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Review of Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*

Dan Ben-Amos

University of Pennsylvania, dbamos@sas.upenn.edu

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Review of Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*

Abstract

In this work Patai proposes to trace the historical development of the female deity in Jewish religion and mysticism. He bases his study of this figure on anthropological-psychological theory and substantiates his ideas with a battery of archeological, historical, cultural, and literary evidence assembled chronologically. Occasionally Patai resorts to comparative methodology.

Disciplines

Cultural History | History of Religion | Jewish Studies | Near and Middle Eastern Studies | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

of memory units; if we speak in Proppian terms, Villainy is always followed—sooner or later, but in the same story—by Victory over the villain. That storytellers can master sequences lasting over six hours (I have a Melanesian myth which does just that) can be explained by the high redundancy of the materials and by the logic—be it our logic or others’—that governs the whole.

Many other questions must be raised. The authors supply a great number of tree diagrams (representing phrase structure analysis, not transformations), but it is an act of faith to accept them. On page 32, for example, a myth sequence is rewritten first as consisting of a set of variations on the theme of fertility, then on the theme of age, then on upriver versus downriver, then on mother-daughter relations, and last as two variants. One can see how it would be possible to trail the significance of fertility and its transformations from one variant to another, but how can “elder” be rewritten as “downriver”? Another question in linguistics: It is easy to see the distinction of “properly formed sentences” versus “nonsentences” for the reason that both are observable, say, in the speech of children, but where, in comparison, does one observe “nonmyths”? The notion is no doubt acceptable, but one may ask what we can know about “not properly formed” myth sequences at present.

The authors are right in comparing Lévi-Straussian and Chomskian concepts as they do, but beyond this I differ with them. Lévi-Strauss does not analyze constituent structures, but transformational structures; he defines a myth as consisting of all its variants. Thus, myth emerges as a language, but as a *universal* language. Transformations take place at the borders of cultures, and transformers are cultural differences; the deep structures are the basic oppositions each collectivity has slowly formed. If there is a basic stock of motifs, these are comparable to phone types, that is to say, without significance as such. Their use and the way in which configurations are built of them make them “mythemes” or “motifemes” of which the messages, actual myths, are built.

The volume at hand is provoking, and it is warmly recommended for study. It is a pity the authors rushed the publication, for the entire volume bears witness to haste. There are numerous proofreading mistakes, incompletely quoted diagrams, references to other articles “in this volume,” and so on. The authors’ intuition, one feels, is fruitful, but pending a more careful exposition one’s feeling remains intuitive.

Laboratoire d'anthropologie sociale
du Collège de France et de l'École
pratique des hautes études
Paris, France

ELLI KÖNGÄS MARANDA

The Hebrew Goddess. By Raphael Patai. ([New York]: Ktav Publishing House, 1967. Pp. 349, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$8.95.)

In this work Patai proposes to trace the historical development of the female deity in Jewish religion and mysticism. He bases his study of this figure on anthropological-psychological theory and substantiates his ideas with a battery of archeological, historical, cultural, and literary evidence assembled chronologically. Occasionally Patai resorts to comparative methodology.

On the basis of Freudian and Jungian psychoanalytical theories of culture and Father

Schmidt's conception of the evolution of religion, Patai postulates that the transition from nomadic to agricultural society, which the Hebrews went through with the conquest of Canaan, led to the addition of a female deity to a religious system dominated by a patriarchic male figure. The Hebrews found this female deity in Canaanite mythology and quickly adopted it for their own ritual and beliefs. The goddesses Asherah and Astarte-Anath constituted complex religious symbols representing the conflicting traits of chastity and promiscuity, motherliness and warlike character. Prophets and priests who preached monotheism never approved of them, and thus their worship was confined to folk religion. The only manifestation of the male-female duality in the normative monotheistic religion appeared in the decoration of the cherubim in both the Solomonic Temple and its postexilic reconstruction.

Patai's main thesis is that the post-Biblical and medieval symbolic-metaphoric female personifications in Jewish literature, religion, and mysticism—the Shekhina and Matronit—are late manifestations of the Canaanite Asherah and Astarte-Anath. As long as Patai stays within the framework of the comparative method, he is able to maintain this theory. It is indeed possible to abstract the four qualities of chastity, promiscuity, motherliness, and warlike character from some, if not all, of these four goddesses—as well as from female deities in Japanese, Indian, Iranian, and other religions. The very plausibility of Patai's theory from a comparative and psychological-anthropological point of view, however, casts serious doubts on his attempts to reconstruct the historical continuity of the female worship and its development from the deities of folk religion in Biblical times to the post-Biblical and medieval mystical symbols. Since the Hebrew goddess shares similar traits with female deities of other religions, it is not self-evident that the later figure of Matronit, for example, is a reappearance of Astarte-Anath, as Patai contends. The mystics and the medieval cabalists who speculated about the actions and nature of the mother-goddess and her relations to the father-god could have derived their conception of her from diversified sources with which they had historical contacts, or they may have developed their own system of symbolic images.

The differences in function, usage, content, and context between the earlier and the later representations of the Hebrew goddess in Patai's scheme are equal to, if not more numerous than, the similarities. Patai's discussion of the individual female personifications demonstrates this fact. A historical reconstruction of their emergence in Jewish thought and religion must take into account both the source of these qualities and their symbolic meanings. Once these are accounted for, it is quite possible that the history of these female deities will have altogether different outlines.

Although hypotheses about the historical emergence of the various feminine personifications and the exact relationships between them and other goddesses require further study, Patai's discussion of the individual metaphors and representations of femininity is based on a thorough knowledge of the primary sources. In one case, however, Patai extends the notion of the Hebrew goddess beyond reasonable limits. He views the Sabbath as a manifestation of holy femininity, considering it as a virgin, bride, queen, and goddess. The epithets bride and queen are commonly used metaphorically when referring to the Sabbath in Jewish poetry, prayers, and mystical speculations; however, by including the Sabbath in the category of religious figures Patai crosses the thin line between metaphor and myth, a step the Jews themselves refrained from taking. The Sabbath is a holy, temporal entity. Poetically it is described in feminine terms; how-

ever, both the poets and the worshipers are conscious of the metaphoric value of these epithets, and they do not confuse poetry with religion.

Though each individual chapter in this book contains a thorough discussion of a feminine figure in Hebrew and Jewish religion and mysticism, the Hebrew goddess as a continuous historical image is a construct that still suffers from too many missing links.

A final comment on the actual production of the book. The place of publication is missing from the title page and the overleaf, and the notes to the Introduction are not to be found anywhere in the book. Ktav, a New York publishing company that undertook the commendable but expensive and commercially risky venture of reprinting books on Jewish folklore, literature, and culture, cannot afford such negligence.

University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

DAN BEN-AMOS

Folk Narrative

Folktales of China. Edited by Wolfram Eberhard. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965. Pp. 267, foreword, introduction, notes, bibliography, indexes. \$5.50.)

Although Chinese scholars usually felt pleased when foreign scholars wrote about their culture, their response to British and American books on Chinese folklore published before 1932 was not always favorable. Occasionally, a persistent boner—such as that the sixteenth-century *Feng shen yen-i* was a very early work and thus the primary source of Chinese mythology—could ruffle the temper of a restrained scholar like Chao Ching-shen. The first worthy book in English appeared in 1932, when R. D. Jameson published his *Three Lectures on Chinese Folklore*. Unfortunately, beyond a few great findings, Professor Jameson padded his work with speculations based on psychoanalysis and solar mythology.

Folktales of China, in my opinion, is definitely the best volume on Chinese folklore ever written in the English language. All tales in this volume may be traced back to authentic Chinese texts, and all but one (no. 73) are acknowledged folk narratives. The translation is idiomatic and readable. Many Chinese terms and customs are explained in the notes, and motifs and types are liberally provided. The editor, whose *Typen Chinesischer Volksmärchen* represents the only effort to date to systematize Chinese tales and whose *Chinese Fairy Tales and Folk Tales* is the principal source of this collection, is well known not only in the West but also to Chinese folklorists, who used to regard him with affection and esteem. Undoubtedly here is a book all readers, including even critical Chinese readers, will enjoy and admire.

Two points in this book, which may puzzle some Western readers, need some explanation. First, many entries (15, 16, 36, 40, 47, 48, 57, 64, 75, and most of the tales in Part I) appear to be legends or myths rather than *Märchen*. Second, tales from the coastal provinces of China far outnumber those from the interior. Among those who know Chinese folklore, however, neither of the two points would cause raised eyebrows. With regard to the first point, specific personal and geographic names do appear in the vast majority of Chinese tales, but these names often vary from version to version,