

OF BOOKS

ASCETICISM AND EROTICISM IN THE MYTHOLOGY OF ŚIVA. By WENDY DONIGER O'FLAHERTY. pp. xii, 386, 16 pl., chart. London, Oxford University Press, 1973. £8.

Myths, like other things, can be studied on two levels. On the first level, one can simply collect and describe data: one can retell the myths. The problem here is selection; it can be solved by choosing either an already-given corpus of material, e.g. all myths known about Śiva, or myths in the Śaiva *purāṇas*, and/or by choosing data relevant to the second level. This second level consists of problems (questions) and hypotheses to solve them (answers, or rather attempts at answers). In the case of myths these problems are of two kinds. Firstly, myths have often been used as evidence to help solve problems about the society of their origin: how those people saw their own role in the universe; in what categories they thought, etc. The trouble has been that it is hard to be sure how useful myths are as evidence for answering these questions. Categories of thought may be better studied through language; the ideas of a literate civilization may be better studied through its obviously non-fictional works. For myths, even if in some sense "believed", do retain a fictional character; they are in fact a kind of literature. So there is the second approach: to ask questions about the myths themselves. Here the trouble has tended to be a lack of good questions. One can fruitfully study the history of a mythology, and ask what earlier myths the bits of a given myth have come from. The comparative study of Indo-European mythology has advanced along these lines. Then one can ask what kind of myth it is: aetiological, explaining the origin of an institution or a natural phenomenon? legitimating, justifying a claim? But this packaging of myths into one's own functional categories is of limited interest. Merely to list motifs, like Stith Thompson, is not to pass beyond description. But all other questions asked about myths seem reducible to the question, "What is the myth really saying?" And answers to this question gravely risk being arbitrary. One can attract an audience by interpreting myths as political propaganda, or by assimilating them to dreams as objects of psychological analysis—and get out of them precisely what one put in.

So ultimately one returns to myths as autonomous works of the imagination. The intervention of Lévi-Strauss and his disciples may have complicated the picture I have drawn, but it does not seem to me basically to have changed it. Using methods long

applied to other literature, one can try to restate what myths are saying by analysing their contents, rendering more explicit the focus of their concerns by isolating motifs and counting how often they occur, and deducing what the motifs symbolize from their collocations, from other material in the culture, and of course from explicit statements within the myths themselves. All this rarely adds up to the production of refutable theories (and thus to a complete shift from my first to my second level), but it may, in the best tradition of humanistic studies, give us sympathetic understanding of the myths and the culture from which they spring. When Dr. O'Flaherty says that "the final 'explanation' of the myth cycle is thus the cycle itself" (p. 21), she is reminding us that the best way to study *Hamlet* is to read it. To find out what myths are "really saying" you have first to study them in their own terms.

On every level—descriptive, analytical (giving insight), and explanatory (offering theories)—Dr. O'Flaherty's book on Śaiva mythology is a success. She has devoted herself to a body of material which even Indologists have regarded as singularly intractable, both because it is vast and diffuse, and because the individual myths seem arbitrary and bizarre. The Śaiva *purāṇas* remain untranslated and have received little serious scholarly attention. Having read through them, and a great mass of other material, both primary and secondary, besides (there is a 15-page bibliography, all of it relevant), Dr. O'Flaherty has distilled what in the first place can serve as an encyclopædia or *catalogue raisonné* of the main corpus of Śaiva mythology; she has thus made accessible a huge amount of virtually new material for the study of Indian civilization. But she has done much more. By a *tour de force* of understanding and sheer hard work she has brought order into the chaos and made sense for us of this weird universe of discourse centred on an ithyphallic yogin.

In ch. i, which (like the rest of the book) is both lucid and entertaining, qualities especially rare in methodological introductions, she explains her method. All students of myth should read this chapter at the least, for though its theory owes much (including the Hegelian use of the term "contradiction") to Lévi-Strauss, it is wholly intelligible, and the application of the theory is so thorough and so effective as to be unique. Dr. O'Flaherty has identified the building blocks from which her myths are composed, and presents them, numbered, in a large chart (which for easy reference recurs as a fold-out at the back of the book); these numbers are then

printed in the margins throughout the book to draw attention to the motifs and thus to what is important in the myth being told or discussed. This chart, with Dr. O'Flaherty's explanation and use of it, is the intellectual core of the book. Like most great intellectual achievements, it looks easy once it is done, and that is a measure of its success.

What it all comes to is this. Śaiva mythology is about sex. All civilizations contain conflicts and tensions arising from human sexuality; in these myths we see what has particularly worried the Hindus. Here are not only tensions about incest, potency, and fertility; overriding these is the wider worry: what are the pros and cons of having a sex life at all? In the Hindu view this is closely connected to whether it is better to live in society or to opt out. They hold both celibate chastity and fertile marriage to be ideals, but the two are irreconcilable. The Hindu's "society demands of him two roles which he cannot possibly satisfy fully—that he become a householder and beget sons, and that he renounce life and seek union with god" (p. 38). I do not wish to imply that Dr. O'Flaherty is a Freudian; she has wisely eschewed psychological explanations. But she has in effect shown that these myths are fantasies about sexuality, and that for all their apparent diversity they have a unity of theme, which they express with a limited range of symbols. The most important symbols are fire and water; water is generally associated with the female as against the male, but fire is complex, for it comprises two contending heats: the heat of lust and the heat of chastity, potency both active and contained.

Dr. O'Flaherty's explicandum is the myth, not Indian society, and she justly writes that "the myth cannot be explained by ethnography alone, for if this were so, the myth could not add anything to the knowledge available in the ethnography" (p. 16). But this reveals that she is prepared to contribute to our knowledge of India in general, and indeed few areas of classical Indology will not gain something from her book. In particular, students of Sanskrit literature will see the *Kumāra-sambhava* with new eyes; and historians of religion will learn a lot about Indian asceticism in general and Śaivism in particular. Finally, although her interpretation is structuralist in rejecting "the text-historical emphasis on chronology" (p. 13), she has managed at the same time to make a major contribution in the "text-historical" tradition by documenting the Vedic antecedents of her motifs and showing the close relationships between Śiva on the one hand and Indra, Agni, and Brahmā on the other.

This is a milestone in Indology, and deserves wide attention for both its precept and its practice. And what a relief it is to follow an author who can illustrate the atomic reactor at Trombay as an example of the *linga* in the *yoni*!

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