

BOOK REVIEWS

GENERAL

CROOK, AMY K., JELENA O. KRSTOVIC, DANIEL G. MAROWSKI, Editors.
Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism Volume 26: Excerpts from Criticism of the Works of World Authors from Classical Antiquity through the Fourteenth Century, from the First Appraisals to Current Evaluations.
Detroit: Gale Research, 1998. xii + 510 pages. Illustrations, cumulative indexes. Hardcover US\$166.75; ISBN 0-7876-2405-5.

The Gale series *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism* (CMLC), which is one of thirteen series on world literature, offers useful information about works written by authors who died before 1400. Volume 26 provides introductions, overviews, and interpretations of specific themes concerning Celtic mythology, Eastern mythology, Greek mythology, and Norse mythology.

The section on Celtic mythology starts by examining the mythology from a historical perspective. Celtic culture had various branches with different traditions and, as P. MacCana points out, "to speak of 'Celtic mythology' is not to imply a close unity, but merely to recognize a tangible relationship based upon common inheritance." The existence of reliable sources is a prerequisite for mythological studies. Knowledge of Gaulish mythology mainly relies on secondhand Roman reports, and this makes scholars particularly cautious when dealing with the mythological world of continental Celts. Wales has a number of manuscript compilations, but they contain rather scattered mythological motifs that lack a solid narrative framework. Irish literature, on the contrary, preserves a vast quantity of pre-Christian material of a highly conservative character. The question of how early Celtic mythology compares with other Indo-European mythologies is presented in an essay by J. Puhvel. Three essays, which include one originally published in 1898 by W. B. Yeats, discuss the importance of Celtic myth to modern European literature, the relationship between historical and fabulous figures, and the nature of Irish mythological heroes. Other writings deal with the divinities and the religious beliefs of the Celts, and stress the role of the druids, who were the mediators between men and gods in Celtic cultures. The final thirty pages of this section focus on the Fenian Cycle, the most popular of the Celtic story cycles, that takes its name from the warrior-hero Fionn mac Cumhaill.

The Eastern mythology section offers a selection of writings on Asian myths, touching on problems related to the ancient Egyptian, Babylonian, Indo-European, and Japanese literatures. The Egyptian religious worldview is introduced in an essay by R. Anthes about the interconnections between the mythical complex of Osiris and the rituals of ancient Egypt. C. S. Littleton outlines the "Kingship in Heaven" theme in a study that deals not only with the Indo-European versions of the story but also with the Phoenician and Babylonian theogonical traditions (the "Kingship in Heaven" theme also returns in the Greek mythology section, cf. pp. 223–24). A recent essay by A. R. Schulman about royal Egyptian myths underlines the need for critical acumen in handling information contained in ancient documents. In our

modern world, the scholar says, people tend to view what they read, see, or hear in the media with a modicum of suspicion, whereas they blindly accept the contents of ancient documents, as if in antiquity no one lied or distorted the truth. Historians in particular must guard against this tendency. A look at East Asian traditions is provided in an essay by W. M. Kelsey about the role of the snake in Japanese pre-Buddhist and Buddhist literature on evil and salvation. An indication of the possible socioeconomic implications of mythology can be found in recent considerations by K. D. Irani, who evokes a connection between some themes of the sacred lore of the Indo-Europeans and technological practices like metallurgy and the manufacturing of steel arms. Babylonian myth and ritual and the ancient epics of India are presented and discussed in the two final essays of this section.

After a general introduction, the section on Greek mythology usefully reprints a piece written in 1928 by H. J. Rose that reviews the various approaches to interpreting the tales of the Greeks since ancient times, from allegorical theory to modern psychological analysis. An essay by W. F. Hansen begins by emphasizing "the impressive fact that many motifs and stories known from modern oral tradition were already in oral circulation in ancient Greece" and calls for an inclusive category of the oral story. Other writings are dedicated to the origins and development of Greek mythology, and to the difficult question of discerning the influence exerted by other mythical sources by derivation from a common tradition. In the subsection "Cosmogonies and Divinities in Greek Mythology" one can read an essay by G. S. Kirk that provides a classification of myths about Greek divinities and a review of their content; an essay by E. F. Edinger that gives a psychological reading of the Greek creation myths; and an essay by R. Buxton that reconsiders, among other themes, the question of believing in myths and holding apparently incompatible beliefs, as raised in P. Veyne's book *Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes?* and elsewhere. Other subsections deal with heroes, heroines, and women in Greek mythology. Kirk underlines the narrative complexity of hero myths and outlines a classification of them. In a more recent study, D. Lyons suggests the presence of a feminine form of the idea of the "hero" in Greek archaic texts. C. Kerényi describes some paradoxical aspects of the representation of feminine characters in Greek mythology. C. Sprenak argues that a native matriarchal oral tradition was transformed by the mythical expressions of the patriarchal social order brought to Greece by successive waves of invaders; R. E. Meagher also notes the subversion of earlier oral traditions in which women were creators rather than creatures born to bring evil to men as in Hesiod.

The last section is on Norse mythology, whose sources, similar to Celtic ones, were written down rather late, but which nonetheless provide accounts of old Icelandic sagas, of the origin of the world, of the rise and fall of the gods, and so on. Subsections describe the historical context and the culture of Norse people, the Norse pantheon, and Eddic poetry. The Eddic myth of creation, summarized by J. A. MacCulloch, resembles very closely the creation myths of other cultures such as those found in India and China in which a giant's body parts become the various elements of the cosmos. P. H. Salus and P. B. Taylor review the Icelandic poetic tradition touching on forms and meter. J. Harris outlines the debates about the oral nature of Eddic poetry. Jungian psychology is used to analyze Icelandic myths in an essay by H. K. Sehmsdorf. G. Sigurdsson deals with some analogies between Irish folktales and Icelandic myths, concluding that they are the results of the cultural exchanges that took place in the British Isles between the Scandinavians and Gaels around the year 1000.

Lists for further reading at the end of each section add bibliographical information to the notes that follow the essays. Various indexes, including the Gale Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author and Topic indexes, complete the volume.

The book is a helpful introduction to the themes it deals with. The interpretations and assessment offered cover a wide range, and the reprinting of a certain amount of commentary

on each topic is surely very useful for students. One would wish to find works like CMLC on the reference shelves of every library.

Paolo VILLANI
Istituto Universitario Orientale
Napoli

MIEDER, WOLFGANG, and ANNA TÓTHNÉ LITOVKINA. *Twisted Wisdom: Modern Anti-Proverbs*. Supplement Series of Proverbium, Volume 4. Burlington: University of Vermont, 1999. 254 pages. Illustrations, bibliography. Paper US\$10.

In the Marx Brothers movie *Monkey Business* Groucho and Chico enter a barn to foil the crooks. As Groucho starts up the stairs, the kidnapper yells down: "You keep out of this loft." When Groucho turns and goes back down, Chico consoles him: "Well, it's better to have loft and lost than never to have loft at all." Normally, amid all the wisecracks and slapstick, I would not have noticed Chico's response, but I had just been reading *Twisted Wisdom*. Chico's saying is an example of how proverbs can be manipulated for jokes, social commentary, and advertising eye catchers. *Twisted Wisdom* is a collection of the original versions of proverbs, their meaning, and their new applications. It is more of a resource book than something one would read through, a handy reference tool for those interested in language use and in proverbs in particular.

The six-page Introduction is a gem of succinct information and analysis. The subtitle's "anti-proverbs" seems, at first, to be too severe a word for such clever examples of wordplay; the word "parodies" would seem to be a better choice. And, in fact, the Introduction begins with a discussion of how these traditional words of wisdom contradict each other, and how people also enjoy making satirical parodies of the proposed wisdom. The parodies take several forms: (1) contrary information is added: "Money talks, but not when it is a small amount"; (2) the first part of the proverb is left as it is, but the second part is changed: "If you want a thing well done, let it cook." ("If you want a thing done well, do it yourself."); (3) changing one word as "Where there's a will, there's a won't." ("Where there's a will, there is a way."); (4) a three-part joke in which the proverb is stated, a speaker is named, and then a situation is given that denies or makes a joke of the original saying: "Little boys should be seen and not heard,' as the boy said when he could not recite his lesson"; and (5) the linguistic structure remains, but the significant terms in each half are changed, e.g., "One man's corn is another man's bourbon." ("One man's meat is another man's poison.")

The contradictory nature of the majority of the parodies is indicated with clear markers as "but" and "although" and other connectors such as "and," "if," a colon, or a hyphen. It is this contradictory nature of the parodies as well as the stronger social commentary in many that give rise to the authors' use of the term "anti-proverbs." To quote the authors: "In that respect even the anti-proverbs, by which we mean any intentional proverb variation in the form of puns, alterations, deletions or additions, can become moralistic if not didactic statements.... Just as well-known proverbs continue to comment about our daily life, so do new anti-proverbs by using alienating and shocking linguistic strategies" (3).

One of the values of this book is that it demonstrates the enduring strength of proverbs in daily life, not only in their original form, which is a kind of common use vocabulary, but also in their new forms as didactic jibes, verbal wit, cartoons, and advertising texts. One of the problems in reading the book at length, however, is that like retold jokes, many of these anti-proverbs limp without their spontaneous supporting context. This is especially true of the