Comments on Comparative Mythology 3, About Trifunctionalism and the Judgment of Paris

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For example:

§0. In the previous post, *Classical Inquiries* 2020.02.21, at §9, I introduced the idea of “trifunctionalism,” applied by the linguist Georges Dumézil in his analysis of myths about three kinds of “sins” committed by the hero Hēraklēs in the course of performing his otherwise exemplary heroic exploits. In terms of this idea, Hēraklēs committed his three “sins” by violating the three social “functions” of (1) sovereignty, (2) warfare, and (3) what I described in the previous post, at §10, as “reproductivity.” In the present post, I will offer an explanation for the wording I used to describe the “third function,” and I will do while moving beyond the myths about Hēraklēs and concentrating instead on a different Greek myth—this one, about the Judgment of Paris. In this myth as well, Dumézil finds an example of trifunctionalism, analyzing the challenge faced by the hero Paris in having to choose which of three rival goddesses—Hērā or Athena or Aphrodite—is supreme. For an example of the many visual retellings of this myth, I have chosen for the lead illustration here a vase painting that shows a scene where Paris is confronted by the three contending goddesses, each one of them arriving at the scene in her own personalized chariot. These three goddesses, as we will see, stand for the three “functions” of trifunctionalism. In my essay, I will focus on the oldest attested verbal retelling of this myth, deployed near the end of the Homeric *Iliad.*
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§1. Although trifunctionalism, as Dumézil showed in numerous publications, is a prominent feature of myths transmitted in languages that linguists classify as "Indo-European," he found it difficult to find clear examples in the case of ancient Greek myths, even though the Greek language is relatively more conservative, as a language, than most other surviving languages that belong to the Indo-European "family" of languages. This difficulty experienced by Dumézil is described most clearly in his Mythe et épopee I (1968 [1995:607–614]), where he goes out of his way to observe that the epic traditions of ancient Greece, represented primarily by the Homeric Iliad and Odyssey, show remarkably few traces of trifunctionalism—especially by comparison with the epic traditions of ancient India—except for one shining example, which is, a passing reference in Iliad 24 to the Judgment of Paris.

§2. In Iliad 24.25–29, it is said in passing that Hērā, Poseidon, and Athena each held an eternal grudge against the city of Troy (25–27), all on account of the atē or 'derangement' of the Trojan prince Paris (27), who had offended the two goddesses Hērā and Athena by saying negative things about them while saying positive things about the goddess Aphrodite (29–30):

ός νείκεσσε θεὰς ὃτε οἱ μέσασαυλὸν ἱκοντο,
τὴν δ’ ἥμησ’ ὣ ὁ πόρε μαχλοσύνην ἀλλειπεῖν

... who [= Paris/Alexandros] blamed [neikeîn] the goddesses [= Hērā and Athena] when they came to his pastoral station, while he praised [aineîn] the one [= Aphrodite] who gave him wantonness that caused grief.

§3. In my own published comments on Dumézil's model of trifunctionalism as attested in Greek myths, the first example I ever cited was this same myth about the Judgment of Paris: I did so in my contribution to a Festschrift published in honor of Dumézil (Nagy 1981:144, 145n), mentioned already in the previous posting, and then, more broadly, in a book about Greek mythology and poetics (Nagy 1990:16–17).

§4. In those comments of mine, however, I argued that Dumézil's Indo-European model of trifunctionalism is workable in the myth about the Judgment of Paris only when we view it in the context of another Indo-European model that is likewise at work here. In terms of this other model, there is a contrast being made in the lines I just quoted, Iliad 24.29–30, between the negative wording of Paris about Hērā and Athena, which reflects the poetics of blame, and his positive wording about Aphrodite, which reflects the poetics of praise. Such a contrast, as we will now see, is relevant to an essential aspect of the third function in the trifunctionalism of the myth about the Judgment of Paris.

§5. As background for my argumentation, I epitomize the relevant comments I made, with bibliography, in A Sampling of Comments on the Iliad and Odyssey (2017):

§5A. On Iliad 3.100. The word eris 'strife' here refers to the Trojan War in general (there is a comparable reference in Pindar Paean 6.50–53). The speaker is Menelaos the Achaean, who claims a juridical grievance on the part of the Achaeans against the Trojans. In terms of the thinking revealed by these words, the beginning of the strife was the abduction of Helen, wife of Menelaos the Achaean, by Paris the Trojan. Accentuating the idea that this juridical grievance of Menelaos was an affair of state is the reference to Paris here by way of his princely name, Alexandros. In royal Hittite correspondences where the Hittite king...
speaks to and about the king of Ahhiyawa—which is the Hittite way of referring to the land of the Achaeansthe king. Even though Eurystheus is inferior to Herakles as a hero, he is socially superior to Herakles because the god’s plan for him to follow the orders of Eurystheus as king by performing Labors imposed by this god (A) Herakles violates a sovereign function linked with Zeus when this hero momentarily hesitates to accept what I said in the previous posting, by Herakles when he tries to marry the princess Iole without formally divorcing his wife Deianeira. I repeat here what I said at §9 about the trifunctional “sins” of Herakles as narrated by DioDorus of Sicily (4.8–30):

(A) Herakles violates a sovereign function linked with Zeus when this hero momentarily hesitates to accept the god’s plan for him to follow the orders of Eurystheus as king by performing Labors imposed by this king. Even though Eurystheus is inferior to Herakles as a hero, he is socially superior to Herakles because he is king.
(B) Hēraklēs violates a war-making function linked with Zeus when this hero murders another hero, Iphitos, by way of trickery.

(C) Hēraklēs violates a reproductive function linked with Zeus when this hero disregards the protocols of courtship by attempting to marry the princess Iole without formally divorcing his wife Deianeira.

§10. Here too, as in the case of Paris, a hero undervalues fertility by way of overvaluing the sexual aspect of the third function. Such undervaluing is a "sin" against the third function, and the negative attitude toward such a "sin" in the myths about these two heroes is an aspect of the overall Indo-European tradition of trifunctionalism. The third function must be protected against such "sins." But how to protect? Here is where the poetics of praise and blame, representing another Indo-European tradition, can interweave with the Indo-European tradition of trifunctionalism. The third function—and in fact all three functions— are protected by the poetics of praise and blame, where the absence and the presence of "sins" can be praised and blamed respectively. The negative attitude of the Homeric Iliad, as poetry, toward the "sin" of Paris is a striking example of such poetics, where we see Paris being blamed in terms of the myth. His "sin" in the Iliad is to praise in an incomplete way the power of Aphrodite, since he views her only as a source of sexuality, not of fertility. His poetics of praise and blame are thus mistaken, since he praises an incomplete Aphrodite and, symmetrically, he blames an incomplete Hērā and an incomplete Athena. As we will see in postings still to come, Hērā too has affinities with the third function, and so too does Athena.

See the dynamic Bibliography for Comments on Comparative Mythology.

Tags: Aphrodite, Athena, Georges Dumézil, Hera, Herakles, Indo-European, Judgment of Paris, Paris, Poseidon, trifunctionalism, Troy

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