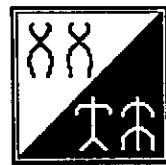

SIMPLE FORMS

An Encyclopaedia of Simple Text-Types in Lore and Literature

edited
by

Walter A. Koch



BPX 4

Universitätsverlag Dr. Norbert Brockmeyer • Bochum •
1994

Apophthegm

APOPHTHEGM

The apophthegm is a short, often witty and elegantly expressed type of saying which is composed of two parts: a particular utterance (*dictum*) and the situation (*occasio*) out of which it arose and in which it was coined. The a. may be a clever answer to a tricky question, or a question with a catch; it may be the mastering of an embarrassing situation, the defensive response to approach, and the like. A typical example might be:

When Cecilius Metellus wanted to attack a fortress one captain affirmed that the attack would hardly cost him ten of his men. "Do you want to be one of these ten?", asked Cecilius Metellus the captain.

Originally, the a. was bound to a particular historical person and a historical situation. This distinguishes the a. from its folkloristic counterpart, the *wellerism, because in case of the latter, the speaker as well as the utterance and the situation are a product of fiction and not a fact of history.

The *dictum* of an a. can be meaningful independent of its original context; this makes it similar to other types of gnomic sayings such as the aphorism, the maxim, or the sententia. Sometimes, the speaker cannot be identified (any longer) or turns out to be anonymous from the beginning; the situation, too, may lose its historical authenticity and may be only alluded to or even disappear.

Xenophon (ca. 400 B.C.) mentioned the term a. for the first time. The a. has to be regarded as serving a predominantly didactical and instructive function; it represents a genre "bei der es vornehmlich um die den Leser und Betrachter anregende Darstellung und Deutung eines Geschehens geht" (Verweyen 1970: 72). Apart from this basic "serious" function, there are many humorous instances, too, which point to a seemingly close relationship between the a. and genres such as the *joke, the *Schwank, or the *anecdote. Yet, humour is never the ultimate aim of the a.; rather, it makes use of humour for instructive purposes.

Initially, a.s were only transmitted orally; the first written sources can be found in the work of Plutarch (1st c. A.D.). Of particular importance were the *Apophthegmata Patrum* (i.e. The Apophthegms of the Fathers), a collection of a. which were written down by the early Egyptian Anachoretes in the 5th century A.D.; this collection, which has also been called the *Gerontikon* or *Alphabeticum*, was meant to instruct monastic novices. After the establishment of monasteries in the occident, the *Apophthegmata Patrum* were soon translated into Latin, and they became one of the most widely-read books of the Middle Ages. Other important collections can be found in the works of Desiderius Erasmus (*Apophthegmatum opus*, 1532) or Francis Bacon (*Apophthegms new and*

Apophthegm

old, 1624/25). Until the 17th century, a.s were very common in Germany, and there are important collections, for example by Harsdörffer (*Ars apophthematica*, 1655), or Zingref (*Teutscher Nation Apophthegmatum*, 1644).

Since then, however, the a. has become less and less important; in our days, it plays hardly any role at all. The term a., too, is hardly used, and if so, it is used either inaccurately or in order to distinguish terminologically between gnomic and folkloristic types of sayings which are closely related. Taylor (1931: 62), for example, in his important book on *The Proverb*, employs the term *proverbial apophthegm* in order to separate 'metaphorical proverbs' from those which are characterized by the absence of metaphor.

9. Bibliography: BOUSSET 1923; GEMOLL 1924; GUY 1962; MILLER 1965; TAYLOR 1931; VERWEYEN 1970, 1977.

P.G.