

Authority & Linearity In Classical Literature

Linearity is a constraint that traces back to ancient times. In *Poetics*, his classic discourse on Greek tragedy, Aristotle devotes chapter seven to the concept of completeness. An act of any kind of magnitude entails “a whole...that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end.” (13) A beginning “does not follow necessarily from anything else” and endings “naturally follow from something else.” This works sufficiently for the playwrights which Aristotle cites like Euripides, Aeschylus, and Sophocles.

However, having a strong linear beginning, middle, and end is an authoritative approach to literature which often forces women to submit, denies questioning of higher powers, and emboldens men. Looking at texts which are more cyclical in nature can often bring up questions about how literature can create hierarchies, often male centered, which serve to punish women for their defiance of male law. Creation myths can also be examined by looking at both authoritative and more skeptical texts from the ancient period and how skeptical texts often have a more cyclical nature while those that are more linear have a fixed nature that is not open to any sort of questioning.

Cyclical stories, like *The Descent of Inanna*, *The Rig Veda*, and the myth of Persephone defy a centralized narrative and the boundaries of the linear text in a number of interesting and varied ways. *The Descent of Inanna* explores a Goddess' journey through the underworld, after being called there, and back to her kingdom. After being chased by demons, she denies them their prey and creates a cyclical solution to the problem by requiring others to spend time in the underworld, thereby defying linear punishment. The myth of Persephone from *The Homeric Hymns* is another take on the cyclical defiance of linearity. In this myth, however, the

protagonist is punished, potentially due to her own lack of agency and passivity. The poems of the *The Rig Veda* offer both authoritative takes on the creation myth and more skeptical, non-linear discourses. Both of these takes can be compared sharply with the creation myth in the *Hebrew Bible*, which is the ultimate in authoritative, linear, texts.

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My interest in the *Hebrew Bible* is purely on a secular, intellectual, level. I am an atheist, since my childhood, so for me this is a work of Literature, not a spiritual guide. Even though I do not believe or have an interest in a higher power or an afterlife, this work of Literature are useful for discovering how our civilization has been crafted and grown over the past few millennia. Through a close reading of linearity in this text, an examination of how it affects the text can commence.

In the *Hebrew Bible*, history only flows in one direction, forward, so that the fulfillment of obedience to God's plan comes in a future heaven. Unlike cyclical texts like *The Descent Of Inanna*, the goals of the text come in the next life. The *Hebrew Bible* fulfills Aristotle's call for a beginning which does not follow from anything else. It is extremely authoritative about the genesis of human life and Earth. Instead of an observer who may know what happened (unless he does not), there is little question here:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. (98)

Before there can even be doubt about in the *Hebrew Bible*, God has been recorded as making more proclamations about his other creations. No space is given for questioning the authoritative nature of the text due their forward, linear, nature. No one is present to witness when God creates the world. Despite this, the story is still told. There is no room for question or skepticism. God is the one authority and his command on the events is final. Unlike the *Hymn of Creation* no room is left for the judgment of the individual believer. God's interpretation of the events is the only one allowed and no observer is there to contradict it. Without an observer, Christians have to believe in their God on blind faith alone without empirical evidence to back up their beliefs.

The Rig Veda is very skeptical about the nature of God, man's creation, and his dominance over the Earth. The opening stanza of the *Hymn of Creation* begins by stating that nothing existed quite yet but then asks a series of questions about it:

Neither nonbeing nor being was as yet.
 Neither was airy space nor heavens beyond;
 What was enveloped? And where? Sheltered by whom?
 And was there water? Bottomless, unfathomed? (177)¹

The fourth stanza discusses the rise of desire and the “primeval seed” of consciousness (177). This stanza seems to be discussing themes similar to the story of Adam and Eve told in the *Hebrew Bible*. This primeval seed of consciousness is like the snake who tricks Eve into eating from the forbidden tree. The tree is “to be desired to make one wise” but instead it grants Eve a sense of shame of her nakedness which requires her to hide herself from God in the garden

¹ For this paper I will be citing from the versions of the *Hymn of Creation*, *The Hymn of Man*, and *Hebrew Bible* in the *World of Literature*.

(100).

Again, God's authority is challenged and those who defy Him are punished. The line "that in nonbeing lay the bond of being" could be interpreted as being about what would become the story of Adam and Eve. By taking food from the tree, Adam and Eve came into being and clothed themselves after discovering their new found shame of their nakedness. This "bond of being" between them lead to their exile from the Garden of Eden into the world beyond (177). Only in "nonbeing," belief in God's plan without question or disobedience will come the true bond between themselves and God.

The kind of blind faith that is expected of followers of Christianity is in sharp contrast to the skepticism of Ancient India. Is this a response to the previous generation's lack of a more linear, authoritative, judgment about the spiritual world? It is interesting to note that before the *Hymn of Creation* even tries to explain creation in its opening lines ("neither nonbeing nor being was as yet...neither was airy space nor heavens beyond") there are already skeptical questions about the process (177). This continues for the next three stanzas until an explanation of "the One" is given.

An interesting linear change between the *Hymn of Man* and the *Hebrew Bible's* creation myth is the order in which man is created. In the Bible, man is saved for last after all of the elements, animals, and others. In the *Hymn of Man*, man comes first in three parts. After man come villages, the holy mantras, and animals. Why the switch? I believe this is done intentionally to emphasize man's domain over the Earth and animals whereas they seem to stand on closer ground in the texts from Ancient India. In the *Hymn of Man*, Man, the Person, is distributed amongst the world to create various aspects of it.

The *Hebrew Bible* creates man last so he may rule over the world like a King does over his kingdom. This continues in chapter two where a garden is created to house him in his domicile. This is done so man may see the fruits of God's labors in action before him. Man is king of God's domain unlike in Ancient India where he is only a piece of a bigger puzzle.

A more linear, contrast comes in *The Hymn of Man*, which offers a multiple stanza length explanation for the creation of the universe that is a more authoritative explanation for the creation myth. The opening stanzas contrasts the skeptical nature of the *Hymn of Creation* by offering answers to what an “observer” might have seen at the beginning of the universe if they were present. The poem talks of a “Him” which is above the Gods apparently:

From Him came the Source of Radiance,
 From the Source of Radiance came Man.
 Born, He was master of the Earth,
 From east to west, from high to low. (178)

Much like in the *Hebrew Bible*, there is a linear, authoritative tone to the stanza. The Gods offer a sacrifice to “Him,” which creates the seasons and other elements. The poem ends without the skeptical questioning of the *Hymn of Creation*, but also does not pass judgment on the validity of the claims made in the poem. While the poem does contrast with the *Hymn of Creation* in that regard, the lack of affirmative judgment for the information given in the poem could be argued as another form of more subtle skepticism.

Why the differences in linearity in these poems while the *Hebrew Bible* is undeniably linear? These were some skeptical people, as noted, and even *The Hymn of Man* is arguably not that authoritative. The contrasts in authority still defy the linearity of the *Hebrew Bible*. “From

Him came the Source Of Radiance.” If this was meant as a definitive, linear, statement there would be a stronger description of the God's work. In Genesis, it is clear that God is the one and only authority. In these poems, it is certainly not clear.

In Genesis, the story of Adam and Eve is a fine example of how linearity is used to oppress women. Eve's biting of the apple, tricked by the serpent, leads to her desire to cover up her body when she hears God nearby in the garden somewhere. She also gives Adam the fruit. After proclaiming that the serpent will be “cursed...among all animals,” God scorns Eve and announces that she will now experience great pains in childbirth and must obey her husband:

To The Woman he said,
I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;
In pain you shall bring forth children,
Yet your desire shall be for your husband,
And shall rule over you. (101)

Eve's defiance of patriarchal command is punished harshly. She must now experience cyclical pains while pregnant with her children Abel and Cain. The harshest penalty is that now her husband will “rule” over her. Even when God is not around, there will be a male to rule over women. According to Julia Kristeva in *The Powers Of Horror*, Adam is now “torn by covetous desire” for Eve (127). To protect him from these lustful desires, God must come up with a plan to punish Eve and embolben his male creation.

Even more misogynistic is God's punishment for Adam listening to his wife and eating the fruit. God proclaims that Adam will eat bread “until you return to the ground” which he was born from in the first place (101). Thus, God's creations are no longer immortal and now must

suffer the cycles of procreation, birth, and death. This, according to Joseph Campbell “set the seal of the patriarchy on the new age.” (29) All because a woman defied man's law.

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I was pleasantly surprised upon my first close reading of *The Descent Of Inanna* how much different Inanna was from most other women in classical texts. Inanna has a lot in common with her mythical counterparts, but the things which set her apart from them is what makes her so fascinating and engaging. Inanna is a Goddess, like Athena, but does not submit to male law. She travels to the underworld, unlike the passive Persephone of the *Homeric Hymns*, of her own volition. The call she receives from the underworld is headed by her own free will, not through trickery. Most curiously, her role as traveler and wife of a passive, uninterested husband in Dumuzi who defies the roles set for Odysseus and Penelope in Homer's *Odyssey*.

Inanna is called to the “great below” for reasons that are unknown (22). Before leaving for Kur, the Sumerian underworld, she speaks to her servant Ninshubur and tells her to seek the help of other Gods to plead for her life. She mentions a number of deities before settling on Enki, who is the one that will eventually save her:

Weep Before Father Enki.

Father Enki, the God of Wisdom, knows the food of life,

He knows the water of life;

He knows the secrets.

Surely he will not let me die. (24)

Inanna does this of her own volition. She enters the underworld in formal dress and is ultimately

“hung from a hook on the wall” by Ereshkigal, the queen of the underworld (28). Inanna was “turned into a corpse,” “a piece of rotting meat,” and would not return to her servant in the designated three days.

Meanwhile, refusing to be a victim of linearity, as Inanna hangs from a wall in the underworld, Ninshubur does as she was told and travels to both Enlil and Nanna who tell the servant that there is no hope for Inanna returning. Ninshubur follows the instructions of Inanna:

She beat the drum for her in the assembly places.

She circled the houses of the gods.

She tore at her eyes; she tore at her mouth; she tore at her thighs.

She dressed herself in a single garment like a beggar. (28)

Ninshubur goes to Enki for assistance. Enki is “troubled” and “grieved” by the loss of Inanna (28). He sends his representatives to negotiate her release from Ereshkigal. Finally, the queen of the underworld, after a lot of “moaning,” agrees to release the corpse of Inanna and restore her to life (30). The judges of the underworld argue that someone has to replace Inanna before she can leave the underworld. Demons, the galla, cling to her body before she can begin her ascent. They demand someone take her place in the underworld if she is to leave.

The empowered Goddess Inanna, however, is not so resigned to her fate. After going from city to city, Uruk and Umma amongst them, she refuses to allow the grieving people who offer themselves the chance to take her place in the underworld. Finally, the demons say they will follow her to the “big apple tree” located in Uruk (33). Dumuzi, instead of waiting for his love to return, is unexplainably dressed in his best garments and rests on a throne, seemingly not bothered by her absence. Inanna swears at him and allows the demons to attack:

Inanna fastened on Dumuzi the eye of death.

She spoke against him the word of wrath.

She uttered against him the cry of guilt:

*“Take him! Take Dumuzi away!”*² (33)e

The galla takes him away, but not before Dumuzi pleads to Utu, the God of Justice, a Sumerian Zeus, who turns his hands into snakes. However, in the post script, *The Return*, Inanna finds Dumuzi and commands him to return to the underworld for half the year. His sister, who pleaded for his life earlier in the myth, will take his place the other half of the year. The galla return to seize him and the myth ends with Dumuzi entering the underworld to serve his half year.

Inanna's decent and return from the underworld defies linearity by creating a cyclical solution to this issue. This challenges dominant, patriarchal, forms of linearity which attempt to constrict and control women. Eve is punished for her defiance of God's command. Inanna refuses to become another victim and creates a situation where linear is defied and the solution involves a cycle of movement in and out of the underworld. She remains an immortal and does not have to suffer any further punishments or pains.

The myth of Persephone is a well known creation myth. In this version of creation, Hades, king of the underworld, kidnaps Persephone and takes her to the underworld to be his bride. Zeus, who in some versions of the myth is Persephone's father, sends his own emissaries to Hades in order to try to save the girl:

To Erebus sent off the gold-wanded slayer of Argos,

That Hermes, beguiling Hades with flattering words,

2 Italics from the Kramer translation.

Might lead holy Persephone out of the kingdom of shadows

Into the light to be with the gods, and her mother(10).

Hades, acquiescing to the will of Zeus, agrees to allow Persephone to leave so Demeter will end her grief, which has been eradicating the land. Persephone, accompanied by Hermes and Hades in his chariot of gold, makes her way out of the underworld and meets with her mother. Demeter has a lovely reunion with her daughter, but she is wary of deceit. She asks the fateful question to her daughter as to whether she ate anything in the underworld. Persephone gives her grave answer that she did in fact eat a seed given to her by Hades, which will resign her to spend a third of the year in the underworld.

Zeus comes down from Olympus and confirms that “in the shadowy kingdom” Persephone must live for that part of each year (13). There is nothing Demeter can do at this point and resigns her to the fate of her daughter. Zeus does offer the compromise that Demeter’s daughter may join the other immortals on Olympus for the other two-thirds of the year.

In a sharp change from the *Hebrew Bible*, instead of an all encompassing punishment like the one which God hands down for Eve's defiance, the deal is brokered. Instead of the punishment of original sin for their defiance, Demeter gets her daughter back for a part of the year and the land is restored because her grief is over. Now, the land will only turn bad when Persephone is in the underworld during that third of the year.

This is a curious change from the *Hebrew Bible*, where, later in Genesis, Cain is punished for his killing of his brother Abel. In Genesis, God curses Cain by ruining his land “when you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength. You will be a fugitive and wanderer on Earth.” (101) The cyclical nature of the Persephone myth is an interesting middle ground

between the violent and authoritative *Hebrew Bible* and *The Descent Of Inanna*. While a female is still punished for her passive and gullible nature, Demeter, the Goddess, is able to vanquish her grief by working out a cyclical compromise. This is not dissimilar to what Inanna does in her myth by sending her husband and sister down to the underworld for different parts of the year.

I am curious about how both of these Goddess ended up with very cyclical solutions to their problems. The similarities between the two myths shows how much oral tradition spread across the continents over time before these stories were written down. There are too many intertextual similarities between these myths not to believe that there was some sort of cross pollination between them as people traveled and traded four thousand years ago. According to the introduction of the section on ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt which includes *The Descent Of Inanna* in *The World Of Literature*, the Sumerians traveled all around the ancient world:

The Sumerians were busy traders and agricultural engineers...their commercial activities connected them with the civilization of the Indus Valley as well as with other parts of Mesopotamia—Syria, Anatolia, the Iranian plain, Afghanistan, Southern Arabia, Bahrain, and Egypt. (13)

Their myths and stories would surely have been passed around as other civilizations also traveled and traded. The myth of Persephone's decent to the underworld in the *Homeric Hymns* is an interesting variation on *The Descent Of Inanna*.

What is most compelling for me, however, is Inanna's position as an independent woman in contrast to the passive Persephone, who is merely a means to an end. Inanna is the mistress of her domain and fate. Faced with venturing into the underworld, she makes sure her servant

knows to only wait for three days before going for assistance. She will not allow linearity to defeat her.

No woman in Greek myth, even a Goddess like Athena, or the *Hebrew Bible*, is quite like Inanna. Her travels to the underworld are active and stand in sharp contrast to Persephone's passivity. In place of Odysseus, she is the briefly (for three days ala Christ, an interesting metaphor seen at times in Inanna's myth) lost traveler who, instead of coming home to a patient and brave Penelope, comes home to a lazy Dumuzi. This reversal of roles allows Inanna to be read as an empowered female in control of her own destiny who does not need a man to claim her destiny. She is powerful and will not, even when called to the "great below," be treated as a pawn like Persephone.

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As I mentioned in my introduction I am an atheist, so these texts are just Literature for me. That being said, this is excellent Literature and worth the sort of spiritual and academic close reading which it receives. The roots of how we can examine linearity and authoritative texts can be found in these classical works of literature. The roots of civilization, our shared, collective, stories, are enclosed in works like *Hymn of Creation*, the *Hebrew Bible*, and others like the Homeric Hymns and Gilgamesh.

The *Hymn of Creation* and the *Hebrew Bible* weave a tale between them that has been passed via oral tradition and the written word for centuries, shaping civilization as it passes down from generation to generation. Inanna and Demeter, both Goddesses, work their way through their trials and resolve them in a way which refuses to be trapped in linearity.

The constraint of linearity goes back to ancient times. The idea that something must have a finite beginning and ending is oppressive, especially towards women. Eve is punished for her deeds and ends up damning all of female kind to submission. Linearity is patriarchal and masculine. Inanna and Demeter defy this by standing up to their oppressors and seeking resolution in other, less masculine, forms of resolution. The evolution of the creation myth from thinking, questioning, intellectual curiosity is later turned into the patriarchal, oppressive, God of the Hebrew Bible. I may not believe in God, or an afterlife, or desire for either, but that cannot stop me from using these texts to look at how our civilization has grown and prospered over time. I am glad that these issues have been growing concerns going back to the origins of literature.

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