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Greek Myths and Mesopotamia: Parallels and Influence in the Homeric Hymns and Hesiod (review)

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Charles Penglase, *Greek Myths and Mesopotamia: Parallels and Influence in the Homeric Hymns and Hesiod*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994. Pp. xii + 278. \$69.95. ISBN 0-415-08371-0.

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Do the names 'Ninurta' and 'Ereshkigal' mean anything to you? If not, you may find much of what is in this book to be new. Penglase is expert, not only in Greek mythology, in which field (as his subtitle shows) he concentrates on tales in the Homeric Hymns and Hesiod, but also in the lore of the Mesopotamian peoples recorded in Sumerian and Akkadian; and he proposes to sail for what may be uncharted waters even for learned classicists.

An introductory chapter, 'Foundations,' sets out the guiding principles of his study, and even gives some rudimentary introduction to the conventions of the languages involved (e.g. the Sumerian morphology is agglutinative, while the Akkadian is based on the triliteral root). More central to P.'s thesis, it proposes that a number of Greek myths from the archaic period share certain motifs with myths recorded in Mesopotamian texts of the third to first millennia BCE. Prominent among these motifs are [i] the hero/god on a journey, in the course of which s/he acquires and demonstrates power; [ii] the cataclysmic Flood; and [iii] tales about the creation of the human race.¹

Parallels are one thing, influences quite another, as P. is well aware. Particularly in the case of such remote and exotic cultures, we must be wary of positing a *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* relationship between the two. Now P. is hardly alone in his attraction to the Near Eastern connection; he is preceded, for example, by no less eminent figures than M. L. West (in his *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient* and the *editiones maiores* of Hesiod) and Walter Burkert (in *The Orientalizing Revolution* and, *passim*, in *Greek Religion*). But even the work of such careful scholars has not succeeded in convincing all their readers of the massive debt owed by the Greek-speaking world to the peoples of the Near East; indeed the issue differs only in degree, and not in kind, from the controversy surrounding Martin Bernal's 'Black Athena' theory. So P. knows he must tread lightly. He is aware that 'an appropriate method is essential. To establish influence, or at least the likelihood of influence, there are two main steps. First it is necessary to establish the historical possibility of influence, and then the parallels between the myths of the two areas must fulfil a sufficiently rigorous set of relevant criteria.' (5) This *diaeresis* is divided further. P. proposes two main parts to the first step: [i] connections, such as trade-routes, between the two regions involved, and [ii] demonstration that the literary material 'existed in

some form at the time of ... contacts between the two regions' (5). Step two involves the investigation of literary parallels between texts from the two cultures.

P. leaves to others the proof that there were in fact connections between the two; he sketches out the situation perspicuously and gathers his scholarly references in nn. 9-10 on p. 6 and n. 40 on p. 114. The prior existence of the Mesopotamian material also being well-established, P. is free to spend the majority of his energy on investigating parallels between the two mythic traditions. He does not delay to spell out what he considers a 'sufficiently rigorous set of relevant criteria':

... the parallels must have similar ideas underlying them and, second, any suggestion of influence requires that the parallels be numerous, complex and detailed, with a similar conceptual usage and, ideally, that they should point to a specific myth or a group of related myths in Mesopotamia. Finally, the parallels and their similar underlying ideas must involve central features in the material to be compared. Only then, it would seem, may any claims stronger than one of mere coincidence be worthy of serious consideration. (7)

I have dilated thus on P.'s methodology because it places in high relief an issue that has been problematized at least since classical philologists declared victory in the 'assured results of modern criticism'; and indeed the sorts of parameters within which P. is dealing are not so different from those involved in detecting 'contamination' in a manuscript-tradition. The point is, however, that we live now in an age that valorizes quantification -- in a time when the very process of gathering statistical samples becomes ever more minutely complex -- and this in a time when the practice of old-style philology seems, to some outside its circle, anything from quaint to jejune to ridiculous. The arrogant days of *Odi profanum uulgus et arceo* are long vanished for us; these are the days when the initiates gather anxiously in cyberspace -- *experto crede* -- to discuss the future of graduate education in Classics. One often gets the sense that, if somehow we could only be more like the hard sciences, we might feel the future of our profession to be less shaky. The most powerful salvo in this direction undoubtedly came in the form of Wilamowitz's grand notion of *Alttertumswissenschaft*, that all-encompassing 'science of antiquity' that was to bring every possible tool of learning to bear upon the study of ancient Greece and Rome. Today, of course, it is dubious that any individual scholar could so much as approximate the achievement of such vast encyclopaedic knowledge, even of the languages and literary texts, let alone of history, archaeology, and the ancillary disciplines, that would put one on a par with Wilamowitz. And *he* had never even heard of poststructuralism.

Conceding all this from the beginning, then, I want to situate P.'s project between the demands of hard-science inquiry, on one hand, and the interests of modernist and postmodernist literary theorists on the other. The scientist will of course dismiss such a project out of hand: even P.'s 'rigorous criteria'

will not satisfy those engaged in, say, the study of bacterial contamination. 'Similar underlying ideas'? How does one quantify similarity? 'Numerous,' 'complex,' and 'detailed' parallels? What quantity may justly be called 'numerous' -- how many swallows make a summer here? Or at what level of complexity may we deem a parallel 'complex'?

Let my reader understand: I do not intend these remarks as a criticism of P.'s method *per se*. Indeed I think that he has been, on the whole, as sensible and as admirably careful as one could be in such a pursuit. My point is rather that his undertaking such a project in the 1990s also underscores what has become for many an existential crisis in the profession: the very issue of defending, or legitimating, literary criticism -- even so apparently 'hard-core' an aspect of it as *Quellenforschung* -- in the Age of Statistical Analysis. This crisis may be elaborated under two main heads: How may the results of modern criticism be assured? And, Why should we care about them even if they are?

P.'s solid book does not purport to answer these two critical questions; he is writing for those who would not pose the second, and for whom the first may be answered by the articulation of his method in the first chapter. His approach to the major task at hand -- the exploration of parallels between Mesopotamian and Greek myths -- is founded in structural and thematic analysis: 'All of the myths analysed here involve journeys carried out by the gods, and the comparisons between the myths are based almost entirely on the structural composition of the journeys and the ideas which are expressed in them' (8). By the same token, P. explicitly rejects 'philosophical approaches such as anthropological, sociological, psychoanalytic, Lévi-Straussian structuralist, and so on' (10) -- rather than impose an extrinsic methodology, he hopes to

let the myths speak for themselves ... to reveal the structures which reflect the abstract, or belief, system of the people concerned, rather than to impose one on them from outside ..., it seems vital to avoid the premises of philosophical theories like those above, since these theories involve modern belief systems. When a philosophical approach of this age is applied to the ancient material, the inherent belief system of a different people and a different age is automatically superimposed on the source. (10)

What this manifesto points up, of course, is the epistemological difference between someone like P. and scholars who believe that one's *own* belief-system -- call it ideology, epistemes, what have you -- is ineluctable, *whether or not* one proposes consciously to apply a method to the process of interpretation. Moreover, such scholars typically hold that one's belief-system dictates not only the method by which one asks questions, but indeed also the very questions that one asks -- or could possibly conceive of asking. What, for example, assures us that the ancient Mesopotamians would find it necessary or useful to stipulate that there must have been human connections such as trade-routes between the two cultures? Might they not have been

(more) satisfied with the explanation that Inanna herself, under whatever name it pleased her to be invoked, vouchsafed the revelation of her timeless truths independently to both Sumerian and Greek?

What one would have surmised anyway is made explicit on p. 11, in terms that would set the most hard-boiled logical positivist at ease: 'What is possible to achieve, and necessary, is complete objectivity, in the sense of being free of subjectivity to philosophical schema: to be able to stand outside the modern belief systems with all of their own assumptions to analyze the material with a mind clear of preconceptions' Scholars working from a subjectivity such as P. purports to eschew will smile at what must seem to them a utopian wish for freedom from subjectivity; for obviously P. too has a subjectivity, and a belief-system, just as much as Lévi-Strauss does.

Some, of course, will not smile. They will detect here a rival philosophical agenda with ramifications no less extensive or implacable than their own. This is the region of pure intellectual activity that borders on the realm of practical pursuits such as politics, and I shall say no more of it here. But P.'s reader should keep those ramifications in mind.

Chapters 2 and 3 introduce us to two great Mesopotamian divinities, Inanna and Ninurta respectively. Inanna is 'the most important goddess in the Mesopotamian pantheon,' and more myths survive about her than about any other goddess of that region. Her Akkadian name, Ishtar, is perhaps better known, in part because of the Gilgamesh epic. All-Mother, creatrix, Great Goddess, deity of love and sex, she is the subject of *katabasis*-narratives and of what P. calls the 'goddess-and-consort strand' (38), a group of tales involving a male lover/consort, sometimes known as Dumuzi (never Dumézil).

Ninurta is 'the great warrior god of the Sumerian pantheon' (49), and son of the supreme god Enlil. Surprisingly, he also presides over agriculture and the irrigation of arable land by the waters of the Tigris and the Euphrates. He may be compared with the Babylonian deities Markuk and Nabû, and Assyrian Assur. Ninurta has his own set of journey-myths, focusing on what P. calls the 'journey for power' (51), and a tradition of heroic labors that has widespread analogues even in the Mesopotamian myths (70).

The brief fourth chapter signals P.'s shift from Mesopotamian to Greek myth. His first recourse is to the Homeric Hymn to Apollo, which receives particularly lengthy treatment in chapter 5 (76-125). Chapter 6 turns to the Homeric hymn to Demeter, and chapter 7 to myths of Aphrodite. Chapter 8 considers journeys of Hermes and Zeus, while chapter 9 focuses on the Pandora/Prometheus story. Chapter 10 presents the conclusion -- no surprise at this point -- that 'extensive influence from Mesopotamia exists in these Homeric hymns and in the works of Hesiod' (237). The book closes with two brief appendices, an extensive bibliography, and an index.

Each of chapters 5-10 contains extensive reference to the Mesopotamian material outlined in chapters 2-3. The Apollo chapter, for example, isolates

both goddess-and-consort and journey-for-power strands in the Delian section of the Homeric hymn, both Apollo and his mother performing journey-sequences. The chapter, then, offers extensive demonstration of parallels between the Mesopotamian and Greek versions of these myths.

P. wants to see these parallels as evidence of Mesopotamian influence on Greece; and quite possibly he is right about that. What he does not acknowledge is that his reasoning is sometimes circular: on the one hand, he wants the evidence that there was extensive trade-contact between the two civilizations from the fourteenth through the ninth centuries BCE to support his assertion that the Mesopotamian myths could have influenced the Greek (5-6), but he also wants to use the parallels he discerns in the Homeric hymns to prove that such contact -- and thus such influence -- took place (114). He does not dispense with the possibility that the Mesopotamians recorded their versions of the myths first simply because they developed *writing-systems* earlier; it is not inconceivable that they learned these stories from their occidental neighbors. It is also within the realm of possibility that both civilizations learned them from a third, more ancient source. It is even possible that both civilizations (not to mention east Asian and Native American peoples) tell similar stories because these are somehow common to the human condition; but to say so might bring us dangerously close to a notion of Jungian archetypes, and P. has declared all such 'systems' taboo. I mention this last, not from sheer perversity, nor out of any deep commitment to Jungian psychology, but because it illustrates how P.'s own system disallows *a priori* certain conclusions, and thus short-circuits pure objectivity just as much as any other system does.

I fear I may appear quarrelsome or contrary in this assessment of P.'s work. I hope I do not seem ungrateful, for P. has assembled a formidable comparative study of a difficult topic, and has executed it with scrupulous care. He also confronts a vast body of secondary sources in each of two distinct fields of inquiry, and deploys his knowledge skilfully. No student of mythology will read this book without profit. If I do have reservations, they are with reference to (what seems to me) his illusion that scholarship is even possible apart from the subjectivity and *Weltanschauung* within which which every scholar works, and must work.

NOTE

- [1] The reader who finds P.'s introduction interesting may also want to consult Jean Bottero's *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods* (Chicago 1992).