

In my previous post I talked about my scholarly book on forgery ([Forgery and Counterforgery](#)) and gave some of the opening paragraphs of the Introduction. Here I'll give the very first part of the first chapter. I wanted to start out on a light and humorous note, even though I was writing at a scholarly level. And so I began with an amusing anecdote from the annals of ancient forgery, a case where a forger was intentionally deceived by someone else's forgery, to his deep chagrin.

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Heraclides Ponticus was one of the great literati of the classical age. As a young man from aristocratic roots he left his native Pontus to study philosophy in Athens under Plato, Speusippus, and eventually, while he was still in the Academy, Aristotle. During one of Plato's absences, Heraclides was temporarily put in charge of the school; after the death of Speucippus he was nearly appointed permanent head. His writings spanned a remarkable range, from ethics to dialectics to geometry to physics to astronomy to music to history to literary criticism. Diogenes Laertius lists over sixty books in all. Ten others are known from other sources. Few texts remain, almost entirely in fragments.

Diogenes is our principal source of information outside the primary texts. As is his occasional wont, he betrays much greater interest in regaling readers with amusing anecdotes than in describing Heraclides' contributions to the intellectual world of his day. And so we are told that Heraclides's penchant for fine clothing and good food, which produced a noticeably corpulent figure, earning for him the epithet Heraclides Pompicus.

Of particular interest to Diogenes are instances in which Heraclides was involved in conscious deception. At one point, Heraclides had fallen desperately, even, he thought, mortally ill. Concerned for his post-mortem reputation, he entrusted a family servant with the ploy. Feigning his death, he arranged for his pet snake to be placed, instead of his (not yet deceased) corpse, under the cover of the funeral bier; at the internment, those attending his funeral would take the appearance of the sacred snake as a sign that Heraclides had been bodily assumed into the realm of the gods. The plot failed, as it turns out; the snake prematurely slithered out from cover during the funeral procession, and it was immediately recognized that the entire proceeding had been a ruse. Heraclides was discovered, and, in the event, he was destined to live on, with more deceits in store.

This near-death experience is paired, by Diogenes, with an episode that did end Heraclides's life. When the region of Heraclea was suffering a famine, its citizens sent to the priestess at the oracle of Pythia to learn what they were to do in order to regain divine favor. Heraclides bribed the envoys and the oracular priestess herself to publish a fake prophecy: the Heracleans' plight would be resolved when they installed Heraclides as royalty with a golden crown, and vowed to bestow upon him honors worthy of a hero at his death. The citizens took the fabricated oracle to heart, but the falsity of the envoys and priestess were soon uncovered: when Heraclides was crowned as directed in the theater he was struck by a fit of apoplexy and died, thwarted in his desire for posthumous honors. The envoys were stoned to death, and the priestess was later dispatched by a poisonous snake at her shrine.

Even at the height of his career, the Diogenic Heraclides was involved in scandal. His literary treatise dealing with Homer and Hesiod was shown to be a bald plagiarism. And he committed forgery, according to the musician Aristoxenus, who claimed that Heraclides composed tragic plays in the name of Thespis. Richard Bentley was the first to argue that the few surviving fragments of Thespis are in fact Heraclidean inventions.

What Heraclides is best known for, however, is an instance of deceit in which he was the victim rather than the culprit. This involves arguably the most famous instance of mischievous forgery in the history of the practice, Heraclides's deception at the hands of his former student Dionysius (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, 5.92-93).

Dionysius Spintharos ("the Spark") earned the epithet *Metathemenos*, the Renegade, in his old age, after a severe illness effectively disabused him of his life-long Stoic view that pain, which is morally neutral, cannot therefore be considered evil. According to Diogenes, earlier in life Dionysius played a trick on his former teacher, by forging a play called the "Parthenopaeus" in the name of Sophocles. In one of his works of literary criticism, Heraclides drew on the play, citing it as authentically Sophoclean. But Dionysius then informed him that in fact the play was a forgery, perpetrated by none other than himself. Heraclides refused to believe it, and so Dionysius brought forth evidence: at the opening of the play, the first letters in a group of lines formed an acrostic, "Pankalus," the name of Dionysius's own lover.

Heraclides insisted that the matter was a coincidence, until Dionysius brought forth two additional and yet more convincing proofs. The first was a subsequent acrostic that said, "An old monkey is not captured by a trap; yes, it is captured, but it is captured after some time." The final acrostic was irrefutable: Ἡρακλείδης γράμματα οὐκ ἐπίσταται οὐδ' ἡσχύνθη (Heraclides does not know letters, and is not ashamed.)

Diogenes's passage has generated some scholarly discussion. In his edition of the fragments of the philosophers of the Aristotelian school, F. Wehrli gives reasons to think that it was not the Partheopaeus that was fabricated, but Diogenes' anecdote itself. The story may be humorous and clever, but for the acrostics to have worked, Wehrli argues, Dionysius would have had to be relatively certain that Heraclides in particular would be deceived and make a public display of his ignorance.

Wehrli makes a strong point but perhaps is not completely suasive. Two of the three acrostics have no explicit connection to Heraclides; the other could just as easily have been placed in the text to satisfy Dionysius's rather scandalous sense of humor. If so, Heraclides just happened to step into a trap particularly suited for his corpulent frame.

In any event, this is not the only instance of roguish forgery from the ancient world designed to bamboozle an intellectual opponent. Galen indicates that Lucian decided to ridicule a much beloved, but unnamed, philosopher whom he considered a braggart, and did so by penning an obscure and senseless philosophical treatise in the name of Heraclides. He had it presented to his enemy for an interpretation. When he complied, Lucian turned the tables, mocking him for being unable to see through the swindle.

More to my purpose here, however, is the pure irony of Diogenes's own Heraclides. In a game of intellectual boomerang, the one who is guilty of swindles, lies, plagiarism, and forgery - in a word, deceit - is himself a victim of deceit. The deceiver is deceived.

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