

SIMONIDES AND THE ‘GRATEFUL DEAD’

That the ancient biographical traditions concerning Greek poets contain details very reminiscent of certain folk-tale motifs is well known and widely accepted¹. One example of this phenomenon would be the story of how Simonides, the sixth century lyric poet, had his life saved thanks to the intervention of a ghost². Having given due rites to an unburied corpse which he encountered on the shore, Simonides later received an admonition in a dream: the dead man's ghost appeared and warned him against an intended sea-voyage. The advice was taken and the poet's life saved when all the other passengers drowned in the ship-wreck.

Almost a century ago, Gordon Gerould³ associated this tradition with the folk-tale type best known by the rubric of ‘the grateful dead’. The basic theme here is of a hero who buries a corpse that has not received due rites and is subsequently rewarded by the dead man's spirit. But classical scholars have not been sufficiently alert to the issues raised by the similarity of story-pattern⁴, and it seems worthwhile exploring this somewhat further here and in particular analysing the more general phenomenon of grateful dead in folk-tales.

A good example of the theme in a relatively basic and uncomplicated form is to be found in an Italian tale from Abruzzo⁵. This begins:

“There was once a youth named Joseph Ciufolo, who played the flute when he wasn't tilling the soil. One day he was dancing through the fields

¹ See, for instance, J.A. Fairweather, *Fiction in the biographies of ancient writers*, “Anc. Soc.” 5, 1974, 270ff.

² The ancient texts that are our source for this story are most clearly assembled (in parallel columns to emphasise their near-identity of content) by M. Boas, *De epigrammatibus Simonideis* (Leiden 1905) pp. 9 ff. See further W.J. Gates, *The Influence of Simonides of Ceos upon Horace* (Princeton 1932) pp. 4ff., hereafter ‘Gates’.

³ *The Grateful Dead: the history of a folk story* (“Publ. of the Folk Lore Soc.” 60, 1907/8), hereafter ‘Gerould’. See also Stith Thompson, *The Folktale* (Los Angeles 1946, repr. 1977) pp. 50ff. with bibliography in p. 50 n. 8. For a more recent survey of the type (D.L. Ashliman, *A Guide to Folktales in the English Language based on the Aarne-Thompson Classification System* (London 1987) No. 505-7 (p. 106f.)) with full bibliography, see Lutz Röhrich's article s.v. ‘Dankbarer Toter’ in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* (3.306ff.), hereafter ‘Röhrich’.

⁴ They are not mentioned by, for instance, Page, *Further Greek Epigrams* (Cambridge 1981) p. 300 (see below n. 11).

⁵ I take this from Italo Calvino's collection (*Fiabe Italiane* (1956) ≈ *Italian Folktales*: for the propriety of using this volume as a source see the review by W. Anderson, “Fabula” 1, 1958, 283ff.) where it is No. 108 (Engl. Tr. [Penguin] p. 393f.).

and playing his flute to relax awhile from all his digging, when he suddenly spied a corpse lying on the ground beneath a swarm of flies. He put down his flute, walked up to the body, shooed the flies away, and covered the dead man with green boughs. Returning to the spot where he had left his hoe, he saw that the hoe had gone to work by itself and already dug up half the field for him. From that day on, Joseph Ciufolo was the happiest tiller alive: he would dig until he got tired, then take his flute out of his pocket, while the hoe went on digging by itself.”

In the sequel, the archetypally malignant stepfather for whom Joseph Ciufolo works drives him away from home, and our hero meets an old beggar with whom he goes to cultivate hitherto untilled fields owned by a king. This king's daughter falls in love with the hero and they elope together by boat. Only when out at sea does the hero recall the old beggar and decide to return for him; but at that very moment the old man himself appears walking across the water to reach them and remind the hero of his promise to share everything between the two of them. The hero is just about to take this agreement to its logical (but extreme) conclusion by slicing the princess in two when the old man intervenes:

“ ‘Stop! I knew you were a just man. I am the dead man, mind you, whom you covered with green boughs. Go in peace, and may the two of you always be happy’.

“ The old man walked away on the waves. The boat came to an island rich in all good things, with a princely palace awaiting the newlyweds.” So the story ends.

The combination thus exemplified of the grateful dead and the winning of a bride is actually very typical. A story from Istria in the same collection of Italian folk-tales⁶ relates how its hero arrives at a port to find “sitting on the shore a coffin, into which passers-by would all drop a small donation of money”. He discovers that the man in question died in debt and cannot be buried until the debts are paid up in full. Our hero announces that he himself will settle with all the creditors – his father has given him seven thousand crowns to get a start in the world – and then returns to his generous father for the same sum. He uses this second sum to ransom a Turkish princess from pirates, but wife and son are both disowned by his father (whose patience is finally exhausted) and she is then recaptured by her father's men. In despair, the hero meets an old man with whom he makes an agreement identical to that of the previous tale. Their fishing boat is then blown by a storm to Turkey where the couple are reunited. When, back on sea, the hero remembers the old man, returns for him and is asked to share his girl too, he

⁶ As cited in the previous note, No. 45 (pp. 138ff.).

rebels (unlike his more submissive equivalent) but is rewarded nonetheless: “ ‘You are a generous youth. Note that I am the soul of the dead man for whose burial you arranged. All your luck stems from that good deed of yours’. He gave him his blessing and vanished.”

Tales of the dead man as helper are, then, often thus combined with the motif of the rescued or ransomed princess, or the bride won in contest or tournament⁷. They are sometimes combined with the motif of the Water of Life⁸ and sometimes with other motifs.

Gerould⁹ claimed that “we do not know” the source behind Cicero *de divinatione* 1.56 (our earliest allusion to the story of Simonides and the grateful dead) but in fact Cicero himself refers to *illa duo somnia quae creberrime commemorantur a Stoicis* and it can be shown that the other ancient references to the tradition also derive from the same Stoic source¹⁰. No-one has seriously argued that the story actually occurred in a poem by Simonides himself¹¹; Cicero did not invent it; and its origin must therefore be located somewhere between the lives of Greek poet and Roman politician. The issue is important if we wish to arrive at a relative dating viz-a-viz the Greek story and the version of the grateful dead found in the Apocryphal *Book of Tobit*¹². For, as we have just seen, the issue (*pace* Gerould)¹³ is not one of observing that Cicero lived approximately two hundred years before the Jewish text. What we must rather do is specify Cicero's source. And this can be done. The story in Cicero and our other ancient authors closely links Simonides' good deed with the admonitory dream he received in consequence and does so in connection with Stoic theories about dreams. And since we know the important Stoic philosopher Chrysippus (d. 208/4 B.C.) to have actually written a book on dreams, it is hard to resist the deduction¹⁴ that this work was the

⁷ See, for instance, Gerould pp. 92ff., Röhrich p. 307.

⁸ Gerould pp. 114ff. etc.

⁹ P. 26.

¹⁰ See especially Boas as cited above n. 2.

¹¹ A pair of two-line epigrams attributed to Simonides which imply the story are not genuine: see Page as cited above n. 4.

¹² For whose relationship to the tales of the grateful dead see, for instance, Thompson (as cited above n. 3) p. 52.

¹³ Followed by, for instance, D.L. Miller, *The Holy Ghost and the Grateful Dead*, “*Eranos Jhb.*” 52, 1983, 308.

¹⁴ See especially Boas (above n. 10): Chrysippus 2.344 von Arnim.. The link between admonitory dream and destructive sea-storm recurs, for instance, in a Scandinavian version of the story, where the corpse is replaced by a merman. See R. Th. Christian, *Norske Folkeeventyr ≈ Folktales of Norway* (tr. P.S. Iversen, London 1964) No. 25 (Engl. tr. p. 55). Here a fisherman gives a self-proclaimedly cold merman his pair of mittens to keep him warm, and is rewarded by a dream-vision warning him to draw up his ships on the shore: they

source of the account in Cicero and the other passages.

Scholars¹⁵ have noted the similarity between the tale of Simonides' rescue from shipwreck by a grateful dead man, and the story of his escape from the falling house of Scopas thanks to the Dioscuri (Castor and Polydeuces). According to the latter tradition, the poet, having composed a poem in praise of the Dioscuri, was summoned forth from a banquet by the young men at the door who then disappeared. In his absence, the building in which he had been feasting collapsed, killing everyone else¹⁶. The two narratives are, indeed, very similar and look like variants or doublets of the same idea, with Castor and Polydeuces taking on the role of 'the grateful dead'. Both stories also fall within a wider framework, "the well known *topos* of the poet as the favourite of the gods. The fable of the marvellous escape of Arion, and the similar tale of the cranes of Ibycus, are both excellent examples of the theme of the sacrosanctity of the poet"¹⁷. The cranes of Ibycus¹⁸, if not saving the life of that poet, did at least ensure a speedy retribution for his killers; and the story of Arion and his dolphin¹⁹ is a helpful reminder of the role played by animals in the rescue or special treatment of poets²⁰. Since a grateful beast sometimes replaces a thankful dead spirit in stories of the sort we have been analysing²¹, this general consideration is highly pertinent.

Mention of grateful (and helpful) animals neatly brings me to the next point of relevance. Stories of heroic quests regularly feature helpers of various types. Sometimes (as just implied) they are animals thankful for a past benefit, thus exemplifying the same principle of *do ut des* which lies beneath tales of the grateful dead²². Sometimes they are human helpers possessed of superhuman powers. And sometimes they are demonic figures with whom the hero experiences what has been termed a 'preliminary adventure' or 'Vorabenteuer', which issues in his being guided to the right path for his quest²³.

alone escape destruction when the storm blows.

¹⁵ For instance Nisbet and Hubbard in the introduction to their commentary on Horace *Odes* 1.28 (Oxford 1970, p. 319).

¹⁶ For the relevant texts see Page *PMG* p. 323. For analysis see, e.g., Gates pp. 2ff.

¹⁷ Gates p. 6. Cf. Fairweather (as cited above n. 1) p. 271 f.

¹⁸ Cf. Ch. Schmitt's article s.v. 'Kraniche des Ibykos' in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* (8.331ff.).

¹⁹ Cf. the article by R. Schenda in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* s.v. Delphin (3.390) and U. Dierauer, *Tier und Mensch im Denken der Antike* (Amsterdam 1976) p. 271 and nn. 20-21.

²⁰ See further Gates p. 17.

²¹ See Gerould pp. 27, 57, 101 and 158ff. For grateful animals as a folk-tale motif see my remarks in "WS" 115, 2002, p. 8 and n. 10.

²² Cf. Röhrich p. 307.

²³ On all this see, for instance, the article by me cited in n. 21 above pp. 6ff.

In the case of both the second and the third class of helper here, there are strong independent grounds for associating many of the relevant figures with the Underworld or Otherworld. To take some examples from Greek myth, both Phineus within the story of Jason and the Argonauts, and Telephus within the story of the Trojan expedition, can be shown to have strong affiliations with the Underworld²⁴. In the stories as they now stand, these figures agree to guide on their way the heroes in question due to a sense of gratitude for benefits conferred (the principle of *do ut des* in operation, once again). Phineus is thankful for being relieved from the attentions of the Harpies, Telephus for being cured of his wound. So here too we come very close to the notion of the grateful dead. The Graeae in the story of Perseus' quest for Medea's head, and the Old Man of the Sea in two of the labours of Heracles²⁵, are not obviously motivated by gratitude. But they do help (albeit against their will) and they do exhibit signs of a connection with the Underworld. So in them too one may detect aspects, if not of the grateful, then certainly of the helpful, dead.

The heroic quests in which these helper figures from Greek mythology feature, symbolise, in some sense, mortal conquest and victory over death; and this explains, at least in part, why the helpers are associated with death and the dead. Often it can be shown, again on independent grounds, that the helper figure of the preliminary adventure is an anticipation of, or 'Doppelgänger' to, the death demon with whom the hero has his climactic combat. This can be most lucidly observed in the tenth labour of Heracles, where Ne-reus, the Old Man of the Sea, is virtually equivalent to the ogre Geryon, both embodying the primal figure of Herdsman of the Dead. Also in the quest of Perseus for Medea's head, where the three Graeae in effect replicate (and anticipate) their sisters the three Gorgons as death-demons. But something analogous can be more dimly discerned in the case of Phineus and Telephus, and there are further parallels in Anglo-Saxon and Norse literature²⁶.

So much for the traces of the grateful, or at least helpful, dead in the 'preliminary adventure' of a quest. Though Heracles and Perseus accomplish the climactic stage of their enterprise without the presence of ancillary heroes, such figures are abundantly in evidence for Jason's recovery of the Golden Fleece and the Greek expedition to fetch back Helen. And they can be shown to derive from those helpers with amazing or supernatural powers who so frequently feature in folk-tale quests. They can also in many cases be shown – and this is also true of the Seven against Thebes – to have strong

²⁴ See the article cited in the previous note pp. 12ff.

²⁵ See my remarks in "CQ" 38, 1988, 278ff.

²⁶ On all this see the article by me quoted in the previous note.

links with the Underworld²⁷.

A similar paradox, then, can be traced at work in both classes of the helpful dead just considered. The goal of the quest is the Underworld or Kingdom of the Dead, and yet the hero is helped in his assault upon it by representatives of the dead, the dead against the dead. That pattern is traceable in other specimens of the folk-tale quest. For instance, in the tale of the fisherman's son from the Shaiqiya tribe of Wad Rawa in the Sudan²⁸, the hero is sent to bring back 'the Sultan's daughter who was guarded by ghouls'. Having consulted 'the old grandmother' – who in this narrative occupies the role of the preliminary helper – he successively encounters four figures with fantastic powers of eating, hearing, sight and motion. On the grandmother's advice he shaves and cleans the head²⁹ of each, which action wins them as followers. And yet we are thrice told of the first figure that he is a ghoul, once told that the second is, and when the heroes and his helpers arrive at "the place where the Sultan's daughter was, as they came near the village, the people saw them and were frightened when they saw the ghouls coming their way". We seem here too, then, to be confronted with supernatural helpers as the grateful dead, ghouls helping against ghouls³⁰.

A great deal of the detail in these quests symbolising the conquest of death, and even more of the significance behind the notion of the grateful dead, is illuminated by the approach (derived ultimately from Freud) which Karl Meuli adopted towards ancient attitudes to death and the dead. His emphasis on the paradoxical view of the dead as "böös und gut zugleich... wegen Projektion... der eigenen Gefühlsambivalenz"³¹ is extremely enlightening for the material we have considered. What better encapsulation of this ambivalent attitude towards dead spirits, powerful to hurt and to harm, than the two sets of stories about Simonides, with their picture of the poet spared and others annihilated?

But it is the tale of Simonides burying the unknown corpse that is particularly illuminated by this approach. It has rightly been observed that "the ancient world had deep-rooted anxieties about the unburied corpse; cf. the cases of Hector, Polyneices, Palinurus, Aeneas, Pompey". No surer way to

²⁷ See the article quoted in n. 21 above pp. 15ff.

²⁸ See A. Al-Shahi and F.C.T. Moore, *Wisdom from the Nile: a Collection of Folk Stories from Northern and Central Sudan* (Oxford 1978) p. 147.

²⁹ For delousing of the head as a common service in folk-tales see Davies and Kathirithamby, *Greek Insects* (London 1986) p. 169, adding to the references W.E. Roberts, *The Tale of the Kind and the Unkind Girls*, "Fabula" Suppl. B1 (1958) p. 111 and E. Weber, *The Reality of Folktales*, "Journal of the History of Ideas" 42, 1981, 106f.

³⁰ See further my remarks in the article cited above n. 21, p. 39f.

³¹ See Index 1 to Meuli's *Ges. Schr.* s.v. 'Tod und Trauer' (vol. 2, 1240f.).

rouse a dead spirit's ire or earn its gratitude than by the act or mission of burial. The great central *kommos* of Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* comes particularly to mind here. Long misunderstood by critics, it is now seen as a "great conjuration... directed not at the living but at the dead". Although Agamemon's corpse has, technically speaking, enjoyed burial, it has also been mutilated, and a particularly apt way of summarising the function of the *kommos* would be to say that it embodies the efforts of Orestes and Electra to convert their father's spirit from predictable anger to the state of mind appropriate for one of 'the grateful dead'³².

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³² See my observations in "CR" 40, 1990, 219.