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Storytelling in Ancient Egypt and Ancient Greece: a Progress Report

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In 2011 I started a research project that compares aspects of narrative writing in two corpora of ancient Egyptian and Greek literary narratives. The selected works represent all sub-genres that Egyptologists and Classicists conventionally group together in the shade of the widely defined umbrella of Narrative Literature in Egypt and Greece. This study aims at actualizing a unique encounter between these two cultures of narrative writing that during the longest part of their history were probably not engaged in consistent interaction, although occasionally one discovers in these corpora subtle acknowledgements of each other's existence, as well as moderate evidence for one narrative culture borrowing a small number of the other's stylistic and thematic features.

However intriguing the establishment of literary parallels may be, the primary goal of this comparative study is, actually, not to explore and prove the historical relationship between the Egyptian and Greek worlds of literature. Instead, it serves as a *historicized* (and not *historical*) attempt at gathering clues from the study of the two corpora that may be used to understand better the development of Egyptian and Greek narrative writing and identify the role its stylistic techniques and conventions played in this.

Such a Comparative Literature-like approach is preferred to the conventional historical, as it offers new perspectives over the corpora of Egyptian and Greek narrative and a more balanced methodological strategy that avoids disciplinary (and in some cases even nationalistic) agendas that often infest works on intercultural contact and influence.

As part of my work so far, I have been able to draw a number of significant overarching similarities and differences between the Egyptian and Greek corpora (and between their processes of producing literature) that affect the scholarly method of analyzing and interpreting literary works of this sort. I will briefly offer here some examples of such general trends noted in the course of my comparative study.

Firstly, one may observe that both corpora share strong links to the world of orality. Throughout the corpus of Egyptian narratives these links are manifested in their written language style, among other things, which often employed figures of speech that facilitated oral circulation by breaking parts of the running text into short memorable verbal units, i.e. oral formulae. In addition, some of the Egyptian authors acknowledged such links to orality by describing in their narratives situations that involved oral storytelling performances – as was the case, for instance, in Pap. Westcar's *Tales of Wonder*.

Signs of similar links to the world of orality abound in the Greek corpus, and especially in its members that represent the narrative sub-genre of epic poetry – compare, for example, the aforementioned Egyptian signs of orality to the famous oral-formulaic theories on Homer or the reference to the singer Demodocus's performance in the *Odyssey*.[1] The effect of these links felt strongly in the selected epic poems decrease dramatically in the cases of Greek prose narrative, suggesting different types of circulation for the two genres of narrative writing and different altogether relationship with the world of orality.

In addition, both corpora also display a dynamic relationship with their national mythologies and historical records, two depositories of cultural knowledge from which the Egyptian and Greek authors frequently drew material and juggled the opposing forces of History and Fiction. Thus, for instance, some of the Egyptian authors, resembling in this the Homeric epics or Hesiod's *Theogony*, did not hesitate to allow in their stories the active involvement of anthropomorphized deities, welcoming the contributions of the mythico-religious world of the Egyptian Divine to plot progress or to the stories' moral and didactic backbone – as was the case, for instance, in the *Two Brothers* or *Horus and Seth*. In other examples some Egyptian and Greek authors chose instead to draw more material from the available historical records, linking characters and situations in their stories to aspects of their national history – see, for example, the *Report of Wenamun* or the *Alexander Romance*. In every case of mythological or historical references the ancient authors made sure that the proper cultural conventions and rules of decorum were used, enhancing in this way the pragmatic value of their narratives and creating convincingly possible literary worlds in which their audiences were invited to partake (what Literary Studies call "storyworlds").[2]

As was the case with mythological and historical references drawn from specific sources, most of the Egyptian and Greek authors appear to have been reluctant in acknowledging their sources, and especially foreign sources that may have influenced their literary writings. In the Greek corpus there are a small

number of references to other Greek sources, by which the authors acknowledged the inevitable presence of intertextuality, surely a defining universal element of every literary creation.[3] Apart from these few attestations to influence from other literary works, it was through various genre markers that the Greek authors tried to link their writings to one or more literary traditions – namely, to that amorphous, but self-aware, blend of memories of eponymous writers and their contributions, and of recognizable genre markers in continuous usage, such as prose or verse form, meter, travelling motif, and so on.

The Egyptian authors were even less eager than their Greek colleagues to acknowledge either Egyptian or non-Egyptian sources, graciously leaving the detection of instances of intertextuality to the trembling hands of scholarly analysis of parallels in the language and contents of the surviving Egyptian works. This striking reluctance by the Egyptian authors to utilize intertextuality in their narratives can be explained to some extent, I believe, as a result of the high degree of anonymity that characterized Egyptian authorship and literary production.

Indeed, the Egyptian narratives under study did not include any explicit references to their authors. Instead, in some cases the colophons of the stories mentioned the names of the scribes who copied the text, in an attempt to assure the literary audience, or perhaps the handlers of text storage and transmission, that the works were copied successfully and completely. This Egyptian preference for anonymity, as opposed to the more common Greek practice of ascribing texts to specific authors, is difficult to explain. Some scholars, like John Baines and Richard Parkinson, have argued convincingly that this was due to the literary works' close connection to orally transmitted entertainment or folklore.[4] Moreover, one should also pay attention to the close association of Egyptian writers' anonymous status with the anonymity of Egyptian artisans, like those who produced monumental inscriptions or pieces of art; this overall inclination to anonymity possibly reflected a conscious attempt to emphasize institutional patronage over artistic individualism.

The anonymity that characterizes Egyptian literary production led their authors to explore other ways of situating their narratives in the world of Egyptian literary production. Hence instead of citing a name or a title, they used regularly, like their Greek colleagues, genre markers to indicate to which genre or literary tradition their work as a whole (or parts of it) related. Accordingly, most of the Egyptian authors acknowledged influence not from specific literary works, as was the case with some of the Greek narratives, but from whole literary traditions.

Finally, one should also note the important differences between the Egyptian and Greek ways of written, narrative communication, deriving from the usage of different languages and scripts. These differences include, for instance, the presence of an inherent, pictorial, communicative value in the Egyptian language, which influenced to some extent literary writing (although Egyptian literary works were mainly transcribed in the cursive hieratic or demotic scripts), as opposed to the Greek language that lacked this pictorial value and had to communicate images in a pure verbal way. This resulted, among other things, in the fact that Greek narratives employed a much larger pool of adjectives than Egyptian ones. In addition, Greek narrative language had the benefit of a more flexible word order that allowed its writers to use the positioning of words in text, for example, as a tool for applying emphasis, producing sound-based figures of speech, or fitting text in metrically defined verse. By contrast, Egyptian narrative language, whose sentence structure was more inflexible and bound by rigid syntactic constructions, involved an extensive usage of repetition.

More such intriguing similarities and differences continue to be generated by this ambitious comparative project, part of whose results are planned to be published in a monograph on ancient storytelling in 2015.

Notes

1 Demodocus performs three narrative songs at the court of Alcinoous, King of the Phaeacians, on the island of Scherie, included in the *Odyssey*'s Book 8.

2 As Uri Margolin does, for example, in his "Naming and believing: practices of the proper name in narrative fiction", *Narrative* 10 (2002): 107-27.

3 See, for instance, the Homeric saying uttered by the knowledgeable Calarisis in Heliodorus's *Aithiopica* 3.12.2.5-6.

4 See, for example, J. Baines, "Interpreting the story of the shipwrecked sailor", *JEA* 76 (1990): 58-9, and R. Parkinson, *Poetry and culture in the Middle Kingdom Egypt: a dark side to perfection*, Studies in Egyptology and the Ancient Near East (London; Oakville: 2002), 56-7