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Abstract



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Interpreting the Seer – The Myth of Melampus

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I. Introduction

My dissertation starts from two fundamental questions. The first refers to seers in Ancient Greece: what was the role of seers in Greek society? What was the nature of their knowledge? Did they have authority, and if so, what was it based on? In the 2nd half of the 20th century, Greek religious studies have been largely dominated by the concept of a “*polis* religion”. Since in Greek culture there was no central institution or set of institutions that organised religious life, nor any dogmatic system or holy scripture that created a fixed framework for religious belief and practice, historians of religion have regarded the *polis* as an institution which assumed the role played by the Church in Christianity (compare Kindt 2012: 3–4 and Bremmer 2010). In consequence, all religious phenomena that did not fit into the frames of institutionalized *polis* religion were dismissed as insignificant, marginal or “sectarian”. Magic and mystery-religion took second place, and so did seers and divination. Symptomatically, the first book-length monograph on Greek seers was not published until as late as 2008 (Flower 2008).

The second fundamental question concerns the nature of myth. Over the past few decades, classical scholarship and comparative myth studies have begun to question the very concept of “myth”. Structuralist and post-structuralist critique has pointed out the specific historical context in which the modern concept of “myth” took shape in the 18th and 19th centuries; it has also called attention to the fact, that the individual myth, as an object of the interpretation (from the British anthropological school through psychoanalysis up to structuralism) has always been an abstract concept: a plot extracted from various narratives, and thereby cut off from its context (Detienne 1981; Veyne 1983, Calame 2009). It is important to realize that mythical narratives are above all communicative acts grounded in particular socially-defined occasions, circumstances and genres (Edmonds 2004: 4). The great variety and mutability which is evident in Greek myths if we view them diachronically come from the very fact that, as stories, they were 'told' (this of course applies to artistic images as well) in different concrete historical situations, and were adapted by the storyteller or artist to the needs and sensibilities of a particular listening or viewing public. Every single act of narration had its special communicative aims (Brelich 1977:7). The examination of context has thus become a major concern in the interpretation of myth (Buxton 1994, Calame 2009).

II. Aims and methods

My study, which examines how the role of the seer develops diachronically in mythical narratives, originates from the intersection of these two questions. How can one interpret the role of the seer in ancient Greek culture? How did social changes influence the conception of the seer, and how did the symbolic representations codified in myth everyday reality? Taking one narrative strand from the vast mythic tradition of the Greeks, the dissertation focuses on stories about Melampus. Modern interpretations of Melampus have been largely determined by the fact, that according to one tradition (preserved by Herodotus and Diodorus of Sicily), he was the founder of the cult of Dionysus in Greece. Different schools of the history of religions thus imagined him differently, but most believed him to have been a historical person. His myths, especially the story about his healing of the daughters of Proetus, became an object of structuralist, ritual-based interpretations (see especially Dowden 1989). My dissertation aims to interpret the myths of Melampus not as abstract plots, but as narratives in their communicative context.

Interpreting context means first of all that one must clarify the closely related, and (particularly in the early period) often interdependent problems of speech- or performance-situation and literary genre. Speech-situation and social context; the relation of the narrator/speaker to his public (and to his models); the way he imagines or represents his own social role: in short, the “pragmatics” of narrative, constitute the most important elements which determine the genre, and therefore the meaning, of mythical narratives in early Greece. Literary narratives thus require narratological analysis. Comparing the different narratives of Melampus will make it possible to reach a diachronic, historical outline of how the memory of Melampus as a mythical seer developed (cf. Assmann 2003: 33). What changes did Melampus, as a symbol, undergo in different circumstances? What meanings did the figure gain or lose?

On account of the considerations mentioned above, I discuss the literary sources arranged according to their genre. Within the main chapters the analyses follow the chronological order of the texts.

III. Main Arguments

1. Epic

- a) In Homer's *Odyssey*, the story and figure of Melampus function as a paradigm or *exemplum*. The embedded narrator of Book 11 (Odysseus) makes the seer

resemble himself. In Book 15, the epic narrator ('Homer') retells the story of Melampus' cattle-raid in Phylace, and reaffirms the parallelism between Odysseus and Melampus. In both cases, the paradigmatic story displays an important characteristic of Homeric mythical exempla: it reveals more than what its narrator (Odysseus or the epic narrator) himself knows (cf. Edmunds 1997: 419). The seer can, however, serve only partially as a model for the epic hero, since his knowledge is incompatible with the world of heroes who can attain immortality only through fame (cf. Gresseth 1975). The seers' distance from the epic world is suggested by the Homeric narrator with several poetic devices, especially the use of non-epic genres. Both narratives about Melampus are told within the frames of genres different from heroic epic: catalogue- and genealogical poetry (cf. Sammons 2010).

- b) In the pseudo-Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women*, Melampus is transformed into a hero. The cattle raid, originally symbolic of an Underworld journey, becomes a heroic exploit. The story about the healing of the Proetids is already linked to Melampus by the poet of the *Catalogue of Women*; in the early 5th century, his persona is enriched with the traits of the healer-purifier. In contrast to the uniformly heroic world of the *Catalogue of Women*, in the *Megalai Eoiai* the non-heroic (shaman-like) traits of Melampus remain conspicuous.

2. Prose

- a) In the prose genealogy of Pherecydes of Athens (5th century BC), all the famous stories about Melampus are told, but the text does not give a coherent picture of him. In the cattle-raiding story he appears like a fairy-tale character; the healing of Iphiclos with a homeopathic cure lacks all divine agents (cf. Costanza 2010). In the story of the Proetids, however, he plays the part of the purifier who discloses and averts divine anger. The aristocratic seers of the age needed an outstanding ancestor who had accomplished great deeds (cf. West 1985:8–10). A possible explanation of the “theologically” incoherent picture is that Pherecydes presented the ancestor of the aristocratic *manteis* of his age according to their interests: Melampus was a seer endowed with exceptional abilities, who performed great deeds.
- b) Herodotus undoubtedly knew tradition about Melampus, and contested it by reshaping him into a wise man different both from the shaman-like figures of the

earlier mythical variants, as well as from the seers of his age (Book 2). He refuses to regard him as an ancestor of historical seers, and makes him the model of his own *persona* as a researcher. At the same time, in the story of Tisamenus (Book 9), he lets his own narratorial voice sound, through irony and polysemy, like the voice of an oracle. As an interpreter of signs and as a narrator of historical events, often revealing divine causes behind human occurrences, Herodotus shows himself to be a wise man, the true heir of mythical seers (cf. Hollmann 2011).

- c) Diodorus of Sicily (1st century BC) simplifies the figure of Melampus, and makes him fit his basically stoic world-view. He ignores his cattle-raiding story, and presents the healing of the Proetids as a charitable deed which deserves gratitude. Thus he places Melampus among „great personalities”, who perform deeds useful for humankind, and are morally irreproachable.
- d) The author of the *Bibliothèque* known as Apollodorus (1st – 2nd century AD) presents Melampus in his former glory. Although his narrative is frequently regarded as the standard version of the Melampus-myth, it is just as strongly determined by its context as the others. In the first centuries AD, as the Roman State tried to restrict divination through legislation, and Greek polytheism was challenged by monotheistic religions (Mactoux 1989), the presentation of the independent and perfectly professional Greek seer could be conceived as an emphatic message.

3. Choral lyric

- a) Bacchylides tells one of Melampus' most famous stories, the healing of the Proetids without him. He omits the mediator between the god and the human community, just as he completely omits from this ode the poetic self-reflexion, a characteristic feature of epinician poetry. The ode's mythical narrative seems to retain traces of the transformation of the tradition about Melampus. Bacchylides' attitude in this ode as a poet may be related to the political system of the victor's city, Metapontum (cf. Kurke 2000: 84). In the mythical narrative the crises are solved by the community, and nobody has a unique privilege of communication with the gods. The little we know about the political system about Metapontum points to the possibility, that it had a republican constitution.

- b) In his 4th paean, Pindar interprets Melampus in an unusual way. In three verses which are extremely difficult to translate, he does not change the tradition radically. Contrary to the interpretations so far propounded, my analysis suggests that Pindar represents Melampus as a man who didn't want to leave his country, but was constrained to leave and rule in Argos, using his mantic skills.

Owing to his extraordinarily rich symbolic content, Melampus could be an ancestor (or model) for seers employed by armies, or for the “religious professionals” (purifiers, healers) of the archaic and classical ages, as well as for an empirical researcher like Herodotus. However, he did not become part of living European memory, probably because he did not appear on the tragic stage. He is not a tragic figure: all of his exploits are successful.

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