliny never literally says 'I saw').⁴⁹

What are we to make of this? Although Pliny straightforwardly affirms that he himself believes in the existence of *phantasmata* based on these stories, he does not communicate the details that have led him to this belief in a particularly satisfactory way. Furthermore, despite the confidence of the letter's opening, at its close Pliny claims that he has consulted Sura with the aim of dispelling his own doubt: *licet etiam utramque in partem (ut soles) disputes, ex altera tamen fortius, ne me suspensum incertumque dimittas, cum mihi consulendi causa fuerit, ut dubitare desinerem* (*Ep.* 7.27.16). This shift from confidence to doubt is puzzling, especially since Pliny cites no examples anywhere in the letter of *phantasmata* that were later revealed to have been empty visions; if Sura wanted to argue that *phantasmata* are not real, he would have to go outside of Pliny's letter to prove it.⁵⁰ Or would he? Perhaps the vagueness and imprecisions that remain in Pliny's attempts to authenticate his stories are intended to provide just the material Sura would need to shoot down his balloon. Either way, Pliny's discourse about *phantasmata* will only work as a dialogue. Sura can reply with 'You are Pliny, so I believe you – someone of your stature would never accept such stories without good evidence,' or 'Well, did you see that hair yourself? And just who is Athenodorus supposed to be?' We can think again of Phlegon and the centaur. The paradoxographer also invited audience participation, yet in his case it was in full confidence that any observer, on examining the centaur's embalmed body, would find his claims about it to be true. In Pliny's letter, there is no possibility of reexamining the evidence.

Further context, however, can perhaps be provided by the internal logic of the *Epistulae*: how do other supernatural apparitions in the collection⁵¹ work against the uncertainty of 7.27? *Ep.* 1.18, to Suetonius, reveals the important political implications of authenticating supernatural visions. Suetonius asks Pliny to delay his forthcoming appearance in court because he has had a dream he believes portends his defeat in the case (1.18.1 *scribis te perterritum somnio vereri, ne quid adversi in actione patiaris*). Unlike other such visions described in the *Epistulae*, the content of this dream, the apparition itself, is never described. What is most important, Pliny says, for determining the veracity of a dream is the dreamer's usual patterns: does he have a tendency to dreams that are predictive, or ones that are not (1.18. *refert tamen, eventura soleas an contraria somniare*)? Pliny then relates a dream of his own, in which his (presumably deceased)⁵² mother-in-law begs him to abandon an upcoming court case *contra potentissimos civitatis atque etiam Caesaris amicos* (1.18.3). If, as Gibson and Morello have argued, *Caesar* here is Domitian,⁵³ this links Pliny's dream explicitly with

⁴⁹ Felton 1999, 64–5 sees traces of scepticism in Pliny's telling of the story.

⁵⁰ Baraz 2012, 122.

⁵¹ The question of whether Pliny's letters should be read sequentially or thematically is much discussed. Gibson and Morello 2012, 2–3 note that, while Pliny's letters are meant to be read straight through in the order they are arranged, it is also possible to pick thematically similar letters from different books to read together; furthermore (*ibid.* p. 9), 'a dynamic of re-reading becomes crucial to grasping the full potential of the collection' and making connections across it. See also Marchesi 2008, 11.

⁵² Felton 1999, 119 n. 13: If his mother-in-law had not been dead, 'the incident would have been less remarkable and less disturbing... and Pliny might have mentioned whether his mother-in-law had expressed this concern over his lawsuit while he was awake.'

⁵³ Gibson and Morello 2012, 24 see this as one in a pattern of oblique references to Domitian throughout *Ep.* book 1. Sherwin-White 1966, 128 thinks Titus is the most likely candidate for *Caesar*, but admits Domitian is possible. The date of Junius Pastor's trial is unknown.

that of his slave in 7.27: yet while that one predicted his deliverance from an unknown Domitianic danger, this one predicts destruction that did not in fact occur.

In contrast to the Domitianic dream of 7.27, Pliny personally attests to this apparition (1.18.3 *mihi quiescenti visa est socrus mea*), and the question is not so much about whether visions *exist*, as about what they mean. The truth of apparitions is directly addressed in *Ep.* 9.13, describing an apparition seen by Publicius Certus, against whom Pliny spoke in the Senate because he had been instrumental in condemning Helvidius Priscus under Domitian. 'The missing heart of book 1,' the incident with Certus provides an important lens through which to reread book 1.⁵⁴ Certus' dream, then, is a lens through which we can reread Pliny's dream in 1.18. Certus dies within a few days of the publication of a pamphlet written by Pliny about the controversy, dreaming that Pliny stood over him with a sword: *audivi referentes hanc imaginem menti eius hanc oculis oberrasse, tamquam videret me sibi cum ferro imminere. verane haec, adfirmare non ausim; interest tamen exempli, ut vera videantur* (*Ep.* 9.13.25). As with the phantasms of 7.27, Pliny relies on eyewitness reports to prove that this vision was not merely imagined by Certus – but how a third party could possibly confirm this is never addressed. Pliny himself is not certain whether it is true, but the story's value as an *exemplum* depends on its at least *seeming* true. This is more than 'Si non è vero, è ben trovato' – the dream in a sense *has* to be true in order to preserve a "larger truth" about the power of Pliny's writings to correct the errors that occurred under the last principate. Regardless of the reliability of the testimony, or even of the visions' fulfillment, the apparitions in both 1.18 and 9.13 gain authentication by being integrated into a larger narrative of Pliny's life.⁵⁵ Even the ultimately unfulfilled dream in 1.18 becomes 'true' by fitting into a larger pattern of Pliny as the successful opponent of the ruling power. The most powerful way of checking the veracity of *phantasmata* is by seeing whether they fit into the larger pattern of the dreamer's life – especially when the dreamer is Pliny and his life is his *written* life as reflected in the *Epistulae*.⁵⁶

(b) Natural history and the *Natural History*

Pliny the Elder is in the background of letters where natural wonders are described. In *Ep.* 4.30 and 8.20, on miraculous water features (as we have seen, a traditional subject of interest for paradoxographers), questions of authentication are related to sight and first-hand observation. In both cases, Pliny emphasizes the wondrousness of the phenomena. The spring by the Lacus Larius near Pliny's native Comum that rises and falls three times a day⁵⁷ has a *mira natura* (4.30.2) reaffirmed at the end of the letter (4.30.11 *tantum miraculum*). Lake Vadimon in Ameria with its floating islands is compared to the wonders of Greece, Egypt, or Asia (8.20.2 *aliae quaelibet miraculorum ferax commendatrixque terra*), and is so strange as to be unbelievable (8.20.3 *incredibilia*).

Pliny authenticates both wonders through careful visual description. The miraculous spring, he says, can be clearly seen to rise and fall (4.30.3 *cernitur id palam*), and he makes much of his own authority: as a native of Comum who has actually seen the spring, he is a reliable witness (4.30.1 *attuli tibi ex patria mea*). For Sura the addressee, who has never seen the spring firsthand, Pliny recreates the phenomenon in words. In an artistically repetitive

⁵⁴ Gibson and Morello 2012, 28.

⁵⁵ On how readers construct a narrative of Pliny's life from scattered references in the *Epistulae*, see Gibson and Morello 2012, chap. 1.

⁵⁶ Cf. *Ep.* 3.5.4, where Pliny reports the ghostly apparition of Drusus to Pliny the Elder straightforwardly as if it doubtless really happened; it gains credence when verified against the subsequent course of the Elder's life and writings. See Sallmann 1984, 580–85; Marincola 1997, 48; Henderson 2002, 80–81, 101; Gibson 2011, 195–205.

⁵⁷ See Lefèvre 1988, 239–243 on the spring's location and description by later writers.

paragraph, Pliny describes the rising and falling of the spring three times. In the first two formulations, two verbs describe the rising and falling of the spring, and an ablative of measure describes the fixed range of the water's movement (4.30.2 *statis auctibus ac diminutionibus crescit decrescitque*; 4.30.3 *interim ille certis dimensisque momentis vel subtrahitur vel adsurgit*); in the third, the formulation is doubled, and two verbs describing the water's rise and two describing its fall are each coupled with two adverbs emphasizing the gradual nature of the phenomenon (4.30.4 *anulum seu quid aliud ponis in sicco, adluitur sensim ac novissime operitur, detegitur rursus paulatimque deseritur*). The fall and rise happens three times a day, as Pliny repeats at both the beginning (4.30.2 *ter in die*) and the end (4.30.4 *si diutius observes, utrumque iterum ac tertio videas*) of his description. The threefold nature of Pliny's repetitive language thus recreates for Sura the phenomenon of the three risings and fallings. This involvement of Sura in the description, emphasised by the use of second-person verbs to describe a picnicker watching from beside the spring,⁵⁸ emphasizes the visual element. Pliny, who verifies the existence of the marvel by first-person observation, can recreate his experience verbally to convince someone who has never seen the spring himself.

For the floating islands in Lake Vadimon, the valorisation of visual, eyewitness testimony is even more explicit. Words for perception abound in the first three sections of the letter.⁵⁹ Pliny opens bemoaning Romans' ignorance about the natural wonders available in Italy itself, setting up an opposition between seeing and hearing as competing methods of finding out about miraculous things: *quacumque de causa, permulta in urbe nostra iuxtaque urbem non oculis modo sed ne auribus quidem novimus, quae si tulisset Achaia Aegyptos Asia aliave quaelibet miraculorum ferax commendatrixque terra, audita perlecta lustrata haberemus* (8.20.2). Romans have not even heard about, much less seen, nearby *miracula*; Pliny's formulation in terms of ears and eyes recalls Herodotus' Candaules' famous statement that ears are less trustworthy than eyes (Hdt. 1.8 ὅτι γὰρ τυγχάνει ἀνθρώποισι ἔόντα ἀπιστότερα ὀφθαλμῶν). Thus when Pliny proceeds to describe his own acquaintance with the lake, first through a story from his father-in-law and then through autopsy, the continued language of sight and sound is loaded with connotations relating to authentication:

ipse certe nuper, quod nec audieram ante nec videram, audivi pariter et vidi. exegerat prosocer meus, ut Amerina praedia sua inspicerem. haec perambulanti mihi ostenditur subiacens lacus nomine Vadimonis; simul quaedam incredibilia narrantur. perveni ad ipsum (8.20.3).

Pliny himself avoids the problem of autopsy by combining *audire* and *videre*, not only by hearing the stories told to him while the lake in the distance was pointed out, but also by approaching it himself to get a good close look that enables him to continue the letter with six more chapters describing the phenomenon in detail.

Yet Pliny is perhaps being disingenuous: although he presents Lake Vadimon as a phenomenon completely unfamiliar to him until the visit with his father-in-law, Pliny the Elder had mentioned the lake as one example in a list of several lakes with floating islands (HN 2.209). His uncle had also described the spring of Ep. 4.30 (HN 2.232 *in Comensi iuxta Larium lacum fons largus horis singulis semper intumescit ac residit*), but this leaves no trace in Pliny's account. In both cases, dry notes in his uncle's *Historia Naturalis* serve perhaps as a tacit source for Pliny's letters, which are framed in terms of eyewitness testimony. The way the Elder describes the islands gives no indication that he actually saw these springs for himself. By suppressing his uncle's accounts in favour of his own firsthand experience of these two water features, Pliny implicitly asserts that his way of doing research produces

⁵⁸ 4.30.3 *recumbis, vesceris, potas*; cf. also 4.30.4 *observes, videas*.

⁵⁹ Saylor 1982, 139.

better results than the Elder's massive work, which he conceals in favour of his own, more convincing and authentic, firsthand account.⁶⁰ Pliny perhaps hints at this when he mentions reading (*Ep.* 8.20 *audita perlecta lustrata*) – people like to hear of, read about, and see wondrous phenomena from abroad, with hearing, reading, and seeing perhaps arranged in ascending order of trustworthiness. Pliny himself abandons hearsay and reading, valorising autopsy. Just as Phlegon occasionally abandons bookish citation in favour of eyewitness testimony, so for Pliny, it is not really enough either to hear or read miraculous tales: for the best authentication, a writer must see the phenomena for himself.

III. TACITUS: POLITICS AND CREDIBILITY⁶¹

Tacitus, too, uses his reports of *mirabilia* to reflect on notions of authenticity, particularly eyewitnesses and their problems. As we might expect of an imperial historian, most of the marvels Tacitus reports appear in the form of omens and portents related to the *princeps*: in the *Histories*, the rises and falls of the four contenders for the principate are marked out by various omens, and the Julio-Claudians in the *Annals* are visited by various unusual occurrences interpreted as dire prodigies.⁶² For the purposes of the present investigation, however, I will focus on only those passages where Tacitus explicitly reflects on the authenticity of strange occurrences – whether or not they can be believed to have really happened, based on the reports of them that are available.

(a) Fear and flattery: The forces that distort

Tacitus allows that reports of *mirabilia* can be falsified. In *Annals* 2, a fleet of Germanicus' troops suffers losses in a vast storm while sailing on the Ocean. Some of the shipwrecked troops, Tacitus says, are found and sold into slavery in Germany or Britain, and slowly find their way back to "civilization" with strange stories to tell: *ut quis ex longinquo revererat, miracula narrabant, vim turbinum et inauditas volucris, monstra maris, ambiguas hominum et beluarum formas, visa sive ex metu credita* (*A.* 2.24.4). This is the stuff of paradoxography: sea monsters and man-beast hybrids would sit quite nicely alongside Phlegon's centaurs. Yet Tacitus does not endorse them as Phlegon might. The historian does not vouch for the existence of such strange creatures *in propria persona*; he is merely reporting what the sailors claim to have seen, and their minds deranged by terror may make them unreliable witnesses. A strong emotional response, then, can warp people's perceptions of what happened, giving rise to exaggerated reports of *miracula*, and there is no independent evidence. Unlike Phlegon's centaurs, these strange creatures are not brought to Rome to be inspected by the suspicious, but stay on the margins of the known world, where strange things are known to happen.⁶³ Yet Tacitus also leaves open the possibility that these *miracula* could be real: *visa sive ex metu credita* has to be taken as a true alternative.⁶⁴ The fact that Tacitus cannot verify the creatures' existence does not automatically make them fictional.

⁶⁰ Gibson 2011, 188 rightly notes that we cannot assume that the Elder did *not* visit Lake Vadimon himself, but if he did, he does not say so in the *HN*, and the Younger's presentation is strikingly different.

⁶¹ In this section, I summarize observations made at greater length in my presentation 'Truth, Belief, and Rationality: Case Studies in Tacitean *Miracula*,' held at the APA Annual Meeting in January 2012. I am grateful to audiences there and at the Universität Erfurt for their observations.

⁶² E.g. *H.* 1.62.3, 1.86, 2.50.2 (see below), 2.78.2, 3.56.1. In the extant *Annals*, no prodigies occur during the reign of Tiberius, but only begin under Claudius (*A.* 12.43, 64) and escalate under Nero (*A.* 13.58, 14.12.2, 15.47.1).

⁶³ Romm 1992, chap. 3; cf. also Williamson 2005, 228.

⁶⁴ Whitehead 1979, 490 assumes the emphasis is on *ex metu credita*, though with the avowed agenda of seeing Tacitus as a 'rationalist' (see his observations on *A.* 6.34.2).

Tacitus places the reader on firmer ground when describing Vespasian's healing miracles performed in Alexandria in AD 69: while the future emperor is in Serapis' sanctuary, a blind man and a man with an arthritic hand beg the emperor to heal them, which he successfully does. As outlandish as this may seem, from the moment Tacitus first introduces the episode, he combines details that provide verisimilitude with an authorial statement about the meaning of the miracles he is about to describe: *per eos mensis quibus Vespasianus Alexandriae stator aestivis flatibus dies et certa maris opperiebatur, multa miracula evenere, quis caelestis favor et quaedam in Vespasianum inclinatio numinum ostenderetur*⁶⁵ (*H.* 4.81.1). Like Phlegon, Tacitus situates the story relatively precisely in time and place. Even more striking, though, is Tacitus' claim that what he is about to report shows the favour of heaven towards Vespasian. Before he has actually reported the episode, Tacitus gives us his own authorial view of it, as if he expects that the reader will find the *miracula* that follow difficult to believe unless he as the narrator of events can impose meaning on them.⁶⁶ This statement of *caelestis favor* also provides a sort of authentication in the context of the narrative of the *Histories* more generally, for Tacitus *in propria persona* has given indications that the Flavian cause had supernatural support (*H.* 1.10.3, 2.1.2), and has also reported other omens signalling their success (*H.* 2.4, 2.78.3). Like the ghost stories in Pliny's letters, the healings gain credibility from being inserted into a coherent larger account. At the end of the passage, after describing the healings, Tacitus reaffirms that they really happened by explicitly vouching for the eyewitnesses who are his source for the information: *utrumque qui interfuere nunc quoque memorant, postquam nullum mendacio pretium* (*H.* 4.81.3). These eyewitnesses to Vespasian's healings provide especially trustworthy testimony, because they are unbiased: with Vespasian long dead, and indeed the whole Flavian dynasty a thing of the past, they have nothing to gain by fabricating fantastic tales that make him look good.

It is important that Tacitus *in propria persona* insists twice on the truth of Vespasian's miracles, for in between these opening and closing statements of truth, the way Tacitus describes the atmosphere in Alexandria and Vespasian's own predispositions seems to cast doubt on the motivations of the various actors. Vespasian is reluctant to perform the cures (*H.* 4.81.2),⁶⁷ but the misguided belief of the Alexandrians works against him: *e plebe Alexandrina quidam oculorum tabe notus genua eius advolvitur, remedium caecitatis exposcens gemitu, monitu Serapidis dei, quem dedita superstitionibus gens ante alios colit* (*H.* 4.81.1). And Tacitus has already told us that Vespasian is susceptible to *superstitio* (2.78.1 *nec erat intactus tali superstitione*, in the context of his belief in astrology). As Rhiannon Ash has observed, 'The magical land of Egypt is certainly an appropriate place for extraordinary events to occur, and the "populace inclined to superstitious beliefs" (4.81.1) mirrors Vespasian's own personality.'⁶⁸ This similarity perhaps explains why Vespasian allows himself to be convinced into performing miracles. Thus we could well imagine that the rampant *superstitio* could make it all the more difficult to determine the validity of the eyewitness accounts on which Tacitus relies; if fear may have made Germanicus' troops

⁶⁵ Heubner 1976, 178 and Chilver and Townend 1985, 83–4 have argued that the subjunctive is an attempt on Tacitus' part to distance himself from the information he reports and allow for doubts about its veracity, but Woodcock 1959, sec. 159 notes that '[the indicative] states the facts objectively, and leaves the reader to draw his own conclusions, while the subjunctive expresses the connexion subjectively, as an opinion of the writer.'

⁶⁶ In this Tacitus differs from parallel accounts of Vespasian's healings. Suetonius states that the miracles added *auctoritas et quasi maiestas* that Vespasian had so far lacked (*Vesp.* 7.2) but does not tell us explicitly that the miracles derive from the gods' particular favour toward Vespasian. Dio, like Tacitus, states that the healings were a means by which the gods magnified Vespasian (65.8.1 ὁ μὲν θεῶν τούτοις αὐτὸν ἐπέμνυεν), but he only does so *after* describing the healings.

⁶⁷ On his reluctance see Henrichs 1968, 65.

⁶⁸ Ash 1999, 135.

imagine their sea monsters, surely superstitious Alexandrians could have imagined the healings. Yet the reader already knows that despite the worrying *superstitio* in the air, the events described actually took place, because he has read Tacitus' opening sentence situating the events precisely in time, place, reality (note the indicative verb *evenere*, *H.* 4.81.1), and narrative context.

In addition to *superstitio*, flattery is also at work. Vespasian's initial resistance to the request to perform the healings does not remain firm, and his reasons for wavering lie in the insistence of his flatterers: *Vespasianus primo inridere, aspernari; atque illis instantibus modo famam vanitatis metuere, modo obsecratione ipsorum et vocibus adulantium in spem induci* (*H.* 4.81.2). This is exactly the kind of pro-Vespasianic bias that Tacitus denies affects accounts of the miracles. Yet although it may have been a factor at the time, we know that bias can no longer be affecting witnesses' continued reports of the miracle after Vespasian's death, because of Tacitus' reaffirmation of the eyewitnesses' impartiality at the end of the passage. This impartiality of his eyewitnesses shows the important political implications of authenticating the marvellous. We can recall Tacitus' observations on Julio-Claudian historiography in the *Annals* (*A.* 1.1.2 ...*temporibusque Augusti dicendis non defuere decora ingenia, donec gliscente adulatione deterrerentur: Tiberii Gaique et Claudii ac Neronis res florentibus ipsis ob metum falsae*), or his statement about freedom of speech in the happy post-Domitianic (post-Flavian) environment in which he now writes (*H.* 1.1.4 *rara temporum felicitate ubi sentire quae velis et quae sentias dicere licet*).⁶⁹ This is true not only for Tacitus himself, but also for his eyewitnesses to Vespasian's healings: the political climate of Tacitus' day removes the possibility that these *miracula* were invented by flatterers. The change of regime means that the eyewitnesses are freed from the temptation of flattery, and that their story is therefore true. Although this seems somewhat circular, it makes an important point about Tacitus' views on authentication. The persistence of an implausible story beyond the time when it was politically relevant means that it must be true: hindsight, especially when combined with regime change, is the best guarantor of truth.

(b) Bird behaviour: *miracula* vs. *fabulosa*

Tacitus further probes the boundaries between belief and scepticism with his report of the phoenix that appeared in Egypt in AD 34 (*A.* 6.28):

Paulo Fabio L. Vitellio consulibus post longum saeculorum ambitum avis phoenix in Aegyptum venit praebuitque materiem doctissimis indigenarum et Graecorum multa super eo miraculo disserendi. de quibus congruunt et plura ambigua, sed cognitu non absurda promere libet (*A.* 6.28.1).

Tacitus gives us a much more limited statement about its truth than he does in the case of Vespasian's healings, yet he does use similar strategies to authenticate the report. He places his report of the phoenix' appearance at the beginning of his account of the year; this striking positioning highlights the phenomenon's importance and draws it to the reader's attention.⁷⁰ It also allows Tacitus to juxtapose the report with the names of the consuls of the year, which has the effect of anchoring this *miraculum* temporally in reality, much as Phlegon does with his θαύματα. Tacitus states the phoenix' appearance straightforwardly as a fact, using indicative verbs (*venit praebuitque*). Yet unlike in the case of Vespasian's healing miracles, Tacitus gives us no explicit authorial guidance, for he does not give us any indication of what

⁶⁹ Cf. Luce 1989, 18–20; Marincola 1999, 396–7.

⁷⁰ On the Phoenix in particular, see Syme 1958, 774; on Tacitus' annalistic strategies in general, see Ginsburg 1981.

the event *means*. In contrast, Pliny the Elder (*HN* 10.5) and Dio (58.27.1) both assign the phoenix to AD 36,⁷¹ two years later than Tacitus and much closer to Tiberius' death, of which Dio even makes the bird an explicit harbinger.

Despite the extensive discussion of the *ambigua* surrounding its life (*A.* 6.28.2-5), the phoenix is remarkable for its lack of narrative context. Unlike Vespasian's miracles, it fits into no larger story of divine favour, nor does Tacitus' dating of the event allow it to be interpreted as an omen of Tiberius' impending demise. Yet this makes its appearance no less true. The things Tacitus seems to find unbelievable, *fabulosa*, about the phoenix are not any of its particular manifestations,⁷² but the descriptions of its rebirth from the carcass of its parent (6.28.5).⁷³ The fact that phoenixes exist is never in doubt, for they have actually been seen: *haec incerta et fabulosis aucta: ceterum aspici aliquando in Aegypto eam volucrem non ambigitur* (6.28.6). Nothing is said about who has allegedly seen phoenixes; the identity and potential bias of these eyewitnesses are not fully explored, and the passive *aspici* even suppresses their presence within the text. Compare Pliny the Elder's observations on the false phoenix brought to Rome during Claudius' reign: *allatus est et in urbem Claudii principis censura anno urbis DCCC et in comitio propositus, quod actis testatum est, sed quem falsum esse nemo dubitaret* (*HN* 10.5). Pliny the Elder's evidence, we might think, is superior to Tacitus' nebulous eyewitnesses, since he has found the phoenix described in the *acta urbis*,⁷⁴ but he rejects it as false nonetheless, apparently because of its inherent implausibility, visible to everyone at the time.⁷⁵ Tacitus, with apparently less solid evidence, chooses to assert that phoenixes are real. Why might this be?

For comparison, we could look to Tacitus' report of another marvellous bird that appears to mark the death of Otho in the *Histories* (2.50.2). Inhabitants record (*incolae memorant*) that an unusual (*invisitata specie*) bird settles in a grove near the battle field, remaining there despite the chaos of battle swirling around it, before vanishing (*ablatam ex oculis*) at the moment of Otho's suicide.⁷⁶ Tacitus describes this bird's unusual appearance, like that of the phoenix, as a *miraculum*. Yet he also expresses some doubt about the story's authenticity: *ut conquirere fabulosa et fictis oblectare legentium animos procul gravitate coepti operis crediderim, ita vulgatis traditisque demere fidem non ausim*. (*H.* 2.50.2). Rhiannon Ash has described this apologetic preamble as 'an insurance policy: by conceding that the episode is incredible, he aims to defuse criticism in advance,' a strategy commonly used by ancient historians when reporting supernatural things⁷⁷ that seem to break the generic rules about *fabula* and history.⁷⁸ This reflects historians' concern with faithfulness to tradition: sometimes they feel compelled to report things that existing accounts or testimony preserve, even if they feel unable to endorse it wholeheartedly. In addition, the passage,

⁷¹ Both of these authors also report the bird in close connection with a consular date: Pliny *HN* 10.5 *Cornelius Valerianus phoenicem devolvavisse in Aegyptum tradit Q. Plautio Sexto Papinio coss.*; Dio 58.26.5 gives the name of the consuls in the section immediately preceding the phoenix.

⁷² This is all the more remarkable given the serious chronological problems with these appearances that Tacitus highlights (*A.* 6.28.4).

⁷³ Cf. Martin 2001, 161: 'T. has ... queried details of the young bird's flight to Egypt with the body of its dead parent as *fabulous*; but, by contrast, the appearance of the bird in Egypt from time to time is given as a fact ("not in dispute").'

⁷⁴ Hartmann 2010, 126.

⁷⁵ The imperfect subjunctive of *nemo dubitaret* should be translated as 'no one at the time would have doubted' – cf. Gildersleeve and Lodge 1895, sec. 258; Woodcock 1959, sec. 121.

⁷⁶ Pliny *NH* 10.135 notes the arrival of *novae aves* into Italy around the time of the battle of Bedriacum, 'but his interest in them is culinary' (Ash 2007b, 215).

⁷⁷ Ash 2007b, 215. For similar strategies in Livy, see Oakley 1998, 101–2.

⁷⁸ See above, n. 2.

purporting as it does to reproduce the testimony of local eyewitnesses (*incolae memorant*), 'suggest[s] his industrious research... without endorsing the truth of the anecdote.'⁷⁹

In a sense, then, Tacitus' decision about whether or not to authenticate any given *miraculum* has a lot to do with the construction of his own authorial persona. With Otho's bird, he chooses to keep his distance and maintain the posture of a sceptical and careful historian; including the inhabitants' report reflects well on him for having done his research thoroughly, and for including a relevant piece of historical data in the *Historiae* even if he professes to doubt it. With the phoenix, on the other hand, the authenticating details provide the appearance of careful research, yet at the end of the day all we have to go on is Tacitus' assertion *in propria persona* that the phoenix really appeared. Expressing his doubts about Otho's bird is like putting money in the authority bank: by sometimes casting doubt on *miracula*, he increases his credibility and thereby throws into relief those *miracula* on whose truth he *does* insist, especially those whose only proof is in the historian's word.

The question of entertainment also comes into play here. With the phoenix, Tacitus' only authorial remark was to state that is 'a pleasing subject for presentation,' and that its appearance is 'not inappropriate to acknowledge'⁸⁰ regardless of the fact that many details about the phoenix' life and habits are hazy (*ambigua*) and the subject of disagreement. Yet with Otho's bird, Tacitus claims to refuse to stoop to the level of sensationalist authors who collect fantastic stories to delight the reader. This is directly relevant to paradoxographical literature, for scholars have often claimed that authors like Phlegon collected the most sensationalist material they could find in order to please the taste of an audience that was casual, reading for entertainment, and not up to the intellectual challenge of 'serious' genres like historiography.⁸¹ Yet the fact that Tacitus, too, enjoys walking the knife edge between the *gravitas* of history and entertaining *miracula* should go a long way toward dispelling the notion that fantastic material is necessarily an indication of inferior quality.

IV. SUETONIUS: *PRINCEPS*-FOCUSED *MIRABILIA*

Suetonius' *Caesares* are full of the improbable, and, perhaps unsurprisingly given that he writes biography, all *mirabilia* are drawn within the orbit of the emperors and become *accoutrements* of the *principes*. For example, Suetonius presents several curiosities kept by the emperors, similar to Phlegon's description of the giant tooth sent to Tiberius (*Mir.* 13-14) and the centaur given to the unspecified emperor (*Mir.* 34-5). The *mirabilia* the emperors collect and display often say something about their character. Thus Augustus illustrates his modest tastes by choosing to decorate his country houses not with luxurious *objets d'art* but with a collection of natural curiosities (*Aug.* 72.3 *rebusque vetustate ac raritate notabilibus*) that included the bones of giants and sea monsters;⁸² while Nero's notorious cruelty led people to believe that he kept a strange being called the *polyphagus* to eat the raw flesh of those condemned to die (*Ner.* 37.2 *creditur etiam polyphago cuidam Aegypti generis crudam carnem et quidquid daretur mandere assueto, concupisse vivos homines laniandos absumendosque obicere*).⁸³ The majority of Suetonian *mirabilia*, on which the rest of my

⁷⁹ Ash 2007b, 215.

⁸⁰ Translation of Woodman 2004 *ad loc.*

⁸¹ Gabba 1981, 53; Schepens and Delcroix 1996, 379. Cf. Stramaglia 2006, 297.

⁸² Cf. *Aug.* 43.3, where his exhibition of the remarkably loud-voiced dwarf Lycius is the only exception to his usual practice of refusing to allow members of the nobility to take part in any kind of spectacles. Contrast Domitian's scarlet-clad dwarf (?), whom he keeps not as a curiosity, but to ask for serious advice and rationalizations of his decisions (*Dom.* 4.2).

⁸³ Littman 1976 suggests that the *polyphagus* is to be understood a crocodile, but Baldwin 1977 argues much more persuasively, based on other instances of the word to mean 'glutton', that what is meant is a human

analysis will focus, consist of apparitions and strange animal behaviour which serve as portents anticipating the rise or fall of particular *principes*.

In general, Suetonius offers less explicit reflection on the truth of the *mirabilia* he reports than Pliny and Tacitus do. His tendency to group material by category rather than chronologically means that he usually does not anchor his paradoxical material as carefully in time or place as Phlegon or Tacitus. He does cite sources for some of the strange occurrences he reports,⁸⁴ but in many cases, he seems to use the 'paradoxographer mode' of straightforward reporting, relying on his reader to accept what he says as the truth (see above, p. 5). One strategy he uses, particularly when reporting portents, is to overwhelm the reader with their sheer number. In such long lists, the concatenation of so many uncanny occurrences pointing in the same direction means that *mirabilia* seem to reinforce each other – especially since the post-Domitianic reader, with the benefit of hindsight, already knows that the outcome these strange things seem (and seemed to the people at the time) to indicate did truly come to pass. For example, in the vast list of portents before Augustus' birth foretelling his future rule, Suetonius provides external authentication for just three: one unspecified portent is said to have been reported by Julius Marathus (*Aug.* 94.3), who was Augustus' *libertus a memoria* (*Aug.* 79.2) and therefore has the authority of an 'insider';⁸⁵ Asclepiades Mendes' *Theologoumenon*⁸⁶ is the authority for Attia's dream of being impregnated by a snake (*Aug.* 94.4); and the otherwise unknown Gaius Drusus is cited as the source of the story that the infant Augustus vanished from his crib one night and was found the next morning facing the rising sun (*Aug.* 94.6). It is not clear why these portents need to be authenticated any more than any of the other thirteen portents Suetonius lists in this chapter; occasionally the biographer feels the need to mention where he got his information, as if to emphasize his own diligent research, but for the most part he is willing to let the sheer accumulation of uncanny events, and the fact that Augustus did after all become emperor, speak to their authenticity.

Much as it was for Pliny and Tacitus, creating a coherent narrative with the help of hindsight is particularly important in Suetonius' authentication of the uncanny phenomena he reports. In what follows I will reflect on several instances of temporal continuity, where the continuing existence of some object or phenomenon through the ages authenticates, or is authenticated by, past events in the life of a *princeps*.

(a) *Mirabilia as memorabilia: Temporal continuity and proof of the past*

Suetonius' emperors leave traces of themselves throughout the world; these traces, often imbued with marvellous qualities, persist into Suetonius' present, where they not only provide reminders of previous emperors' presence, but also can serve as proof of other uncanny things that happened in those locations in the past. The supernatural properties of the room which apparently served as Augustus' nursery (*Aug.* 6) provide one example of this phenomenon. Suetonius introduces the room, located in Augustus' grandfather's suburban villa near Velitrae, in a way that highlights the uncertainty surrounding it. The small room is

cannibal. Besides his cruelty, Nero's other notorious quality was a love of spectacles, which can perhaps be related to his exhibition of sea monsters at a *naumachia* (*Nero* 12.1).

⁸⁴ For example, in the long list of portents of Julius Caesar's death, the only one Suetonius feels the need to authenticate is the one he recount at greatest length, the discovery of an ancient bronze tablet in the tomb of Capys that just happens to foreshadow Caesar's death: *ne quis fabulosam aut commenticiam putet, auctor est Cornelius Balbus, familiarissimus Caesaris* (*Jul.* 81.2). Balbus had just been mentioned as a character at *Jul.* 78. The tale probably derives from his memoirs (Butler et al. 1982, 141).

⁸⁵ On the role, see Shuckburgh 1896, 147; Adams 1963, 212; Levi 1970, 96; Carter 1982, 1960.

⁸⁶ The author was from Egypt and wrote a history of that country, leading Wildfang 2000, 47 to suspect that this story was a piece of propaganda that originated in the Eastern part of the empire.

displayed (*ostenditur*) as the nursery, and local tradition holds that Augustus was born there, too (*tenetque vicinitatem opinio tamquam et natus ibi sit*). But Suetonius has just reported that Augustus was actually born on the Palatine in Rome on property later owned by C. Laetorius, citing evidence from the *acta senatus* to uphold his assertion (*Aug.* 5). Secure in the knowledge imparted to us by Suetonius the diligent researcher with archival proof on his side, we might well presume that these locals in Velitrae are trying to profit by spreading the story that Augustus was actually born among them. This perhaps puts us in a sceptical mindset for what follows: Suetonius reports a longstanding belief (*religio... concepta opinione veteri*) that contact with the infant emperor somehow invested the room with a supernatural aura akin to haunting, that invests all who enter the chamber with fear (*horror quidam et metus*). Why should we trust this *vetus opinio*, since Suetonius himself has also demonstrated the other commonly-held *opinio* about the room to be wrong? But Suetonius refuses to let us dismiss the room's supernatural powers out of hand,⁸⁷ and proceeds to anchor these powers in reality by stressing their continuity into the present: *sed et mox confirmata. nam cum possessor villae novus seu forte seu temptandi causa cubitum se eo contulisset, evenit ut post paucissimas noctis horas exturbatus inde subita vi et incerta paene semianimis cum strato simul ante fores inveniretur*. Suetonius' language emphasizes the continuity of this marvellous property of the room into a period closer to his own time, and the possibility that the new owner may have acted specifically for the purpose of testing the room's power (*seu temptandi causa*) underlines the notion of proof and authentication. The fact that the room's special power lasts into Suetonius' present not only proves that the room was specially connected with Augustus, even if his real birthplace was elsewhere, but also helps to authenticate the fact that the uncanny power existed in the first place.

A similar example is provided by Suetonius' report of two dice that preserve the memory of Tiberius' consultation of the oracle of Geryon in Illyria, listed amongst the many signs which predicted that Tiberius would one day be emperor (cf. *Tib.* 14.1 [*spes*] *quam et ostentis et praedictionibus ab inito aetatis conceperat*). Suetonius reports that the oracle, which functioned by lots, ordered Tiberius to throw a pair of golden dice into the spring of Aponus near Padua, and that the emperor in doing so landed the highest possible throw. But instead of asking us to merely take his word for it, the biographer notes that the dice can still be seen to this day (*Tib.* 14.3 *hodieque sub aqua visuntur hi tali*). If the fact that this portent is corroborated by six other uncanny events is not enough to convince the reader that Tiberius' principate was predicted in advance, Suetonius offers tangible, persistent proof. The dice do not merely serve to corroborate the story, but are something of a marvel themselves, since they have remained undisturbed at the bottom of a spring for over a century and are clearly visible to the second-century viewer. Suetonius may have known of these springs because of his firsthand knowledge of the region of northern Italy where the spring is located,⁸⁸ but he is also perhaps concealing some research of a more bookish variety. For Pliny the Elder had discussed the spring, which he calls *Patavini fontes*: unlike some springs with medicinal properties, it does not discolour silver or gold (*HN* 31.61).⁸⁹ As with

⁸⁷ Cf. Adams 1963, 77: 'In Suetonius there is not necessarily any implication that the rumour or belief thus expressed is untrue.' See also Carter 1982, 95.

⁸⁸ So Lindsay 1995, 92.

⁸⁹ Pliny the Elder also mentions that grass grows in the springs (*HN* 2.227), so they seem to be noteworthy for their marvellous nature in general, not just tied to this specific property. The possibility of Plinian influence here is perhaps strengthened by the fact that Suetonius has just reported another omen of Tiberius' future success also treated by Pliny the Elder. Suet. *Tib.* 14.2 describes Livia's ability to incubate a hen's egg with the heat of her hands until it hatches into a rooster; cf. *NH* 10.154. The language of the two passages is very similar, and the details are told in the same order (*Tib.* 14.2 *praegnans eo* ~ *NH* 10.154 *Ti. Caesare ex Nerone gravida*; *Tib.* 14.2 *cum an marem editura esset* ~ *NH* 10.154 *cum parere virilem sexum admodum cuperet*; *Tib.* 14.2 *variis captaret ominibus* ~ *NH* 10.154 *hoc usa est puellari augurio*; *Tib.* 14.2 *ovum incubanti gallinae subductum* ~ *NH* 10.154

Phlegon's invitation to his reader to corroborate the existence of the centaur by going to see its remains themselves, Suetonius offers the reader the possibility of autopsy in case the prediction of Tiberius' future greatness is difficult to believe: the dice corroborate not only Tiberius' throw, but also, indirectly, the instructions of the oracle of Geryon. But the evidence itself is also a rarity worthy of wonder, and carries that uncanniness surrounding the emperor through into the present. Tiberius was viewed as exceptional in his time, but he has also left a marvellous and permanent mark on the landscape.

(b) Chickens and laurels in the *Galba*: Dynastic *mirabilia*

In perhaps one of the richest *mirabilia* in Suetonius' *Caesares*, the biographer describes a strange phenomenon at the beginning of his life of Galba – a phenomenon that had been experienced by Livia some 35 years before Galba's birth and over a century before the civil war that would make him emperor. This unexpected placement of the anecdote allows Suetonius to combine notions of truth and authentication with notions of continuity and discontinuity. If Augustus and Tiberius left traces of portents foretelling their future greatness in the form of *mirabilia* that have survived into Suetonius' own day, what effect can a change of regime, the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, have on such proofs?

Suetonius relates a tale that precedes even Augustus' principate: just after her marriage to Augustus in 38 BC, Livia is en route to her estate at Veii when an eagle drops into her lap a white chicken carrying a laurel branch in its beak (*Galba* 1). Both the laurel shoot and the chicken reproduce vigorously, with the laurel grove providing the branches for the triumphs of subsequent Caesars, until the end of Nero's reign sees the death of laurels and chickens alike. In his description of the event, Suetonius gives several details that seem aimed at authentication. He states at the beginning that there were many signs foretelling the end of the Julio-Claudian line with Nero, but that he is telling us only the two most obvious ones (*compluribus quidem signis, sed vel evidentissimis duobus apparuit*). This implies that Suetonius could have reported other marvellous events, but has chosen these because of their particular clarity;⁹⁰ the implication that Suetonius the careful researcher has already sifted through a mass of irrelevant details to bring us these particular stories is perhaps meant to increase the likelihood that we will believe them. Like Phlegon, Suetonius situates the event in time (*post Augusti statim nuptias*) and place (*Veientanum suum revisenti*) with relative precision. He also seems to be alluding to the testimony of eyewitnesses with his claim that the laurel tree planted by each Caesar from a shoot of his triumphal laurels was seen to wither with his approaching death (*et observatum est sub cuiusque obitum arborem ab ipso institutam elanguisse*). Finally, the name 'Ad Gallinas' that the copious chickens lent to the villa survives into Suetonius' own day (*tanta pullorum suboles provenit, ut hodieque ea uilla 'ad Gallinas' vocetur*). Like Tiberius' dice, the name of the villa provides temporal continuity that brings this unusual occurrence from the past into the present of Suetonius and his readership. Importantly, the villa's name is the only lasting proof, since the laurels and chickens both died out at the end of Nero's reign and are no longer visible to the reader of Suetonius' own day, a point to which I shall return below.

Like the spring preserving Tiberius' dice, this marvel appears to have a Plinian antecedent: the same story is told at *HN* 15.136-7.⁹¹ Interestingly, another chicken omen

ovum; *Tib.* 14.2 *nunc... fovit* ~ *NH* 10.154 *in sinu... tepor*). Typically, Pliny the Elder is interested primarily in the natural-history aspect of the anecdote (it is an example of the practice of artificial incubation), whereas Suetonius is more specific in reporting the anecdote as a prediction of Tiberius' birth.

⁹⁰ Cf. Gugel 1977, 27. Compare Suetonius' selectivity in regard to omens foretelling the death of Claudius: *Cl.* 46 *praesagia mortis eius praecipua fuerunt*. For clarity as an important criterion cf. *Aug.* 97.1 *mors quoque eius... divinitasque post mortem evidentissimis ostentis praecognita est*.

⁹¹ Cf. Shotter 1993, 99.

involving Livia that predicts future greatness (*Tib.* 14.2 – see above, n. 89) also features in the *NH*, perhaps increasing the possibility that Suetonius used Pliny the Elder's *mirabilia* as a source for some of his portents, or that the two were using a common source.⁹² As in that case, here the order in which Suetonius tells the story largely follows the structure of Pliny the Elder's account, again strengthening the impression that Suetonius is writing in reaction to him. Both authors set the scene temporally by describing Livia's relationship to Augustus, and then go on to describe the omen itself with remarkably similar sentence structure⁹³ before noting the persisting name of the villa and the subsequent use of the laurels for Julio-Claudian triumphs. Yet there are important differences in the details of their two accounts. Unlike Suetonius, Pliny the Elder explicitly emphasizes the miraculous nature of the event, highlighting Livia's response to the discovery of the laurel branch in the chicken's beak (*HN* 15.136 *intrepideque miranti accedit miraculum*) and the marvelous nature of the lush laurel woods (*HN* 15.137 *mireque silva ea provenit*). In Suetonius, the anecdote's value as a marvel is noted only indirectly by the extraordinary number of offspring of both the chicken and the laurel, emphasized with result clauses (*Galba* 1 *tanta pullorum suboles provenit, ut... ; tale vero lauretum, ut...*). What really makes the occurrence marvellous for Suetonius is its value as an *evidentissimum omen*, its connection to the principate. Furthermore, Suetonius disagrees with Pliny the Elder on one detail, the timing of the episode: for Suetonius, it occurred just after Livia's marriage to Augustus (*Galba* 1 *post Augusti statim nuptias*), while Pliny the Elder states only that it took place after their betrothal (*HN* 15.136 *cum pacta esset illa Caesari*). Suetonius' dating is more precise, perhaps indicating that, if he did have the *HN* in mind as a source here, he wished to show that his own information about the incident was of a higher quality. Finally, Suetonius notes the importance of the Veientine villa early in his description of the event, whereas Pliny the Elder withholds information about its setting until after describing the appearance of the ominous chicken, and makes less of the continuity of the name 'Ad Gallinas' (*HN* 15.137 *quod factum est in villa Caesarum fluvio Tiberi inposita iuxta nonum lapidem Flaminiae viae, quae ob id vocatur 'ad Gallinas'*; cf. Suetonius' more insistent *tanta pullorum suboles provenit, ut hodieque ea villa 'ad Gallinas' vocetur*, which also links the unusual number of chickens to the name of the villa more directly than in Pliny the Elder's version). Pliny the Elder's previous account of this fantastic incident, then, lurks in the background of Suetonius', confirming its status as a marvellous report of a strange natural phenomenon in the *mirabilia* tradition; yet Suetonius offers important correctives that help to distinguish his own account.

The most important difference, however, is in the way the two authors open and close their accounts of the episode. While Pliny the Elder opens by relating the incident to Augustus (*HN* 15.136 *sunt et circa Divum Augustum eventa eius digna memoratu*), Suetonius keeps the focus on Nero: the chicken omen is introduced as one of the many signs foretelling that Nero would be the last of his dynasty (*Galba* 1 *progenies Caesarum in Nerone defecit*), which is reiterated at the end of the story (*ergo nouissimo Neronis anno et silva omnis exaruit radicitus, et quidquid ibi gallinarum erat interiit*, where *ergo* shows how the entire preceding narrative has been for the express purpose of setting up this piece of information). Furthermore, Pliny the Elder ends on a more positive note: for him, the laurel trees planted by all the Caesars are still alive (*HN* 15.137 *et durant silvae nominibus suis discretae*). In Suetonius, by contrast, not only does each *princeps'* tree wither with his approaching death,

⁹² Flory 1989, 343 n. 3 suggests that the two chicken omens are 'perhaps related,' but does not speculate about the nature of that relationship.

⁹³ In both, although Livia is in fact the subject of the anecdote, she is grammatically represented in the dative (both times with a present participle), while the eagle itself is nominative. Pliny *NH* 15.136: *Liviae Drusillae ... gallinam conspicui candoris sedenti aquila ex alto abiicit in gremium inlaesam*; cf. Suet. *Galba* 1: *Liviae ... Veientanum suum revisenti praetervolans aquila gallinam albam ... demisit in gremium*.

but *all* of the trees die in Nero's last year as emperor.⁹⁴ For Suetonius, then, the physical traces of the marvellous omen itself have all passed away; the only way it can be authenticated is via the survival of 'Ad Gallinas' as the name of the villa, and by the eyewitness testimony for the withering of the trees preserved by Suetonius (*observatum est*).

This crucial difference between Pliny the Elder and Suetonius is linked to a further question: why would Suetonius choose to report this omen here, in his account of Galba's reign, and not relate it to Augustus, as Pliny the Elder does, or even place it in Nero's reign, in which the trees and chickens are supposed to have died? T.J. Power has observed that this first chapter of Suetonius' *Galba* functions as a prologue to the whole of book 7 of the *Caesares*, comprising the lives of Otho, Galba, and Vitellius. This is corroborated by a return to chicken omens in the very last chapter of *Vitellius*: in accordance with a prophecy that Vitellius would ultimately be undone by a man from Gaul (*Vit. 18 uenturum in alicuius Gallicani hominis potestatem*), he is slain by a man from Toulouse who had once been known as Becco, meaning 'rooster's beak' (*id ualet gallinacei rostrum*), playing on the double meaning of *g/Gallus* but also linking directly with the laurel-bearing beak of Livia's chicken (*Galba 1 gallam... ramulum lauri rostro tenentem*). Suetonius is thus 'framing the whole of Book 7 through the Caesars' laurel grove.'⁹⁵ The emphasis throughout is on a lack of hereditary continuity, both from the Julio-Claudians to Galba,⁹⁶ and also from Galba to Otho to Vitellius to Vespasian. This is an important distinction between Suetonius and Pliny the Elder, according to whom the laurels have not yet withered and the chickens are still alive.

Given this chicken-link joining Galba and Vitellius, I suggest that Suetonius' placement of the chicken omen also allows him to emphasize the discontinuity that comes with the arrival of a new imperial house. When Suetonius uses the chicken omen for Galba, not Nero, he emphasizes disjuncture: this marvellous event signaled the start of a dynasty, and that dynasty has ended so fully that nearly all proof that the omen ever happened at all has withered away and died, leaving only the name of the villa as testimony. This may be related to Suetonius' distance not only from the Julio-Claudians and the civil war of AD 69, but also from the Flavian dynasty that succeeded it, allowing him to draw parallels between Nero and Domitian.⁹⁷ Unlike Pliny the Elder, Suetonius had the position of hindsight necessary to make that connection. In addition, the emphasis on discontinuity may speak directly to the problem how someone like Galba – or perhaps, closer to Suetonius' present day, like Nerva and his successors – responds to the problem of figuring out how to be the successor to a dynasty that ended cataclysmically. Thus the shadow of Domitian falls across Suetonius' depiction of *mirabilia* and their authentication. The marvels of the previous era are themselves gone, but they still leave some evidentiary traces for a Hadrianic biographer to find.

V. CONCLUSIONS

I would like now to draw together the common threads running through the selection of authors and genres that I have examined here, and make a few preliminary suggestions

⁹⁴ Flory 1989, 345 n. 7 cites this as a problem in Suetonius' account: 'The myth is hardly consistent since a great grove still remained at Nero's death even though the bushes identified with the previous emperors had presumably died.' Yet *elanguescere* does not necessarily imply the death of the object in question, but merely its weakening: cf. *OLD* s.v. *elanguesco*: 'to begin to lose one's physical, mental, or moral vigour, droop, flag, languish, etc.' (emphasis mine); *TLL* 5.2.322.30 *i. q. languidum fieri, remitti, decrescere sim*.

⁹⁵ Power 2009, 218–9.

⁹⁶ Cf. Flory 1989, 347, 'emphasizing the . . . impact of the end of Augustus' line on the Romans'; Power 2009, 218.

⁹⁷ Wilson 2003, 531–2.

about what we can conclude from these commonalities. I hope I have demonstrated that not only Phlegon, writing in an established 'genre' of paradoxography, but also the more 'mainstream' authors Pliny the Younger, Tacitus, and Suetonius have an interest in reporting *mirabilia* – the uncanny, unexpected, or astonishing in both the natural world and the realm of the supernatural. Furthermore, while often *mirabilia* are simply reported straightforwardly as facts to be accepted by the reader, sometimes these authors use a variety of strategies to give them an extra flavour of authenticity, as if the reader needed to be convinced that they are real. Sometimes this takes the form of source citation, but even more interesting are the cases where an author uses other strategies. On some occasions eyewitness testimony can be appealed to, and the identity and credibility of the eyewitnesses explored, as in the case of Tacitus' report of Vespasian's healings. More often, the identity of the witnesses is left in shadow. Sometimes the author himself can serve as an eyewitness, as with Pliny's description of miraculous lakes and springs. And in still other cases, no direct testimony is cited, and the author provides precise details of time or place to anchor an event in familiar reality, while leaving the original source of his information in shadow.

One noteworthy trend is our authors' attempts to involve the reader directly in the process of authenticating the marvels they report. In Phlegon, we saw this in the paradoxographer's invitation to sceptical readers to inspect the remains of centaurs or giants for themselves. This strategy not only authenticates his reports by mentioning physical remains that confirm Phlegon's accounts, but also acknowledges the difficulty a reader might have in believing what he says. Something similar may be at play in Suetonius' choosing to authenticate *mirabilia* from the Julio-Claudian past by means of evidence that Hadrianic readers can still find or experience for themselves (Tiberius' dice, Augustus' haunted nursery, the villa still called '*Ad Gallinas*'). For Pliny, it is the epistolary form that invites dialogue about *mirabilia*: only Sura's participation in the conversation will help him explain the mysterious spring (4.30.11) or settle once and for all the question of whether *phantasmata* are real (7.27.15-16). For these authors, *mirabilia* cannot merely be straightforwardly reported with an expectation of belief, as they were in earlier paradoxographers, nor is it enough just to cite literary sources. The authentication of *mirabilia* requires a degree of consensus.

This is a trend that cuts across the different genres in which these authors write, and it indicates a spirit of enquiry and dialogue strikingly common to them all. Where this common impulse comes from is harder to judge. It may be a reaction against the way earlier examples of the paradoxographical 'genre' tended to rely on books and citations of previous authorities rather than firsthand 'field experience.' Not only do these authors claim to have seen these marvels for themselves,⁹⁸ but they are also confident about the validity of their stories because the experience of autopsy can be repeated by the reader due to the survival of a particular marvelous object. Another possibility is that Phlegon, Pliny, and Suetonius are reacting to the legacy of the more mainstream genre of historiography, traditionally concerned with truth and validity, which from its beginnings had a propensity to report marvels. (Indeed, the passages from Tacitus we have examined provide one example of this, and his report of the discussions surrounding the appearance of the phoenix perhaps shows an awareness of the need for consensus when dealing with the implausible.) It could be that Phlegon, Pliny, and Suetonius, when they try to involve the reader directly in the process of authentication, are playing a riff on historiography's concern with authentication, as well as nodding to the genre's strong tendency to privilege eyewitness testimony.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ This is of course not a phenomenon that only emerged in the era of Trajan and Hadrian: insofar as we can tell, Mucianus seems to have made some use of autopsy in his work (Williamson 2005, 221; Ash 2007a, 6–7).

⁹⁹ Marincola 1997, 82 notes that in the ancient historiographical tradition claims of first-person autopsy were particularly important 'as a voucher for a marvel or wonder.'

My example texts show how *mirabilia* can be used to prompt reflections on truth, and on the problems that will always surround the process of authentication. But what makes these authors' approach to *mirabilia* particularly characteristic of the Trajanic and Hadrianic period in which they write? Two aspects seem the most important: how Pliny, Tacitus, and Suetonius respond to the large *mirabilia* legacy of Pliny the Elder, and how they respond to the crisis in the principate following the cataclysmic reign of Domitian.¹⁰⁰

Pliny the Elder's vast work of natural history seems to have cast a long shadow over subsequent writers, and Pliny, Tacitus, and Suetonius are no exceptions. All three report *mirabilia* that Pliny the Elder had also treated, yet none acknowledges the *Naturalis Historia* as a source. Even Phlegon may show the imprint of Pliny the Elder's work: as I have said, his story of the centaur may owe a debt to Claudius' centaur in the *HN* (see above, n. 32), but an even more striking similarity is both authors' interest in human oddities like hermaphrodites and (in the *Περὶ μακροβίων*) extremely long life spans, prominent in *HN* book 7.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, Pliny the Younger, Tacitus, and Suetonius all implicitly seem to be re-evaluating the Elder's presentation of the material, and in particular his attitude to truth, source material, and authentication. For Suetonius, the omen of the chickens and the laurels that appears to Livia is more than a natural curiosity to be reported in a book on trees; the event can only achieve its full believability and significance when it is considered against the background of its place in the entirety of not just Julio-Claudian, but also post-Julio-Claudian history. Tacitus, too, treads ground already trodden by Pliny the Elder. The latter had cited the textual authority of Cornelius Valerianus as evidence for the phoenix in Tiberius' reign (*HN* 10.5), yet Tacitus changes the year of its appearance and gives us absolutely no external evidence, merely asserting it *in propria persona*. Similarly, Claudius' phony phoenix, for which Pliny the Elder could cite the *acta* by way of authentication, is not even mentioned by Tacitus. Even the most careful reading and collation of sources might not produce the best account of events; Tacitus constructs an authorial persona on which the reader can rely to give the best account of the past in all its peculiarities, whether or not he cites his sources. Pliny the Younger confronts his uncle even more directly. His description of the marvelous water features in *Ep.* 4.30 and 8.20 draws on examples that had been treated in the *Naturalis Historia*, yet the nephew's overt emphasis on visuality and his own personal autopsy seems directly opposed to his uncle's brief, unauthenticated mentions of the river and spring. While Pliny does not mention his uncle directly in these letters, his presence surely lurks in the background; what the letters offer is a more visually-oriented, and therefore more authentic and easier to conceptualize, snapshot of the *mirabilia* that a reader could not gain from the short descriptions in the *Naturalis Historia*.

For all these authors, Pliny the Elder's massive work was apparently unavoidable if they wanted to discuss wondrous phenomena in the natural world; yet despite the monumental nature of the *Naturalis Historia*, each author finds a way to carve out his own niche as a somehow better or more truthful reporter of *mirabilia*. This common interest in Pliny the Elder suggests that Pliny the Younger, Tacitus, Suetonius, and indeed Phlegon are not interested in *mirabilia* merely because they were traditionally appropriate to the genres in which they wrote, or because they were plugging into an interest in wonders drawn from

¹⁰⁰ Phlegon's work, while it bears the unmistakable imprint of its imperial context (the relationship between emperors and marvels) and refer to dates in the extremely recent Trajanic past (*Mir.* 9, 25, 29), thematically speaking has a timeless, apolitical quality: the marvels he reports are interesting in and of themselves, not via their relationships to contemporary or previous literature or political situations.

¹⁰¹ On longevity see Hansen 1996, 18–20 (who rightly notes that Aristotle's *Περὶ μακροβιότητος καὶ βραχυβιότητος* is also a potential antecedent of Phlegon's text), and compare Pliny *HN* 7.153–64 (with Beagon 2005, 357–8). Not only does an interest in hermaphrodites link the two authors, but they validate them in the same way, by claiming to have seen a sex-changer themselves (Pliny *HN* 7.36, Phlegon *Mir.* 9; see Hansen 1996, 120; Beagon 2005, 176–7).

historiography. Pliny the Elder's great work, 'extensive, learned, and no less full of variety than nature itself' (Pliny *Ep.* 3.5.6), teeming as it was with paradoxographical elements, may have helped bring material of paradoxographical interest closer to the 'mainstream' (perhaps particularly through the reception of his text by his nephew),¹⁰² and perhaps required engagement on the part of any later writer who sought to describe wonders, whether he was doing so in the generic context of history, biography, a collection of letters, or paradoxography.

In addition to living in a post-Plinian world, Pliny the Younger, Tacitus, and Suetonius also live in a post-Flavian world, and that too casts a shadow over the way they deploy and authenticate *mirabilia*. This is particularly true in Pliny's descriptions of supernatural visions: whether or not *phantasmata* are real is directly related to his own survival of Domitian's reign of terror. Though 7.27 may leave some uncertainties in terms of proof and credibility, the last dream, related explicitly to Pliny's relationship to Domitian, gains further authentication when placed within a larger narrative of his career assembled from other visions elsewhere in the *Epistulae*. The fact that Pliny probably did not suffer as much under Domitian as he would have us believe¹⁰³ makes the question of authentication all the more important: if the reality of remarkable *phantasmata* were to be impugned, so would Pliny's credibility as an intellectual who survived the reign of terror. For Tacitus, on the other hand, temporal distance from Flavian Rome is the best guarantor of truth for *mirabilia*. So many years after Bedriacum, he can offer an impartial assessment of the *incolae*'s reports of Otho's bird, and conclude that, while perhaps *fabulosa*, they are not entirely false. Similarly, the witnesses to Vespasian's healings have no more to gain by lying now that the Flavian dynasty has died out, and this is the only thing that can prove their outlandish reports to be true. Suetonius offers a picture of a world where the Julio-Claudians and their marvellous omens are a distant memory, preserved today only in traces – citations in books, the name of a villa, the numinous quality of a room, a pair of dice preserved underwater. But these implausible things, perhaps counterintuitively, seem all the more real *because* they are so old, because of the perspective offered by hindsight. Livia's wondrous chicken seems more credible to readers who have watched the course of history encompassing not only the Julio-Claudians' rise, triumphs, and catastrophic end, but also the similar arc of the subsequent Flavian dynasty. Thus for these three authors, *mirabilia*, and particularly the question of whether they are true, form an important part of their conception of their own immediate past.

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¹⁰² Cf. Doody 2010, 2 on the importance of the Younger for later reception of the Elder. On the relationship between the Plinies, see recently Gibson 2011.

¹⁰³ Cf. Syme *RP* 7.564-5 on the Comum inscription as evidence for Pliny's tenure as the prefect of the *aerarium militare* under Domitian; cf. Gibson and Morello 2012.

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