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Mythic Background (to Homer).pdf

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Mythic Background

MYTH, ACCORDING to a well-known formulation by Walter Burkert (1979, 23, his emphasis), “*is a traditional tale with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance*”. Andrew von Hendy, who declares Burkert’s definition the “gold standard” in classical studies, offers a Marxist reformulation, so that myth “is traditional narrative with a high degree of ideological saturation” (von Hendy 2002, 269, 277). This definition accords with the fact that *muthos*, the Greek word that most closely approximates myth, also designates “story” generally, and, as we might expect in an oral culture, “speech” (its meaning of “fiction” is post-Homeric). It also allows us to sidestep the issue of distinguishing between “myth,” “legend,” and “fairytale” which is an enduring legacy of the Brothers Grimm among folklorists, but has no basis in ancient taxonomy (Detienne 1986; Calame 1991; Edmunds 1997; von Hendy 2002).

Lowell Edmunds offers a compatible definition that reflects the status of the epics as oral poetry: drawing on Richard Martin’s (1989) analysis of Homeric speech acts, he argues “that for Homer and his audience, our ‘myth’ is the oral performance of a story with intent to sway an audience” (Edmunds 1997, 420: note that “sway” instrumentalizes Burkert’s ‘collective importance’). “In other words,” he remarks, “myth can be understood in terms of a practice, not a subject-matter, and it is unnecessary to look for some ancient concept and/or term meaning ‘story about gods or heroes’” (Edmunds 1997, 416). I agree that myth should be understood in terms of practice, but propose a more minimalist definition: *myth is the oral performance of a traditional tale*. Implicitly, a tale is traditional precisely because it concerns something of collective importance.

Gregory Nagy (2007, 53–4) reaches a similar conclusion. Martin serves as Nagy’s point of departure as well, though his focus is not on the objectives of the internal characters but on the metapoetic effect of creating myth through epic performance: his thesis is that *epic performance activates myth, which thus belongs to ritual*. Of central importance for the present discussion is that, following Burkert and Nagy’s definitions, the epics do not simply include mythic material, but can be legitimately treated as myths in their own right, a point on which Nagy is explicit (2007; see also Nagy 1996b, 136–7).

Edmunds rightly notes that the majority of stories we would naturally identify as myths in Homer are related by the internal characters. These stories are used in a limited number of ways. First, since the Homeric heroes have personal and family histories, extending for the most part two or three generations, they may use them to assert their own standing: for example, Glaucus narrates the achievements of his great grandfather, Bellerophon, to impress Diomedes (*Il.* 6.150–211), while Sthenelus refers to the sack of Thebes by the Epigoni, the sons of the Seven Against Thebes, to justify his claim that they are greater than their fathers (*Il.* 4.403–10). Homer, in turn, may introduce characters and objects with their histories to index their significance, or to provide a defining anecdote about a victim so as to situate his death in the context of his tradition (Bakker 1997, 118). Troy and the Trojan War also have extensive traditions that may provide context for an event (Marks, *EPIC TRADITIONS; EPIC CYCLE*; see also Létoublon 2011).

A common use to which such stories are put is that characters will relate them to each other as paradigms that indicate the proper course of behavior: for example, Achilles declares that Niobe, having lost all of her children, ate despite her grief, in order to encourage Priam to do likewise (*Il.* 24.602–17). This raises a question that continues to be debated: does the poet ever consciously, and even pointedly, innovate in retelling myths? For scholars such as Malcolm Willcock (1964, 1977), the answer is yes: poets routinely adapt myths to increase their applicability to a given situation. Nagy (1992), on the other hand, argues that oral poets always select from variant traditions. Edmunds (1997, 428) seeks to reconcile these positions by suggesting that we should see the internal characters as innovating. Nagy, however, raises two points whose importance cannot be overstated. First, traditional poetry *never* presents itself as innovative because it claims to narrate historical events; that is, it presents itself and is perceived by its audience as the truth (see also Nagy, *apud* Martin 1989, ix). Second, the narrative traditions of archaic Greece are far richer and more varied than those that have survived in written form. Whatever degree of plausibility one assigns to any particular case, it is always possible that a variant tradition lies behind Homer's apparent departures from the accounts preserved in other ancient authors. Finally, the very concept of a "canonical" version of a myth is questionable in an oral context. An important exception is a myth with an anchor in living cult, such as the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*.

Among the mythological elements found in Homer, we may distinguish broadly among: (1) those belonging to Indo-European tradition (*HOMER AND INDO-EUROPEAN MYTH*); (2) those that have a Near Eastern origin (*ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN EPIC*); and (3) indigenous Greek myths, including those belonging to the Trojan War tradition (Marks, *EPIC TRADITIONS*). These distinctions, however, require a number of significant clarifications and qualifications. What we commonly refer to as Near Eastern mythology includes material belonging to Indo-European and non-Indo-European cultures that interacted with each other for centuries before Homer: it is often impossible or simply meaningless to distinguish between them as separate traditions. Moreover, the myths found in archaic literature have often been so thoroughly Hellenized that their ultimate source is of limited interpretive value; and it can even mislead as any given story may have a nearer source in Greek myth. Conversely, even "indigenous" myths may belong to ancient transcultural traditions, for example of war and heroic combat that, following Burkert (1996), can be traced back to Paleolithic hunting practices. Finally, it is implausible that a war remotely resembling the one Homer describes ever took place between Troy and a

Greek coalition mounting an amphibious assault of 65,000 troops; nevertheless it doubtless does reflect the historical reality of life during the Greek Bronze Age in which siege warfare and difficult homecomings were assuredly common (Edmunds 1997, 435).

Still, useful connections and distinctions can be made: if, for example, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* accounts for important features of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, then by definition we are dealing with the influence of a specific Near Eastern text on Homer, whether that influence is direct or mediated (Cook 1992; West 1997a, 336–47, 377–8, 402–17). While conceding that the context of the *Iliad* and *Gilgamesh* are very different, M. L. West notes the following parallels, which he sees as compelling evidence of such influence: both heroes are exceptionally emotional; their mothers are goddesses, highly attentive to their sons' needs; the heroes have sidekicks about whom they care greatly; they are consequently shattered by the sidekick's death; and, mad with grief, they begin a new venture as a consequence; but in the end recover their senses. Most important, perhaps, the protagonists of both epics confront the fact of their mortality, with which fact they struggle before finding acceptance. West (1997a, 338) observes that it is precisely this "humanism" that distinguishes *Gilgamesh* from other Akkadian poetry.

The affinity between the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the *Iliad* thus centers on the character and personal tragedy of Gilgamesh and Achilles. Gilgamesh and Odysseus, on the other hand, do not resemble one another in terms of character so much as in their adventures, the very point on which Gilgamesh and Achilles most differ (West 1997a, 402–12). Indeed, the two epics begin in a strikingly similar manner, by introducing their heroes as having traveled extensively and as having seen and learned many things; and in both cases the hero's identification is noticeably delayed. West lays particular emphasis on the parallels between the alewife Siduri from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and Circe and Calypso from the *Odyssey*, each of whom sends the hero to an otherworldly realm. Whereas Gilgamesh goes to Dilmun to consult the wise and immortal Utnapishtim, Circe sends Odysseus to Hades to consult the prophet Tiresias, who alone among the dead retains his intelligence. Following Calypso's directions, Odysseus eventually reaches Scheria. His objective is not further consultation, but the Phaeacians do possess magical ships, thus providing a striking parallel to the boatman Urshanabi, who alone is able to cross the waters of death separating Utnapishtim from the human realm. In fact, Scheria can be seen as a border realm, and the Phaeacians as otherworldly ferrymen providing conveyance between this world and the next (Cook 1992). Equally striking is that not only does the Phaeacian episode have a series of close parallels in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, but the palace of king Alcinoos also seems to be based on Assyrian royal architecture (West 1997a, 251, 419–20, 423–4; Cook 2004): a copy of the epic was housed in the library of Ashurbanipal, and anyone who had seen the palace firsthand could have known the story from numerous sources.

Burkert finds compelling evidence for other Near Eastern influence on the *Iliad*. An especially striking example is the scene from *Iliad* Book 5 in which Aphrodite complains to her mother Dione after being wounded by Diomedes. Whereas Dione comforts her, Zeus offers a gentle reproof, advising her to attend to matters of love, not war. Burkert notes the parallel from *Gilgamesh*: when Ishtar propositions Gilgamesh, he launches into a catalogue of her past lovers; Ishtar then retires to heaven and complains to her father, Anu, in the presence of her mother, Antum, only to receive a gentle reproof from Anu. What makes the parallel compelling is the identity of the actors: as the love goddess, Ishtar corresponds to Aphrodite, and as the sky god, her father, Anu, corresponds to Zeus. Of decisive

importance is that the name of Ishtar's mother, Antum, is the feminine counterpart to Anu: this explains why Dione, or "Mrs. Zeus," is Aphrodite's mother and Zeus's wife here but nowhere else in archaic Greek poetry (Burkert 1992, 96–9; West 1997a, 361–2).

A second Iliadic episode that, Burkert (1992: 88–96) argues, attracted a range of Near Eastern material is Hera's deception of Zeus in Book 14. Hera's reference to the quarrel between Oceanus and Tethys as the original divine couple mirrors the Babylonian pair Apsu and Tiamat from the *Enuma Elish*. Tethys's name may in fact derive from Tiamat, which, if correct, would make the parallel certain (Burkert 1992, 91–3; West 1997a, 383). In addition, the love strap that Aphrodite lends Hera for her seduction is not typically Greek, but has good Mesopotamian parallels (Burkert 1992, 93; West 1997a, 383–4). Zeus's catalogue of his female loves is comparable to Gilgamesh's catalogue of Ishtar's lovers in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*: the possibility that the echo is genuine is much enhanced by the more striking parallel between Ishtar's subsequent complaint to Anu and Aphrodite's to Zeus in the *Iliad* (Burkert 1992, 93; West 1997a, 384). Poseidon's protest that he, Zeus, and Hades cast lots for rule of their respective realms contradicts Hesiod's account of Zeus's rise to power, but parallels the *Atrahasis* (Burkert 1992, 88–93; West 1997a, 109–10, 385). Burkert exclaims: "There is hardly another passage in Homer which comes so close to being a translation of an Akkadian epic."

The story of Bellerophon in Book 6 of the *Iliad* illustrates some of the methodological and interpretive issues involved in the source criticism of Homeric myth. The story contains a number of distinctly Near Eastern features, including a "Potiphar's wife" intrigue, a winged horse, Pegasus, a composite monster, the Chimera, whom Bellerophon in fact kills in Lycia, and the only reference to writing in Homer (West 1997a, 365–7). Yet, as Calvert Watkins observes (1995, 357–60 and 385 n. 4; cf. Katz 1998), Homer preserves the marked verb, *pephne* (smite, slay), that belongs to an Indo-European formula for a hero killing a dragon (see below). In fact, the closest analogies to the Chimera in Near Eastern iconography are Hittite, an Indo-European culture (Burkert 1983, 52; West 1997a, 366). It seems plausible that a precursor of the Bellerophon myth acquired a Near Eastern patina in Anatolia before reaching Greece. On the other hand, as early as Pindar the story of taming Pegasus has been Hellenized, so that it celebrates the use of *mētis* (mind and technology) to make nature's *biē* (violent might) available for human use: specifically, it celebrates the introduction of the so-called Corinthian bridle from Assyria in the seventh century B.C. This suggests that the story may have entered Greece together with the Near Eastern technology that made effective equitation possible (Cook 1995, 186–94).

The story of Achilles' battle with the river Scamander is still more complex (Cook 2012b, xxviii, li–v). It is paralleled in a number of Near Eastern myths in which the sky god battles a storm demon or unruly terrestrial waters; in these accounts the god employs storm weapons, including lightning and wind (West 1997a, 86, 97, 300–4). In a Near Eastern context, the myth celebrates the triumph of order and culture over chaos, a meaning not unwelcome in the *Iliad*. Yet the nearer source of inspiration for having Achilles battle a river comes from cosmogonic traditions surrounding Zeus himself, specifically the god's battle with Typhoeus, alluded to in the *Iliad* and told in more detail in Hesiod (*Il.* 2.781–3; *Hes. Th.* 304–7, 820–68). Indeed, the point of the battle with Scamander is to dramatize how Achilles paradoxically most closely approximates divinity, and specifically the identity of Zeus, after he has embraced his fate to die young and achieve immortal fame.

Although West (1997a, 301) argues that “Mesopotamian and Canaanite parallels are at least as important as the Hurro-Hittite,” as Watkins (1995, 448) observes, “It is now generally assumed” that the myth of Typhoeus “was diffused into Greece from Anatolian Hittite, where it is attested as the myth of *Illuyankas* the serpent-adversary slain by the Storm God” Teshub. An important further parallel comes from Vedic Sanskrit, in which Indra defeats a snaky water demon named *Vṛtra*: although the Hittite myth may have been infiltrated by other Near Eastern accounts, it has a clear Indo-European pedigree (Watkins 1995, 321–3, 347–56, 441–59). The Hittite parallel also shows that the initial defeat of the storm god is likewise Indo-European, and it is paralleled by Achilles almost being drowned before Hephaestus comes to his aid (Watkins 1995, 450).

West has written a pair of in-depth studies of the Greek inheritance of Near Eastern and Indo-European myth (West 1997a, 2007), and it is telling that although he devotes a very long chapter to Near Eastern echoes in the *Iliad* and a somewhat shorter one to the *Odyssey*, comparable chapters are lacking in his book on Indo-European myth. Jaan Puhvel (1987, 138) goes so far as to say that “the Greek pantheon affords rather slim pickings for comparative Indo-European mythology.” One should remember that half a millennium separates the high point of Mycenaean culture (ca. fourteenth century B.C.) from the arrival of the first Greek speakers in Greece (towards the end of the third millennium), and nearly a millennium separates the Greek Bronze Age from Homer (late seventh or sixth century B.C.). Arguably, Indo-European tradition has become emulsified in Greek mythology by the time the epics achieved canonical form. Conversely, one could argue that the majority of the Near Eastern imports arrive in the so-called Orientalizing Period, leaving their roots relatively more exposed. Against this should be set arguments by West (1988, [1972] 1992) and others that poetry in a meter cognate with Homeric epic and featuring a divine apparatus that included Hera and Zeus, and heroes such as Ajax, Idomeneus, and Odysseus, were sung in the courts of Mycenaean kings. Add to this Nagy’s demonstration that the Homeric formula, “unwithering fame,” descends from Indo-European song tradition, and one can infer that Mycenaean epic also celebrated heroic combat (Nagy 1990b, 122–6 and 2003a, 45–8; see also Schmitt 1967 and 1968; S. West 1988; KLEOS). Two bodies of material strengthen that inference.

An important exception to the general lack of Indo-European parallels to Greek myth is the archery contest for the hand of Penelope in Book 21 of the *Odyssey*. Scholars such as Joseph Russo (2004) have noted that the archery contest is well attested in Indo-European, and especially Indic tradition. For example, the Buddha proves he is worthy to marry the daughter of Dandapani with a miraculous bowshot that displays a combination of skill and strength. Parallels from the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are closer, as they involve actual archery contests. In the *Ramayana*, a bow, originally belonging to Shiva, has been handed down through the generations to King Janaka, who proposes an archery contest in which whoever can bend it will marry his daughter. After numerous kings, princes, gods, and serpents fail to bend it, the hero Rama lifts the bow with one hand, and then not only bends but breaks it in two. Points of contact with the *Odyssey* include not only the illustrious history of the bow, but the contest in which only the hero can string it. The closest parallel comes from the *Mahabharata*, in which Arjuna wins an archery contest for marriage to Draupadi with another miraculous bowshot. As in the *Ramayana* and *Odyssey*, the bow is described as nearly impossible to string. Draupada, the girl’s father, issues the challenge that whoever can string it and shoot an arrow through a “contraption” to strike a golden target

will win Draupadi's hand. All the other kings who tried to string the bow failed, but Arjuna does so easily and then shoots and knocks the target down. As Russo (2004, 99) observes: "It is noteworthy that the narrative places similar emphasis, first, upon the repeated difficulty the rivals have with the bow, and then upon the ease with which the hero strings it." But in the light of the foregoing, one should not be surprised to discover that a striking parallel can also be found in Egyptian ritual practice. The motif of winning a bride is lacking, but the pharaoh's ability to draw a bow that no one else could draw and to shoot it through one or more copper ingots is used to legitimate his sovereignty. This is of course all strikingly similar to the bow contest in the *Odyssey* (Burkert 1973; Walcot 1984).

Our image changes somewhat when we shift from Indo-European myths to themes, which are well attested in archaic Greek poetry. From the pathbreaking work of Nagy (1990b, 1999) we know that the interplay of praise and blame and the defining themes of the traditional hero extend back to Proto-Indo-European (PIE). In addition to the heroic quest for "unwithering fame," the hero is characterized by a combination of extraordinary might (*biē*) and intelligence (*mētis*), qualities that can also be opposed, for example as strategies for conquering Troy, or in the competition between heroes such as Achilles and Odysseus for the status of "best of the Achaeans," or even the poetic rivalry between the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Indeed, the *Odyssey* draws a series of such analogies, between itself and the *Iliad*, Athena and Poseidon, and Odysseus and Achilles, Polyphemus, his own companions, and the suitors of Penelope. In addition, the hero has a divine patron and antagonist, with the latter of whom he also has a special affinity and may even be identified in cult: for example, Hera is the antagonist of Heracles, Apollo of Achilles, and Poseidon of Odysseus. Finally, the traditional hero is a man of pain and hatred, in both an active and passive sense (Cook 2009): this is closely related to the theme of his divine antagonist and his own status as a dragon slayer.

Of crucial importance in the present context is a formula that qualifies as a myth in its own right. Drawing on linguistic evidence ranging from Vedic Sanskrit and Hittite to Old Irish, Calvert Watkins (1995) has reconstructed an Indo-European formula, "Hero Slay Serpent," which serves to define the traditional hero: Indra is thus "he who slew Vṛtra." The formula may include a marginal element in an instrumental relationship, so that the hero slays the serpent with a weapon or a helper (Watkins 1995, 301–2). For example: "Zeus slew Typhoeus with lightning" or "Heracles slew the Hydra with Iolaus." More broadly, the combat myth represents the triumph of order over chaos, and equally of life over death; as such it is naturally associated with the cycles of nature, so that winter is aligned with chaos, and the New Year with rebirth and the return of life and order (Watkins 1995, 299–300). The Hittite story of *Illuyankas* was thus performed at the New Year festival to promote fertility and prosperity (Watkins 1995, 444–6). But the chaos that the dragon represents "was fundamentally social in character": "the evil or chaos that must be overcome by the narration of the myth . . . is all that is 'anti-social', anti-traditional, anti-hierarchical, and that is in violation of the fundamental institutionalized gift-exchange relations and consecrated customs which are alliance and blood kinship, symbolized by hospitality" (Watkins 1995, 446). We shall see that the *Mnesterophonia*, or slaughter of the suitors, in the *Odyssey* is a reflex of the combat myth, but Watkins's account accurately summarizes the major themes of the entire epic. Watkins finds another modality of chaos in the Germanic world that can be applied to the *Odyssey*: "the dragon keeps wealth from circulating: the ultimate evil in society in which gift-exchange and the lavish bestowal of riches institutionalized

precisely that circulation” (Watkins 1995, 300). Finally, the dragon may undergo various transformations, into another monster, wild beast, hero, or antihero; and the hero and his opponent may switch roles, so that the hero is portrayed as a monster himself.

The formula is highly conservative: the PIE verb for “he slew,” **g^hhen-*, persists in its Greek incarnation as *pephne* into the Hellenistic period. In the *Iliad*, it is attested in the stories of Zeus and Typhoeus, Bellerophon and Chimaera, and Achilles and Scamander; and in the *Odyssey* in the stories of Heracles and Iphitus, Odysseus and the Cyclops, and Odysseus and the suitors. On account of its associations with antisocial behavior and violations of gift exchange, the formula finds its Odyssean instantiation in a pair of reciprocal expressions extended by localizing the event in a domestic setting: “Anti-hero Slay Guest (in own House),” that is, the *Cyclopeia*, the encounter with the Cyclops, and “Hero Slay Anti-Guest (in own House),” that is, the *Mnesterophonia* (Watkins 1995, 404).

The *Cyclopeia* most directly represents the formula, although the marked verb does not occur since Odysseus only blinds the ogre: Polyphemus is not only monstrous, but keeps his cattle locked away in a cave; and not only does he not provide food and treasure, but he even eats his guests. His cattle correspond to the cows secreted in the body of *Vṛtra*, which, in a cosmogonic myth, Indra releases by striking *Vṛtra* with his thunderbolt. Polyphemus’s cattle can thus be seen as representing the source of life itself; a conclusion that can also be reached by relating them to the cattle of the sun god Helios in the Thrinakian episode of the *Odyssey* (Cook 1995, 80–2). It is, then, Odysseus’s task to release them. Odysseus even uses fire to blind the monster, which can be compared to the fire Hephaestus deploys against Scamander, as a metaphor for the lightning bolts of Zeus and Indra. Most important, however, is that Polyphemus’s crimes are social in nature: in particular, he violates the laws of guest friendship, or *xenia*, including gift exchange, which Watkins has shown to define the serpent’s behavior (HOSPITALITY). This same violation is also central to the other two instances of the formula in the *Odyssey*.

The first instance is, as we have already seen, the *Mnesterophonia*. The suitors correspond to the serpent, chaos, and winter. The *Mnesterophonia* thus takes place during a solar eclipse at the new moon of the New Year (Cook 1995, 128–70). Conversely, the formula links the return of Odysseus to the return of prosperity to his kingdom, and the restoration of social order. The second instance is, unsurprisingly, the story used to introduce the *Mnesterophonia*. When Iphitus arrives at the home of Heracles to recover some stolen mares, Heracles kills him and keeps the mares: the marked verb *pephne* is twice used to describe the murder in a RING COMPOSITION that brackets the story. Before Iphitus dies, however, he gives Odysseus his bow. It is with the gift of a guest wrongly slain by his host that Odysseus slays the suitors “in his own house” for repeated wrongs to *their* host and his family. The story of Iphitus is thus a “photographic negative” of the *Mnesterophonia*: the “correspondence is rigorous, mathematical” (Watkins 1995, 402).

In sum, there is a strong case for seeing widespread Near Eastern influence on the mythological background of Homer, and the case for the influence of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is particularly compelling; but the myths have been so thoroughly Hellenized, or better Panhellenized, that knowing this often does not change how we understand their epic deployments (PANHELLENISM). On the other hand, the influence of Indo-European mythology is even more diffuse in Homer. Nevertheless, the hero’s combat with a dragon in Indo-European myth, as reconstructed by Watkins, is able to cast significant light on Achilles’ fight with Scamander in the *Iliad*, and on the *Cyclopeia* and *Mnesterophonia* in the

Odyssey. Also striking are the Indic parallels to the archery contest in the Odyssean contest for Penelope's hand in marriage.

Erwin Cook

Further Reading

Detienne 1986; Puhvel 1987; Nagy 1990b; Burkert 1992; Cook 1995; Watkins 1995; Edmunds 1997; West 1997a; Nagy 2007; West 2007; Cook 2012b.

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