

BOOK REVIEW

The Iliad: Structure, Myth, and Meaning. By BRUCE LOUDEN. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. Pp. vii + 337. Cloth, \$55.00. ISBN 0-8018-8280-X.

Although we comparativists hate to admit this, the identification of literary parallels is an undertaking that can run from shamanism to science, and the line between is often blurry. This is partially a matter of necessity—if the parallels were obvious, we would not still need to point them out after all these centuries. It takes a specialized instinct to home in on unnoticed verbal or structural similarities, and the unfortunate fact is that instincts are often wrong, and that the process (and its results) can be disconcertingly opaque to outsiders. In terms of credibility, therefore, the search for literary parallels falls somewhere between dowsing and truffle-sniffing: there are jackpots out there, but crackpots as well, and all too often it is unclear why someone is digging so hard in a spot—until they pull up a delicious treat.¹ The process should not be paranormal, but the cues the comparativist responds to may lie below the radar of readers unfamiliar with both canons, and may be difficult to clarify and quantify.

Making the transition from a powerful yet indefinable understanding of two texts to a compelling exposition of the relationship between them is difficult. Comparative work must have a leg in two fields, and it demands that separate disciplines be brought into alignment in such a way that their shared qualities are highlighted without being dwarfed by their differences. This brings a host of questions: Should one conduct the discourse in the language of field A or field B? And how much of each narrative should one recap, when too much will bore half the audience, but too little will frustrate the rest? That the process is difficult from start to finish is demonstrated by the paucity of book-length offerings. It is therefore a pleasure to welcome Bruce Louden's *The Iliad: Structure, Myth, and Meaning*, a companion to his 1999 book on the structure of the *Odyssey*. Though only half the volume deals directly with borrowing and cultural influence, all of it addresses issues that are as fundamental to the comparative process as they are to understanding Homer in isolation. The complaints and concerns about each part that follow should accordingly be taken as evidence of the engagement and interest Louden's work provokes.

Chapters 1–4 treat L.'s vision of a structural framework upon which the *Iliad* is composed and represent an attempt to answer fundamental questions about the nature of the individual units of which

¹ Example include Hansen, "Odysseus and the Oar: A Folkloric Approach," in "Approaches to Greek Myth," L. Edmunds, ed., (Baltimore, 1990); Jamison, "Draupadi on the Walls of Troy," *CA* 13 (1994) 5–14; Larson, "Hermes and Lugalbanda," *CP* 100 (2005) 1–16.

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oral poetry is composed. In L.'s analysis, the *Iliad* has three major movements: two roughly analogous 20-part segments (expressions of the "principal narrative pattern") in Books 4–7 and 20–4, bracketing a "parodic" or inverted version of the pattern in Books 8 and 11–17. The motifs within the principal narrative pattern concern the cycle of activity leading up to and through one *aristeia* by a "best of the Achaeans," as Diomedes and Achilles take their turns in the role. The Books that introduce each iteration of the cycle (1–2, 9–10, 18–19) are handled separately as an "introductory" pattern. Finally, motifs from the principal narrative pattern appear in Book 3 in a reduced form, serving as an "overture."

That the *Iliad* divides into three movements has been argued before (as L. acknowledges, though he draws his divisions differently than his predecessors), and cross-culturally most tales break into three phases of action. Beyond this, L.'s analysis is not simple or unencumbered. Without question, L. has seized on symmetries I had never noticed, and he may have hit upon a significant chunk of the narrative-generation matrix of the *Iliad*. But stripping a complex piece of literature down to a skeleton requires over-simplifications, glossings-over, substitutions and acknowledged deviations, and for L.'s reader, absorbing these and their implications is a slow process. Doubtless, oral poets kept a checklist like the one L. describes in their minds as they composed, using it as a template that allowed them to follow the established tale, while remaining free to elaborate some elements and abbreviate or eliminate others. But where L. sees the Homeric narrative as something approaching a Near Eastern cylinder-seal rolling over and over on wet clay, I lean toward a vision of it as a Hindu *mandala*, with interlocking rings of meaning, a labyrinth of forking paths and doublets facing one another at the compass points. Others may well see a temple frieze of stylized and variable repetition. Within the larger picture, there can also be disagreement as to what are significant elements in the narrative, and what is padding or filler; a pivotal moment in the narrative to some is a throw-away scene in the eyes of others. In any case, L. has an eagle-eye for philological comparanda, and a rare willingness to address the poem simultaneously on the large and the small scale. Whether he has uncovered the poets' secret compositional tool, or merely an intriguing set of artifacts of its construction, his schema is an intriguing exposition of the patterns and variations on a theme that run through the epics.

The second section of L.'s book (Chapters 5–7) treats a variety of Homeric themes and elements that seem to have been adopted from Near Eastern literature. Many of these are dead-on. I require little further convincing that the *Iliad* contains some reflex of Old Testament siege myths (pp. 149–54), wrathful gods bringing down an

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apocalypse on a city (pp. 226–35), or the NE “one just man” figure (pp. 235–9), or that the Destructive Dream from *Iliad* 2 may have ties to similar Old Testament tales (pp. 163–7). Chapter 7 is also wholly convincing that Athena was shaped in part by characteristics imported from the Ugaritic goddess Anat (pp. 240–85), and that Ares may have been similarly shaped by elements originating with Baal (pp. 251–7).

But while some of the elements L. identifies in Homer may have been tempered by exposure to Near Eastern tales, there is no getting around the fact that Indo-European proto-epic is just as likely a source for many of them. These include divine councils (pp. 207–9), most of the characteristics of the hero (pp. 167–82), and warrior-priestly-caste conflict (pp. 158–60). While story-pattern borrowing in the ancient world was widespread, the epics of Greece have Indo-European ancestors as well, and when themes or motifs are shared with other Indo-European epics, an inherited tradition is a more straightforward source than a borrowing. And, as always, many of these motifs may simply be universal—a quick look at British history, for example, makes it clear that a poet probably never needed to look far for inspiration about warrior and priestly caste conflict.

It is unfortunate that for reasons of space L. was unable to include an expanded proposal of the path/pattern/timetable of transmission for myths and story-patterns from the Ancient Near East to Greece (restricting his discussion to a few paragraphs on pp. 12–13, and another on p. 289). The ample evidence of contact between Ugarit and Mycenae, both at the height of their powers between 1400–1200 BCE, is comfortable for Ugaritic borrowings, but expanded discussion regarding the timeline and nature of transmission would be interesting and worthwhile. L. also does not systematically address the import of the various similarities he details between the *Iliad* and Old Testament mythology. Particularly welcome would be discussion of how the similarities came to be; presumably the OT parallels under consideration are relics of earlier NE literature that survive in no other form, and that this earlier form was passed to the Greeks as well. While it is worthwhile to merely note the correspondences, the really difficult work of putting them into a historical context is a large part of making them useful to other scholars.

Also welcome would be more discussion of the nature of the contact that led to the borrowings and its relationship to the possible timelines for borrowing. It is hard to imagine the cultural transfer required to get these motifs into Homer as a speedy process, as L. acknowledges (p. 289). Story-patterns usually evolve slowly, and there is an enormous resistance to alteration of a beloved tale, particularly when it is bound up with national identity. But perhaps the process need not always be so slow. Cultures do not borrow objects

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or technologies without a powerful innate attraction towards them: Thailand and India have only had the chili pepper since the 1500s, but chilis are now the hallmark of their cuisines. Thus it may have been with the epics. If the Homeric epics retained an Indo-European element, adopted a Near Eastern one, or incorporated a folktale, this happened because the poets felt that that element belonged in the story, and if their audience disagreed, the element would surely have disappeared again. Understanding how these various threads formed the version of the *Iliad* we have will contribute to our understanding not only of the epic itself, but of the world in which it was shaped, and the oral-poetic processes that formed it. *The Iliad: Structure, Myth, and Meaning* takes us another generous step forward on that path.

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