

## I

BEGINNING WITH *THAUMA*

ἦ θαύματα πολλά

Yes, truly, marvels are many . . .

Pindar, *Olympian* 1.28

μάλα γὰρ φιλοσόφου τοῦτο τὸ πάθος, τὸ θαυμάζειν· οὐ γὰρ ἄλλη ἀρχὴ φιλοσοφίας ἢ αὕτη.

This experience – wondering – is very much characteristic of the philosopher. There's no other beginning to philosophy than this.

Plato, *Theaetetus* 155d

διὰ γὰρ τὸ θαυμάζειν οἱ ἄνθρωποι καὶ νῦν καὶ τὸ πρῶτον ἤρξαντο φιλοσοφεῖν, ἐξ ἀρχῆς μὲν τὰ πρόχειρα τῶν ἀτόπων θαυμάσαντες, εἶτα κατὰ μικρὸν οὕτω προϊόντες καὶ περὶ τῶν μειζόνων διαπορήσαντες.

Through wonder men now begin, and once first began, to philosophise: from the beginning they have wondered at strange things which were near at hand, and then progressed forward step-by-step in this way, raising questions about greater matters.<sup>1</sup>

Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 982b12–15

For both Plato and Aristotle, the value and place of wonder (*thauma*) is clear. *Thauma* comes first: without wonder, philosophical inquiry would not even begin to get off the ground. As the crucial spark that first stokes and then continually provokes intellectual curiosity, the importance of *thauma* in both philosophers' conception of what philosophy is and does should not be underestimated. But it was not in the realm of philosophy alone that wonder occupied a significant conceptual place by the time Plato and Aristotle were writing. As Pindar's famous, gnomic observation about the inherent multiplicity of marvels cited above suggests, conceptions of and responses to wonder and wonders in antiquity were both multiform and multivalent. In the same spirit,

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this book all translations are my own.

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this book does not seek to impose singular, monolithic definitions of what wonder is and what it does in Greek literature and culture but instead endeavours to begin to open up the subject of ancient wonder as a more comprehensive and coherent field of inquiry in the modern world for the first time. Its main aim is twofold: to put *thauma* on the critical map and to demonstrate that wonder and the marvellous are concepts which we can – and should – take much fuller account of when considering Greek culture more broadly.

The Greeks are already engaged with the marvellous from the very beginning of their literary tradition. Homer presents a world full of visual marvels linked to the divine, from the Shield of Achilles to epiphanic appearances of the gods themselves before mortals. Already in the Homeric poems, the marvellous is linked to transgression of the boundaries that separate the human and divine realms, and also the natural and the artificial. Over time, certain continuities, complexities and differences in the treatment of and responses to wonder and the marvellous in the Greek world begin to emerge. For example, *thauma* becomes a paradigmatic response to visual art, music and poetry in the Greek world. It expresses the manner in which the realms of the human and divine interrelate with one another. It begins to occupy a central position in concepts of what philosophy and literature are and what they do. It evolves into a central concept in the articulation of relationships between self and other, near and far, familiar and unfamiliar. In the subsequent chapters of this book, these issues and many more will be explored. In the process, texts from a range of literary genres, such as early Greek hexameter poetry, tragedy, comedy, historiography, epigrams, philosophy and Hellenistic paradoxographical collections, will be examined, interrogated and juxtaposed to demonstrate that far from being a tangential concern of the Greek literary tradition, wonder and wonders constitute a constant and central theme in Greek culture.

Beginning with the terms the Greeks themselves most often used to describe and refer to the experience of wonder is one obvious starting point for any investigation seeking to build a firmer view of what wonder is and what it does in ancient Greek culture. By far the most important textual signpost pointing towards the Greek experience of wonder is the use of some form of either the noun *thauma* or the verb *thaumazein*, or one of their

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various cognates. One of the chief difficulties in studying Greek concepts of wonder springs from the inherent slipperiness of the noun *thauma*, which can refer both to objects which cause wonder and astonishment (cf. the use of ‘a wonder’ or ‘a marvel’ in English), as well as to a more general and often abstract feeling of wonder, surprise or astonishment.<sup>2</sup> A few examples picked at random make this particular distinction clear: in the *Iliad*, Achilles describes his old armour, an object which Hector has now stripped from Patroclus’ dead body, as ‘a marvel to see’ (θαῦμα ἰδέσθαι, *Il.* 18.83), while later in book 18 his famous new shield, an even more impressive object, is made into ‘a marvel’ (*thauma*) when Hephaestus’ wondrous artistic power makes the glittering depiction of a field upon its surface realistically appear as though it has been freshly ploughed.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to these uses of *thauma* as a concrete noun, the *Odyssey* provides us with a good example of its potentially more abstract use as a noun denoting a general feeling of astonishment or wonder. In book 10, Circe is ‘held by *thauma*’ when she notices that Odysseus is completely and unexpectedly impervious to her powerful drugs – a surprising and unprecedented incident which has never occurred before.<sup>4</sup> As these examples suggest, one of the most striking aspects of objects which are labelled as ‘marvels’ (*thaumata*), or of phenomena which inspire a more general sense of wonder, at least in Archaic poetry, is their visual appearance. This is unsurprising as it is highly likely that the word *thauma* and its cognates are derived from the verb *theasthai* – ‘to see, gaze at, behold’.<sup>5</sup>

The appearance of *thauma* in reference to this kind of feeling is paralleled by the use of another term which is often applied to the

<sup>2</sup> Greenblatt (1991) 22 designates the double aspect of wonder as both a thing and a feeling as an integral part of its effect; cf. Neer (2010) 67 on the doubleness of *thauma*: ‘in Greek as in English, one wonders at wonders. The word itself shuttles between “here” and “there”’; see also Neer and Kurke (2019) 60–1.

<sup>3</sup> *Il.* 18.548–9: ἡ δὲ μελαίνετ’ ὄπισθεν, ἀρηρομένη δὲ ἑώκει, | χρυσεῖη περ ἑοῦσα τὸ δὴ περὶ θαῦμα τέτυκτο.

<sup>4</sup> *Od.* 10.326: θαῦμά μ’ ἔχει ὡς οὐ τι πῶν τόδε φάρμακ’ ἐθέλχθης.

<sup>5</sup> See Prier (1989) 82. Beekes (2010) 535 is more tentative and suggests that it is possible, though not certain, that *thauma* is a sort of verbal noun related to *theasthai*. In antiquity itself *thauma* was already etymologically derived from *th-* root words denoting vision, seeing and sight: see *Etym. Magn.* 443.37–48.

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effect of the marvellous: the noun *ekplexis* and its associated verbal form, *ekplessein*. Words from this root usually refer to a more extreme sense of wonder than *thauma* – something which Aristotle picks up on in his *Topica* when he explicitly defines *ekplexis* as an ‘excess’ of *thauma*.<sup>6</sup> This intensification of *thauma* can often spill over into a feeling of astonishment so strong that it causes both a cognitive and a somatic reaction. Rather than provoking curiosity, thought and inquiry, this type of wonder potentially leads to a stultifying mental and physical stasis – something that is hinted at by some of the more literal meanings of the verb *ekplessein*: ‘to strike out, drive away, expel from [i.e. the senses]’. Once again, a few examples help to make these specific nuances of *ekplexis* clearer. In Euripides’ *Helen*, for instance, the stultifying physical and mental effect of ekplektic wonder becomes apparent when Menelaus – who has been misled by a phantom of his wife Helen and has not yet realised that his real wife was in Egypt all along – finally recognises the authentic Helen and exclaims: ‘you have rendered me speechless with astonishment!’ (ἐκπληξιν ἡμῖν ἀφασίαν τε προστίθης, 549). Dumbstruck silence is also the response which the famous Sicilian sophist and rhetorician Gorgias associates with this type of wonder, as we see in one of his speeches when he notes that ‘*ekplexis* leads to being at a loss for speech by necessity’ (διὰ δὲ τὴν ἐκπληξιν ἀπορεῖν ἀνάγκη τῷ λόγῳ, *Palamedes* 4).<sup>7</sup> The potential of excessive ekplektic wonder to cause a sort of cognitive and somatic stasis which renders thought and speech impossible is something Plato emphasises as well in his *Euthydemus*, a work which strongly and repeatedly associates the potentially stultifying effects of too much *thauma* with Socrates’ two main interlocutors in the dialogue, the sophistic brothers Euthydemus and Dionysodorus. The astonishing and stultifying effect of the two sophists’ frequent and often absurd

<sup>6</sup> Arist. *Top.* 126b17–24: δοκεῖ γὰρ ἡ ἐκπληξίς θαυμασιότης εἶναι ὑπερβάλλουσα ... ἢ ἐκπληξίς ὑπερβολὴ ἐστι θαυμασιότητος.

<sup>7</sup> On Gorgias and *ekplexis*, see O’Sullivan (1992) 21. *Ekplexis* is one of the chief responses with which Gorgias’ own complex and beguiling rhetoric is associated in later testimonia relating to the impact of his speeches on their audiences: see, e.g., the report of Diodorus Siculus (12.53.3) that Gorgias ‘astonished the Athenians with the strangeness of his language’ (τῷ ξενίζοντι τῆς λέξεως ἐξέπληξε τοὺς Ἀθηναίους ὄντας εὐφρεῖς καὶ φιλόλογους) on a visit to Athens in 427 BCE.

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eristic arguments is succinctly summed up by the divergent responses of their habitual followers and those, like Socrates and his friends, who have not yet witnessed the brothers' wondrous sophistic performances. When treated to a particularly stunning argumentative display, the former group, who were already very familiar with the brothers' linguistic tricks, 'laughed long and hard and cheered, admiring (ἀγασθέντες) the wisdom of the pair', while Socrates and his friends 'were astonished and stayed silent' (ἡμεῖς ἐκπεπληγμένοι ἐσιωπῶμεν, *Euthydemus* 276d). The contrast between the raucous laughter of the sophists' friends, who are filled with a reverential and admiring sense of wonder at the brothers' cleverness (denoted by the use of a form of the verb *agasthai* – 'to wonder at, admire'), and the dumbstruck astonishment of those unfamiliar with the spectacle before them points to the potential danger of falling prey to an ekplektic sense of wonder while engaging in philosophy, since in this case no further argument or inquiry is possible in the aftermath of the astonishing sophistic display. Unlike *thauma*, which has the potential to provoke curiosity, inquiry and dialogue, *ekplexis* thus has the potential to cause a debilitating mental, emotional and physical stasis.

Of course, *thauma* and *ekplexis* are not the only lexical terms which may explicitly signpost us towards wonder. Others, such as *thambos* and *agasthai*, will appear frequently in this study – though *thauma* in particular does seem to be the most powerful and frequent indicator of wondrous experiences. Nor is it the case that any of these terms absolutely needs to be present to denote the presence of wondrous experience in Greek literature. But as a starting point for inquiry it is useful (and necessary) to examine the presence and meanings of *thauma* as a means of initially mapping out the varied range and spectrum of responses to wonder and the marvellous which occur over time in Greek culture and to help avoid the risk of imposing anachronistic modern definitions and assumptions about the range and meaning of the marvellous onto the ancient material. This lexical approach is, however, only a starting point. This study does not depend on the appearance of particular words in any single case, though it has often proven useful and productive to begin with an examination of the use of

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certain terms across a given work, in order to establish how the construction of thought and theme works in those texts as a whole.

The approach taken here also builds upon the limited amount of work on *thauma* in Greek culture which has appeared to date.<sup>8</sup> Among recent studies, Richard Neer's work on the place of *thauma* as an important aesthetic term in relation to Classical sculpture provides a particularly important model for my own study.<sup>9</sup> For the first time, Neer examines the significance of the creation and evocation of wonder in relation to the visual arts and concludes that as a term relating to aesthetic response in the Greek world 'the importance of wonder can hardly be overstated' and that '[t]hauma is, in fact, a basic and hugely neglected element of Greek thinking about depiction'.<sup>10</sup> In his introduction, Neer even writes that his own conclusions about the importance of *thauma* suggest that '[w]e need to make the Classical strange again, uncanny; we need to restore its wonder'.<sup>11</sup> This invocation to 'restore the wonder' of the Classical period is something my own study wholeheartedly attempts to achieve, especially since Neer's work on the place of *thauma* in Greek thinking of depiction needs to be extended to Greek ideas about all sorts of literary, visual and cultural representation.

This study also builds upon work outside of the field of Classics, where the concept of wonder has assumed an increasingly

<sup>8</sup> The few studies on wonder in Greek literature which do exist tend to focus on particular authors, works or genres: see, e.g., Nenci (1957/8), Prier (1989), Hunzinger (1993) and (2018), and Fisher (1995) on wonder in Homer and early Greek hexameter poetry; Jouanna (1992) 223–36, Kazantzidis (2019) 1–40 and Lightfoot (2019a) 163–82 on *thauma* in Greek medical writings; Barth (1968), Hunzinger (1995) and Munson (2001) 232–65 on Herodotus; Kurke (2013) 123–70 on Plato; Pajón Leyra (2011) on Greek paradoxographical collections. Two exceptions to the general tendency to focus on single authors or genres are Mette (1960), a brief study of the use of *thauma*-words from Homer to the Classical period, and Hunzinger (2015), an excellent study which begins to outline the importance of *thauma* in aesthetic terms. Three recent edited volumes, Bianchi and Thévenaz (2004), Hardie (2009) and Gerolemou (2018), have also contributed a range of papers which touch on wonder in antiquity to varying degrees: the first examines *mirabilia* in various texts, genres and periods; the second concentrates on paradox and the marvellous in Augustan literature and culture; the third examines miracles in various texts in antiquity and beyond. For an overview of the importance of marvels and the 'wonder-culture' of the Roman empire in the Imperial period, see ní Mheallaigh (2014) 261–77.

<sup>9</sup> Neer (2010), especially the introduction and chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>10</sup> Neer (2010) 57.

<sup>11</sup> Neer (2010) 2.

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significant place in critical theory and cultural history over the last few decades.<sup>12</sup> In recent years New Historicist critics have shown a special interest in the nature and function of wonder and the marvellous in relation to literature and culture. In particular, Stephen Greenblatt, the founder of New Historicism, has picked up on the potential of wonder as a useful theoretical concept which is able to mediate between inside and outside, subjects and objects, and texts and contexts in the practice of cultural poetics.<sup>13</sup> In his 1990 article, ‘Resonance and Wonder’, Greenblatt places wonder at the very heart of his own critical approach, stating that rather than necessarily seeking to approach works of art ‘in a spirit of veneration’ (as he perceives some Formalist critics to do), he seeks rather to approach them ‘in a spirit that is best described as wonder’.<sup>14</sup> The importance of approaching texts with a marvelling eye is reinforced when Greenblatt ends his article by affirming the place of wonder in the practice of New Historicism as a whole, declaring that ‘it is the function of new historicism continually to renew the marvelous at the heart of the resonant’.<sup>15</sup> Greenblatt’s theoretical approach to wonder is of great importance to my own study, not only because it provides a new way of thinking about the interactions between wonder and the effect of literature, but also because his work on wonder as

<sup>12</sup> For this study the following works have been particularly influential: Greenblatt (1991), Daston and Park (1998), Campbell (1999), and the collected papers in Evans and Marr (2006) on wonder from the Early Modern period onwards; Bishop (1996) and Platt (1997) on wonder in Shakespeare; Kareem (2014) on eighteenth-century fiction and wonder; Kenny (1998), (2004) and (2006) on the concept of curiosity in the Early Modern period. Todorov (1970), which includes a theoretical discussion of the nature, form and definition of the marvellous in relation to the fantastic as a broader genre, has also influenced my thinking, particularly in the way he examines the notion of the marvellous in relation to the uncanny (*Unheimlich*), a concept which itself inherently places the relationship between the familiar and the unfamiliar under the spotlight.

<sup>13</sup> Greenblatt (1991) 16: ‘Someone witnesses something amazing, but what most matters takes place not “out there” or along the receptive surfaces of the body where the self encounters the world, but deep within, at the vital, emotional center of the witness’. Cf. Greenblatt (1991) 22: ‘For the early voyagers, wonder not only marked the new but mediated between outside and inside’. Cf. Neer (2010) 68 on *thauma*: ‘to wonder, in Greek is to be poised between two possible modes of existence, to shimmer between what we might be tempted to call subject and object’, cf. Neer and Kurke (2019) 60; see also Hunzinger (2018) 263–4 on *thauma* as an ‘in-between’ state.

<sup>14</sup> Greenblatt (1990) 19.

<sup>15</sup> Greenblatt (1990) 34. On the importance of wonder to the aims and practice of New Historicism and on how shifting the objects which we think of as marvels provokes radically different interpretations, see Gallagher and Greenblatt (2000) 9, 12.

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a theoretical concept bears a complicated relation to the concept of wonder in antiquity which has not thoroughly been probed before. The year after the publication of ‘Resonance and Wonder’, Greenblatt returned to the place of wonder in both New Historicism and Western culture in his 1991 monograph *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*. In this work, he focuses on the integral place of the marvellous in European responses to the New World, exploring how and why ‘[w]onder is . . . the decisive emotional and intellectual experience in the presence of radical difference’.<sup>16</sup> The influence of textual accounts of marvels from antiquity over later European responses to people and cultures perceived as radically other is drawn out at several points in Greenblatt’s study.<sup>17</sup> In particular, Herodotus’ *Histories* is named as the key text which ‘had instituted certain key discursive principles that the many subsequent attacks on his veracity and the ensuing oblivion did not displace’.<sup>18</sup> Greenblatt sketches out the importance of Herodotus as the figure-head of a long tradition of historiographical responses to the marvellous by drawing heavily on the work of François Hartog, in particular his 1980 monograph *Le miroir d’Hérodote*.<sup>19</sup> As the editor of the University of California Press series *The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics*, in which the English translation of *Le miroir d’Hérodote* first appeared, Greenblatt was well aware of Hartog’s pioneering approach to the concept of wonder in Herodotus’ *Histories* even as he conducted his own study of Renaissance attitudes towards wonder, and he is correct when he adduces that ‘Herodotus is at once a decisive shaping force and a very marginal figure’ in *Marvelous Possessions*.<sup>20</sup> But Herodotus is not the only pivotal figure in the development of a discourse of the Greek

<sup>16</sup> Greenblatt (1991) 14.

<sup>17</sup> Ancient discussions of the properties of the earth’s edges were particularly influential, as Greenblatt (1991) 22 notes: ‘The discovery of the New World at once discredits the Ancients who did not know of these lands and, by raising the possibility that what had seemed gross exaggerations and lies were in fact sober accounts of radical otherness, gives classical accounts of prodigies a new life.’

<sup>18</sup> Greenblatt (1991) 123.

<sup>19</sup> Hartog (1980). On the importance of Herodotus as the shaping force of later responses to wonder, see Greenblatt (1991) 123–8.

<sup>20</sup> Greenblatt (1991) 122. Hartog’s *Le miroir d’Hérodote* first appeared in English in 1988 as *The Mirror of Herodotus: The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History*. Cf. Pelling (1997) 64–5, where the potential for the productive application of Greenblatt’s ideas in *Marvelous Possessions* to Herodotus is noted.



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marvellous in antiquity, and the historiographer's own attitude to marvels is itself shaped by a complex tradition relating to wonder which must be examined in more detail. It is one of the aims of this book to fill in some of the gaps left in this vision of the influence of ancient discourses of wonder on later approaches to wonder and the marvellous.<sup>21</sup>

It is therefore because of the special place which wonder holds in recent historicising approaches to literature, and because of the influence which responses to the marvellous in antiquity go on to have on later responses to marvels and the marvellous, that a thorough examination of the place of *thauma* in the Greek world from the Archaic to the Hellenistic period is long overdue. My own double-edged interest in both the cultural poetics of Greek wonder and Greek wonder's place in the practice not only of cultural poetics but in subsequent discourses of the marvellous more generally, will hopefully be clear throughout. But this is not my only focus; one of the most attractive aspects of working on the relationship between the marvellous and texts in antiquity is the fact that wonder is a concept that mediates between formalist and historicist approaches to literature.<sup>22</sup> One particular idea which I return to and re-examine through the lens of Greek wonder is Viktor Shklovsky's concept of 'defamiliarisation', first outlined in his influential 1916 essay 'Art as Technique'. Shklovsky's claim, in its broadest terms, is that '[t]he technique of art is to make objects unfamiliar', due to the fact that over time our day-to-day perception becomes habitual and automatic, rendering objects overfamiliar and unremarkable.<sup>23</sup> In other words, the strangeness and wonder of objects is deadened over time, and it becomes the

<sup>21</sup> In this respect, I hope this book will appeal beyond the field of Classics, especially since ancient Greek conceptions of wonder are currently attracting interest elsewhere: Harb (2020), a very recent study of the importance of wonder in the poetics of Classical Arabic literature, demonstrates how important the reception, adaptation and reformulation of Aristotle's views on *thauma* and *ekplexis* in the *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* were in Classical Arabic literary theory (see especially pp. 75–134) and points the way towards some potential fruitful avenues for future study.

<sup>22</sup> As Greenblatt himself notes (1990) 19: 'Wonder has not been alien to literary criticism, but it has been associated (if only implicitly) with formalism rather than historicism. I wish to extend this wonder beyond the formal boundaries of works of art, just as I wish to intensify resonance within those boundaries.'

<sup>23</sup> Shklovsky (1916), translated in Lemon and Reis (1965) 12.

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task of the artist to ‘reactivate’ these feelings in the reader, listener or viewer. It is this artistic phenomenon of ‘making the familiar seem strange again’ that Shklovsky calls ‘defamiliarisation’. He turns to Aristotle as a significant antecedent to his own ideas about the defamiliarisation effects which occur on a lexical level in poetry when he notes that ‘[i]n studying poetic speech ... we find material obviously created to remove the automatism of perception ... According to Aristotle, poetic language must appear strange and wonderful.’<sup>24</sup> Shklovsky is referring here to Aristotle’s comments at *Rhetoric* 1404b8–14 on the necessity of ‘making language strange’ (δεῖ ποιεῖν ξένην τὴν διάλεκτον) because such language provokes wonder, and ‘the wondrous is pleasurable’ (ἡδὺ δὲ τὸ θαυμαστόν). In this book, I probe the significant connection between defamiliarisation and wonder which Shklovsky hints at here, demonstrating that in antiquity there was a firm interest not only in the creation of defamiliarisation effects but in what I have termed ‘refamiliarisation’ effects as well: that is, making what is unfamiliar and wondrous actually seem extremely familiar.<sup>25</sup>

This book is therefore an attempt both to outline the significance of *thauma* in Greek culture from the Archaic period onwards and to provide a history of early conceptualisations of the connection between wonder and literature which may be useful when considering the impact of wonder as a literary-critical and cultural concept in later periods and contexts. The study focuses predominantly on Greek literary texts from the early Greek hexameter tradition to the early Hellenistic period. Since it is impossible to begin to make sense of subsequent attitudes towards *thauma* without examining the associations carried by the marvellous from the early Greek hexameter tradition onwards, the Homeric poems are the earliest texts which are examined here with *thauma* in mind. The chronological end point of the study lies in the early Hellenistic period, with the emergence of a new and very different type of text: the paradoxographical collection. These texts are

<sup>24</sup> Shklovsky (1916), in Lemon and Reis (1965) 21–2.

<sup>25</sup> For an example of the application of the concept of ‘refamiliarisation’, see Pelling (2016), which considers the creation of effects of ‘refamiliarisation’ as well as defamiliarisation in his study of Herodotus’ Persian stories.