Results of the project “Repetition in ancient Egyptian storytelling”

In the course of my research during Spring 2014 I have discovered a number of intriguing parallels between the uses of repetition in some ancient Egyptian narratives and the ancient Greek epic (represented mainly by the well-known poems by Homer, Hesiod, and Apollonius of Rhodes). My conclusion was that the celebrated formulaic theory by Albert Lord and Milman Parry, which originally applied to the Homeric epics, can to some extent be used to explain the regulated usage of formulaic language in some ancient Egyptian narrative works, such as the Late Egyptian Contendings of Horus and Seth and Two Brothers.

In addition, I explored the effects of repetition on literary characters’ reliable reporting of past events or messages. The rule seems to have been that verbatim repetition contributed to positive characterization, as its user-character was portrayed as a reliable person who neither forgot nor deliberately omitted any details when communicating a story or a message to another character. Apart from contributing to characterization, in the Egyptian narratives long passages were often repeated for pragmatic purposes, to imitate reality and its plurality of points of view (or, what the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin famously called a novel’s “polyphony”), which often results in the repetition of whole stories and messages. Sometimes, however, the Egyptian storytellers restricted these effects of mimesis for stylistic purposes. For instance, they sometimes repeated passages for the sake of emphasis or for dramatic effect, instead of mimicking reality, or avoided repetition altogether to stress the untrustworthiness or insignificance of a specific character. The degree to which in each narrative, as well as the manner in which, mimesis was sacrificed for literariness, or vice versa, can be used as a criterion for identifying different styles among Egyptian storytellers.

All these observations were discussed in detail and were expanded into a chapter on repetition in Egyptian literature, which will be incorporated into my forthcoming book “Let me have your Majesty hear a marvel”: aspects of narrative writing in ancient Egypt.

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