

THE SIRENS AT MID-DAY

As Odysseus' ship approaches the island of the Sirens, the wind drops and there is a calm (*Od.* 12.167-9). Why? Several explanations have been advanced, not all mutually exclusive. If quantity and quality of advocates were all, the preferred solution would be the one that supposes the calm to indicate mid-day¹ and the Sirens to have been, originally at least, demons associated with that time of day. Otto Crusius² and Kurt Latte³, in particular, interpreted Homer's words in this way.

Alfred Heubeck's commentary on this passage⁴ baldly rejects the idea, without giving reasons. Presumably Heubeck was influenced by the article of G. K. Gresseth⁵, which he quotes *ad loc.* for the notion, approved by him, that the calm in question “is a warning... of imminent danger”. He certainly refers to this article elsewhere (12.39ff. n.) as having “criticised” (*scil.* convincingly) Latte's thesis. There is an important point of principle involved here, since Gresseth does not, in fact, quote or therefore address directly, the actual arguments of Latte or of Crusius⁶. More seriously, he, like Heubeck himself, totally ignores the fruits of the labours of R. Cailliois, whose lengthy article on *Les démons de midi*, spread over several issues of “*Révue de l'histoire des Religions*”⁷, constitutes in fact the most detailed and important monograph on its subject. Gresseth's claim⁸ that “the noon day demon type is

¹ For such “Windstille” as associated with mid-day in ancient literature see the article by R. Cailliois cited below (n. 7) pp. 60ff., esp. p. 60 n. 2.

² “*Philol.*” 4, 1891, 105ff., esp. 107.

³ 3. In a *Festschrift* for the Göttinger Akademie (1951), 67ff. = *Kl. Schr.* 106ff. For further bibliography of scholars who have taken this view see the article by Gresseth cited below, n. 5, p. 210 n. 14 and note in particular Cailliois (below, n. 7) pp. 54ff. on the connection between Sirens and the mid-day. For a good recent general bibliography on Sirens see E. Hofstetter in *LIMC* s.v. (*Suppl.* 8.1094).

⁴ Originally published in Italian. More recent English version (Oxford 1989), 127.

⁵ *The Homeric Sirens*, “*TAPA*” 101, 1970, 203ff.

⁶ He does provide (see n. 3 above) various bibliographical references which would enable one to track down their articles.

⁷ 115/6, 1937, 142ff., 55ff., 143ff.

⁸ This formulation is preceded by the words “Marót is clearly right in saying that”, and obviously derives from K. Marót, *Die Anfänge der gr. Lit.* (Budapest 1960), 140 (cf. p. 195 n. 77): “im Klassischen Altertum weder in den Werken der bildenden Künstler, noch der Schriftsteller aufzufinden ist”. The derivation is unfortunate, since, though for Gresseth, writing shortly before 1970, Marót's treatment may have been (as he says p. 203 n. 1) the most recent, it is significantly deficient in one respect: Marót explicitly states (p. 195 n. 75) that he has been unable to see Cailliois' fundamental treatment (above n. 7). When he claims, therefore, that, for example, instances of the “daemon meridianus” in ancient literature are

not found in Classical Greek art or literature” is, given Caillois’ extensive researches, extremely misleading. In the first place, the *Odyssey* itself is not a product of the “Classical Age”. Secondly and more significantly, if the implication is that the relevant phenomenon only originated with the Hellenistic and “late” sources in which it is first specifically testified, our response must be that several primitive-looking superstitions with world-wide affinities are, by a familiar paradox, first attested in sophisticated and learned Hellenistic poetry⁹.

The association of the *Odyssey*’s Sirens with demons of the mid-day has not, therefore, been refuted¹⁰. And it may be strengthened by evidence from an unexpected quarter. The Sirens represent that figure so frequent in folk-tale, the temptress who tries to distract the hero from his quest¹¹. Gresseth in effect recognises at least part of this truth by observing the Sirens’ similarity to Calypso, who, like them, lives on a flowery island and has the power of song (*Od.* 5.61)¹². Part of the story-pattern which involves such temptresses shows the hero resisting the enchantress where everyone else has failed and succumbed to her charms¹³. This is precisely what happens with Odysseus and the Sirens.

Now a prime instance of this pattern occurs in a Norwegian folk-tale which I have cited elsewhere for slightly different purposes¹⁴. In this narrative, we encounter the immemorially ancient sequence of three questing brothers, the quest in this case being to keep watch over a king’s seven foals

“seltenen und späteren”, the former epithet needs instant qualification in the light of Caillois’ findings, while, for the second, note the mid-fifth century Athenian red figure vase discussed by Latte and showing Procris’ death at mid-day in the presence of a Siren: see *LIMC* as cited above n. 3, 11 (p. 1099).

⁹ Compare, for instance, Theocr. *Id.* 7.106ff. on the primitive custom, first there attested, of beating statues of deities in order to punish them for non-fulfilment of prayers (see Dover’s commentary *ad loc.*).

¹⁰ Individual arguments have, it must be said, met with specific rejection. Thus Crusius was wrong to rely upon a sarcophagous whose fragments had been incorrectly reassembled: cf. K. Meuli, *Odyssee und Argonautika* (Berlin 1926) p. 94 n. 1 = *Ges. Schr.* 2, p. 658 n. 4. And Latte’s interpretation of a black-figure vase from Attica and now in Naples as showing a siren on the shoulder of a man who is carrying a parasole to protect himself against the mid-day heat has been shown to be unlikely by F. Brommer, *Kopf über Kopf*, “*AuA*” 4, 1954, 42ff. (though cf. Latte’s brief rejoinder in *Kl. Schr.* p. 111 n. 4).

¹¹ On this figure see my remarks in “CQ” 54, 2004, 606ff. Compare the word κληιδών applied to Sirens in Pind. *Pae.* 8.71.

¹² As cited above (n. 5) p. 207. Circe is analogously capable of song and she too is a temptress: see the article cited in the last note.

¹³ See the article cited above (n. 11) p. 610 n. 38.

¹⁴ Cf. “CQ” 53, 2003, p. 35 n. 17. The reference is to R.Th. Christiansen, *Norske Folkeeventyr* = *Folktales of Norway* (tr. P.S. Ivresen) No. 71 (Engl. tr., p. 169ff.).

and bring back word of what they eat and drink. In time-honoured fashion, the two elder siblings fail in their task: the reason? – they are led astray by an old hag. While clambering after the seven horses, and when they themselves are at a point of maximum exhaustion, they encounter the ancient woman in a mountain cleft¹⁵. She is *spinning*, just like Calypso in *Od.* 5.62 or Circe in *Od.* 10.222 or the equivalent figure in the Ceylonese *Mahavamsa* (or *Great History*) which some scholars¹⁶ have cited as parallel to the second Homeric episode just alluded to. “Come here! Come here, my dear son, and I’ll pick the lice out of your hair” she calls alluringly to each elder brother successively, and the initial injunction (though not the following offer)¹⁷ is strongly reminiscent of the Sirens’ words to Odysseus at 12.189, to say nothing of the Elizabethan poet Samuel Daniel’s version:

Come, worthy Greek, Ulysses, come,
Possess these shores with me:
The winds and seas are troublesome,
And here we may be free.
Here may we sit and view their toil
That travail in the deep,
And joy the day in mirth the while,
And spend the night in sleep¹⁸.

The youngest brother, by contrast, resists where his brothers had suc-

¹⁵ For mountains as a frequent backdrop to encounters between hero and helper figure see my remarks in “Rh.Mus.” 2005, forthcoming.

¹⁶ See D.L. Page, *Folktales in Homer’s Odyssey* (Cambridge Mass. 1973), 62, with bibliography in p. 124 n. 24 (add Cook, *Zeus* 1, 240). These folk-tale exemplars of the ambivalent helper/temptress who spins suggest that Ed. Fraenkel’s eloquent commentary on the spinning Circe of Verg. *Aen.* 7.11ff. as “combining with the dangerous charms of the Homeric sorceress some of the domestic virtues of a Roman gentlewoman” (“JRS” 35, 1945, 2 = *Kl. Beitr.* 2, 147) requires some modification.

¹⁷ The offer may seem bizarre and not very enticing, but for the removal of head lice as a frequent 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; E. Weber, *The Reality of Folktales*, “Journal of the History of Ideas” 42, 1981, 106f. Cf. I. Roschmann-Steltenkamp s.v. ‘Laus’ in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* (8, 792).

¹⁸ The stanza here quoted was singled out as a type of “perfection” by A.E. Housman in his lecture on *The Name and Nature of Poetry* (*Selected Prose*, ed. J. Carter, p. 171) “not necessarily as a pattern” [scil. for any “promising young poetaster”], “but as a touchstone to keep at his side”. Cf. J. Bayley, *Housman’s Poems* (Oxford 1992), 77f. The actual content of the Homeric Sirens’ song has surprised many scholars (cf. Heubeck’s commentary on vv. 184–191) but its final claim (v. 191) to foreknowledge of events fits with the prophetic capabilities of some folk-tale helper figures (see Propp’s *Morphology of the Folk-Tale*, Engl. tr., 120 and 129, and cf. the next note).

cumbed, and thus wins through (like Odysseus).

We are not specifically told at what time of day the crone appears to the two siblings, but the logic of the story entails that the meetings occur somewhere between morning and evening, and from the exhausted state of the boys, dripping with sweat as they are, it seems reasonable to infer *mid-day's* heat as the background. The hag, like the Sirens, has some features of the ambivalent helper figure¹⁹, seeming to offer aid, actually intent on thwarting. It is relevant, therefore, to adduce the Heroines of Apollonius of Rhodes *Arg.* 4.1305ff., who appear to Jason and offer help at mid-day (v. 1312)²⁰.

To return finally to the Odyssean Sirens, there is no need to insist that they were originally *either* mid-day *or* death demons (Latte's position) any more than we need choose between them as *either* soul-birds *or* otherworld enchantresses (Gresseth's dichotomy). They can be both and all three. For a numinous being encountered at mid-day and associated with death and the dead, compare the Old Man of the Sea in *Od.* 4.377ff.²¹.

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¹⁹ See my remarks "CQ" 54, 2004, 609f. Helpers in folktales often take the form of old men or women (cf. R. Schenda's article s.v. 'Alte Leute' in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* (1, 378): "Nach anderen didaktischen Vorbildern treten alte Leute häufig als Helfende und Raterteilende auf").

²⁰ See my remarks in "SCO", forthcoming, where I point out that both Homer's Sirens and Apollonius' Heroines announce their vast knowledge by using ἴδμεν in anaphora (*Od.* 12.189 ~ *Arg.* 4.1319).

²¹ Cf. my remarks in "Prometheus" 29, 2003, 57ff. The Lotus Eaters are compared to the Sirens by both Cailliois (above, n. 7) pp. 63ff. and Gresseth (above n. 5) p. 21 (and to Circe and Calypso by, for instance, W. Crooke, "Folk-Lore" 19, 1908, 177). Now when Odysseus and his men arrive at the land of the *Lotophagi* (*Od.* 9.86) they take their δεῖπνον. This is rightly rendered as "mid-day meal" by, for instance, E.V. Rieu's Penguin translation: for this meaning see *LfE* s.v. B2 (2, 239f.) and Richardson on *HHDem.* 129, the former observing that the word occasionally functions as a periphrasis for "mid-day". So beings parallel to the Sirens are explicitly connected by Homer with the requisite time of day.