

MYTHIC GAPS

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Greek folklorist Demetres Loukatos reports a conversation he had with a fisherman, D. Kontares, on the island of Paxos in the 1950s.¹

“Are we going fishing?”

“Hey, I’m not going anywhere. I’m going to do what St. Elias did. I’m going to put my oars on my shoulder. St. Elias was a seaman and got so tired of the seaman’s life – at that time they didn’t have engines and sails, only an oar – that he put his oars on his shoulder and said, ‘I’m not going back to the sea.’ And he went to the highest mountain. For this reason all the churches of the prophet Elias that exist, they are on mountains. I don’t remember the conversation with the villagers.” (Hansen 1990, 243)

Responding to the scholar’s friendly inquiry, Kontares says he is not going fishing but is going to follow the example of St. Elias (that is, the Old Testament prophet Elijah), and explains this statement by recounting a short legend about Elias. As he reaches the end of his narrative, however, Kontares realizes that he does not remember the details of the story’s last scene, and acknowledges this fact to his interlocutor. The defective scene in his narration illustrates what one may call a narrative gap. The narrator forgets part of his story, leaving an ellipsis or hole in his narration, which in the present case he is content simply to acknowledge.

In the usual telling of the legend the prophet Elias, weary of seafaring, determined to seek a community that knew nothing of the sea; he located them by walking inland with an oar on his shoulder until he found a community that did not recognize it as an oar. The following text is typical:

They say about St. Elias that he was a seaman and served all his life as a captain on ships. He experienced great storms, and in one frightful storm his ship sank, and all except for him were drowned. Getting hold then of the oar of a boat, St. Elias managed to reach the mainland. Disgusted, however, with his sufferings at sea, he withdrew far inland. With his oar on his shoulder he began going forth, and whomever he met on the road he asked, “What’s this?” And whenever they said, “An oar,” he understood that these people knew of the sea. And he kept moving on in order to go further inland. In this manner one day he reached a little village built on the top of a mountain. He gathered the villagers, showed them the oar, and asked them, “What’s this?” With one voice they all answered, “A stick” (*xylō*). These people had never seen the sea, ships, and boats. For this

¹ Since the abbreviation, according to my friend Olga Kalentzidou, may stand for any one of several names – Demetrios, Demos, Demosthenes, etc. – I do not expand it.

reason he remained with them forever. And from that time the chapels of St. Elias have always been built on mountain tops.
(Hansen 1990, 242–243; cf. Uther 2004, 2: 183)

Sometimes narrators or their audiences, confronting a text in which they feel that something is missing and ought to be supplied, or that something is inappropriate and ought to be changed, adopt a more active attitude than Kontares does. What if, instead of confessing that he did not recall the last part of his story, he had improvised? After all, the man did recall that the scene consisted of a conversation between Elias and the villagers, and presumably he understood that the point of the seaman's oar-test was to find persons who were so unacquainted with the sea that they did not know what an oar was. So, instead of simply failing to identify the object as being an oar, the villagers might have mistaken it for a terrestrial object such as a farmer's winnowing shovel or a baker's peel, each of which resembles an oar. As it happens, there are texts of this story in which the inlanders make precisely these errors; for example,

Mr. W.R. Paton has since been good enough to draw my attention to an indisputable instance of survival, the case of the sailor who is told to put his oar on his shoulder and march on until he comes to a land where they say that it is a baker's peel. This story Mr. Paton remembers hearing from an old woman in Calymnos some years ago: his notes of it have unfortunately been mislaid. (Hansen 1990, 253)

Since the precise way in which the inlanders fail to recognize the oar as an oar varies (they identify it as a stick, a winnowing shovel, a peel, etc.), some narrators, unlike fisherman Kontares, must have improvised when they forgot a feature, or must deliberately have altered a detail.

Allomotifs

Variation of this sort is what Vladimir Propp has in mind when he lists a number of similar events taken from different Russian folktales:

1. A tsar gives an eagle to a hero. The eagle carries the hero away to another kingdom.
2. An old man gives Súčenko a horse. The horse carries Súčenko away to another kingdom.
3. A sorcerer gives Iván a little boat. The boat takes Iván to another kingdom.
4. A princess gives Iván a ring. Young men appearing from out of the ring carry Iván away into another kingdom, and so forth.

Propp observes that although the characters in these episodes vary, the narrative function of their actions in their respective tales is the same (1968, 19–20). Alan Dundes goes a step further when he suggests that functionally equivalent motifs, which he calls "allomotifs," are also symbolically equivalent. That is, motifs that fill the same "motifemic slot" in a tale not only perform the same narrative task but also bear the same meaning (Dundes 1980, 1984).

Although Propp attempts to distinguish historically earlier ("basic") from later ("derived") motifs, invoking grand social and historical changes such as religious shifts that have caused motif transformation in tales (1984, 82–99), he does not attempt to understand change on the level of individual narrators. Dundes does address this level, declaring that new allomotifs

are generated “from an unreflective, unselfconscious folk process” (1984, 176). Contrarily, Bengt Holbek insists that oral narrators frequently and quite consciously substitute one motif for another (Holbek 1993). All in all, it seems reasonable to suppose that some narrators, forgetting part of a story, simply acknowledge it in the manner of fisherman Kontares, whereas others wittingly or unwittingly supply a functional equivalent, and that still other narrators deliberately choose to modify a feature for some reason such as the nature of their audience (cf. Başgöz 2008, 201–213). Vance Randolph, for example, mentions a raconteur who had two different ways of telling a particular comic tale (Dundes 1984, 191). In “the ladies’ tale” the king threatens to cut off the protagonist’s head if he fails to perform a particular task (Randolf 1952, 17–19, 185–186), whereas in the more colorful version the king threatens to cut off the protagonist’s pecker (Randolf 1976, 93–96).²

Pandora and her Jar

For other kinds of mythological gap let us consider a pair of folk narratives from ancient Greek tradition. I begin with the myth of the first human woman, Pandora, and move on to the legend of Pygmalion and his animated statue, another manufactured woman.

The classic source for the myth of Pandora and her vessel of evils is the early Greek poem entitled *Works and Days* (vv. 53–105), composed by Hesiod around 700 BC. Hesiod tells how the god Zeus ordered Hephaistos to mix earth and water, shape it into the image of a lovely maiden, and give her voice and strength (that is, animate her). He told Athena to teach her crafts, Aphrodite to pour charm over her, and Hermes to instruct her in deceit. Then Hermes took the maiden to the mortal man Epimetheus as a gift, and Epimetheus accepted her. Until then humans had lived free of toil and disease and death, but the woman lifted the lid of a great storage jar, and scattered its contents about, devising sad cares for mankind.³ Only Hope remained in the jar. So now the earth and sea are full of evils, which visit men by day and by night.

The poet is silent or vague about two aspects of these events that, as it happens, modern readers have pondered much about. First, where did the mysterious jar of evils come from? In Hesiod’s narration it has no history; it is just there, a given. Second, what was Pandora’s motive for opening it? Hesiod says only that “she devised (or wrought) sad evils for men.” The usual sense of the verb he uses is “devised,” implying intent, but some Greek scholars take it here in the softer sense of “wrought.”

It is very unlikely that Hesiod himself saw the jar’s origin and Pandora’s motive as holes in his narrative. Oral narrators commonly recount their stories elliptically, economizing on details that are known to their audience or that are marginal to the point they trying to make (Edmunds 1997, 18–20). Hesiod’s immediate concern is the quality of human life, and his point here is that at a certain moment in cosmic history miseries in the form of toil, disease, and death entered the world and became irreversible facts of life for human beings. Hesiod can tell the Pandora myth differently when he has a different point to make, and does so (*Theogony* 570–593).

Nevertheless, the prehistory of the jar and the woman’s motive for opening it do amount to gaps for many readers, whose interests extend beyond the narrator’s immediate focus. One result is that modern retellers of the myth have come up with backstories of their own for the jar as well as motives for Pandora’s action in opening it. Thus the popular mythographer Thomas Bulfinch (1796–1867) writes that Pandora’s husband Epimetheus had the vessel in his house (Bulfinch n.d., 16–17). Another popular mythographer, Edith Hamilton (1867–1963), says that the gods gave the vessel to Pandora, instructing her never to open it

² “Pecker” signifies “penis” in comic slang.

³ In Hesiod’s text Pandora’s vessel of evils is a large jar (Greek *pithos*). Only in versions from modern times is the vessel represented as a box.

(Hamilton n.d., 70–72). As for Pandora’s motive, modern interpreters of the myth are divided half and half, one group seeing the maiden acting from malice and another from curiosity. Bulfinch (n.d., 16–17), for example, informs his readers: “Pandora was seized with an eager curiosity to know what this jar contained.” The popular mythographer Robert Graves (1895–1985) has it both ways when he describes Pandora as “foolish, mischievous, and idle” (Graves 1955, 1: 144–145), implying, it seems, that she somehow acted from both curiosity (“foolish”) and malice (“mischievous”), on top of which she was lazy. What is relevant to the present investigation is to recognize that the origin of the jar and Pandora’s explicit motive are the result of attempts to supply details that modern readers perceive as missing in the ancient mythography. These additions appear in current retellings and discussions of ancient Greek myth, especially in popular handbooks of mythology, where they acquire an aura of ancient authority (Hansen 2013).

Pygmalion’s Animated Statue

Our unique source for the well-known Greek legend of Pygmalion is the version that the Roman poet Ovid relates in his *Metamorphoses* (10.243–297). As the poet tells it, the sculptor Pygmalion developed an aversion to women and so lived a bachelor life. He carved an ivory statue of a lovely maiden and fell in love with it, dressing it, kissing it, and sharing his bed with it. When it was time for the festival of Venus, Pygmalion asked the gods to give to him as his wife a woman like the ivory maiden. Although he did not dare to ask for the ivory maiden herself, Venus knew what he meant, and when Pygmalion returned home and kissed and caressed his statue, its ivory softened into flesh, whereafter Pygmalion wed the maiden.

For many centuries Ovid’s readers did not sense that anything essential was missing from this story; in any case, the statue remained nameless in retellings and literary treatments of the story. But in eighteenth-century Europe the story of Pygmalion and his animated statue became popular among French and German artists, and the need for the maiden to have a name was felt. She was called “Agalméris” in a comedy by Jean-Antoine Romagnesi performed in 1741, and “Galatea” in a novel by Thémiseul de Saint-Hyacinthe de Cordonnier published around the same time. The name “Galatea” reappeared in 1762 in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s enormously popular *scène lyrique* (a spoken text with musical accompaniment) entitled *Pygmalion*, and around this time the name began appearing also in the titles of paintings on the Pygmalion theme. A century later, in 1871, W.S. Gilbert wrote a very popular comedy, *Pygmalion and Galatea*, which established the name in English-speaking lands.

Meanwhile, in eighteenth-century Germany a different name arose. The poem *Pygmalion und Elise* by the German-Swiss author Johan Jakob Bodmer created a vogue for the name “Elise” in Germany, which perhaps inspired the name “Eliza” in George Bernard Shaw’s play, *Pygmalion* (1912), whence the “Eliza Doolittle” of the musical *My Fair Lady* (1956). In short, in the course of reworking Ovid’s Pygmalion story in novels, stage-plays, and poems, eighteenth-century European authors desired the convenience of a name for the maiden, and devised several. Two families of names, Galatea and Elise/Eliza, established themselves in the literary tradition.

By the early twentieth century the history of these names was all but forgotten, prompting the classicist H.J. Rose to exclaim in exasperation: “Why some modern writers call the woman Galatea is one of the lesser mysteries of mythology; no ancient gives her any name” (Rose 1929, 340). Although scholarly sleuthing has unraveled the tangled mystery of the maiden’s name (Law 1932, Reinhold 1971), handbooks of classical mythology continue to declare that the name of Pygmalion’s animated statue is Galatea, lending authority to the name. “Pygmalion named the maiden Galatea,” says Edith Hamilton (n.d., 111); “Aphrodite brought it [the statue] to life as Galatea” writes Robert Graves (1955, 1: 211–212); and so on.

Joseph and Asenath

I turn from Greek to biblical mythology.

The cycle of stories about the patriarch Joseph, one of the twelve sons of Jacob, is among the fullest and best-known narratives in the Old Testament. According to the biblical account, Joseph's brothers hated him because he was favored by their father Jacob, and also because Joseph told of having dreams that implied his superiority over the other members of his family. When the brothers had an opportunity to act, they threw Joseph into a pit, but he was rescued by merchants and sold eventually in Egypt to a certain Potiphar, captain of Pharaoh's guard. Joseph then became a slave in Potiphar's household, but after Potiphar's lustful wife falsely accused Joseph of making a sexual pass at her, Potiphar had Joseph imprisoned. Nevertheless, the youth managed to earn a reputation as a skillful interpreter of dreams, and eventually Pharaoh summoned him to explain puzzling dreams that he himself had had. Joseph explained that the king's dreams portended seven years of plenty and seven years of famine, and advised Pharaoh to appoint an overseer to store up grain during the years of plenty in preparation for the years of want. Pleased by the youth's skill, Pharaoh put him in charge of the entire land of Egypt, second only to himself, and arranged for him to marry a high priest's daughter, Asenath, who presently bore him two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. During the years of famine that soon followed, Joseph's brothers traveled from Canaan to Egypt to buy grain. Since food supplies were under the control of Joseph, Pharaoh's governor, the brothers were obliged to make their case to Joseph, whom they did not recognize, so that the prophecy of the brothers doing obeisance to Joseph was fulfilled. After Joseph and his brothers were reconciled, Pharaoh invited Jacob and his entire family to settle in Egypt. They did so, and in time Jacob and subsequently Joseph died there (*Genesis* 37-50).

Joseph's wife Asenath merits only two brief mentions in the narrative. In the first, after Pharaoh made Joseph governor of Egypt, "he gave him as wife Asenath, daughter of Potiphara, priest of On" (41:45); and in the second the text says, "Before the years of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph by Asenath, daughter of Potiphara, priest of On" (41:50).⁴ Her function in the canonical story, then, is a modest one: she signals Joseph's social elevation, and she bears him children. The narrative focus is not upon her but upon Joseph and his astonishing success at the Egyptian court. One day he languishes in prison, and the next day Pharaoh makes him governor of Egypt and arranges a prestigious marriage for him.

The fact that Joseph wed into the family of an Egyptian high priest was all well and good for the authors of *Genesis* and their contemporaries, but for Jewish readers of a later age such a marriage outside the cultic community was viewed quite differently (von Rad 1973, 378; Charlesworth 1985, 2: 194). To them it raised the question: how could it happen that the Hebrew Joseph wed the non-Hebrew Asenath? Two different answers were given, each in the form of a backstory that filled in what now seemed to be a gap in the canonical account.

According to Jewish legend Asenath was the illegitimate daughter of Dinah and Shechem.⁵ When Dinah's brothers wished to kill the babe because of the shame to the family, Jacob placed a tin amulet inscribed with the name of god around her neck and abandoned her under a bush. An angel conveyed the infant to Egypt, where Potiphara, whose own wife was barren, adopted her. Years later, as Joseph traveled throughout Egypt in his role as vizier and maidens threw gifts to him in the hope of attracting his attention, Asenath, having only her amulet,

⁴ Despite their similarity of name, the eunuch Potiphar and the priest Potiphara are two different characters. "On" refers to the Egyptian city better known by its Greek name, Heliopolis, "City of the Sun."

⁵ Dinah was the daughter of Jacob and his wife Leah, whereas Joseph was a son of Jacob and his wife Rachel. Shechem was son of Hamor, chieftain of the Hivites. In the canonical account Shechem raped Dinah but loved her and wished to marry her; Jacob's sons pretended to agree to his proposal but treacherously slaughtered Shechem and his fellow Hivites (*Genesis* 34). The Jewish legend summarized in the text represents Dinah as becoming pregnant from the rape and giving birth to a daughter, who is identified with the Asenath of *Genesis* 41.

gave it to Joseph. Learning that she was not actually an Egyptian, inasmuch as she was descended from his own father Jacob through her mother Dinah, Joseph married her (Ginzberg 1920, 2: 38; 1925, 5: 336–337). A different version recounts how Asenath's parents were Dinah and Shechem's father Hamor. Jacob exposed her after having placed around her neck a golden amulet upon which he had inscribed the story of her birth. Potiphara discovered the infant while he was out walking near the city wall, learned her story from the amulet, and raised the girl as his own daughter (Ginzberg 1920, 2: 76–77; 1925, 5: 345). According to the legend, then, the marriage of Joseph and Asenath is unobjectionable because the bride is really not an Egyptian at all but a Hebrew.

A different solution to the problem of Joseph's bride took the form, not of a legend, but of a short novel, *Joseph and Aseneth*, a work some thirty-five pages in length that was composed in Greek by an unknown Jewish author, perhaps sometime between 100 B.C. and 100 A.D.

When the narrative begins, Aseneth was a beautiful Egyptian maiden of eighteen years, the daughter of Pentephres, priest of Heliopolis and chief counselor of Pharaoh. Many princes, including Pharaoh's eldest son, sought her hand in marriage, but she rejected them all and preferred to live in her ornate residence on top of her father's palace, where she worshipped countless idols.

One day Joseph, touring Egypt to collect grain, announced to her father that he was coming to visit. Pentephres told his daughter that he was going to give her to Joseph in marriage. She flatly refused the marriage, but when she saw Joseph enter her father's house in royal attire, she fell in love with him. Now it was her turn to be repudiated. A Jew who worshipped God and lived on the bread of life would not kiss a heathen woman who ate food offered to idols. Still, Joseph was charitable enough to say a prayer for her conversion, after which he boarded his chariot to continue gathering grain, promising to return a week later.

Utterly shaken, Aseneth destroyed her idols, engaged in a week of fasting and crying, and repented of both her conceit and her idolatry. One morning, God's chief angel came to see her and declared her to be reborn; he fed her a piece of honeycomb, which he said was the bread of life, and promised her that Joseph would return to marry her. He did come back, and the wedding ensued, presided over by Pharaoh himself.

Eight years later, Pharaoh's eldest son happened to see Aseneth, and his old infatuation was revived. He persuaded Joseph's brothers, Dan and Gad, to help him kidnap Aseneth, kill Pharaoh and Joseph, and assume power in Egypt. The coup failed, and Pharaoh's son perished. He was followed in death by his grief-stricken father, after which Joseph reigned over Egypt (Charlesworth, 2: 177–247; Wills 2002, 121–162).⁶ In this case, Joseph's wife remains an Egyptian but converts from Egyptian idolatry to the worship of the Hebrew deity.

The content of *Joseph and Aseneth* was inspired to a large extent by literary commonplaces of the day. From Greek romantic novels the novelist borrows the idea of love at first sight: when the haughty Aseneth meets Joseph for the first time, she falls instantly and passionately in love with him and can think of nothing else. From Jewish fiction he borrows the idea of the woman's prayer scene: when Aseneth understands that Joseph will not accept a worshipper of idols as his wife, she prays and humbles herself for days in an effort to make herself acceptable to him (Wills 2002, 17–18).

Ancient Jewish narrators saw in the minor character Asenath/Aseneth both an intriguing problem and also an imaginative opportunity. The expansion of the two sentences that the canonical text devotes to Joseph's wife is one instance out of many in which biblical stories were elaborated in ancient Jewish legend and literary fiction (Ginzberg 1910–1938; Yassif 1999, 46–52, 79–89).

⁶ See further Ginzberg 1910, 2: 170–178; 1925, 5: 374–375; Aptowitz 1924; Burchard 1996; and Kraemer 1998. I thank Professors Elliott Oring and Dan Ben-Amos for calling my attention to several of these references.

The Childhood of Jesus

The books of the New Testament have much to say about the adult life of Jesus but little about his childhood. Two of the four canonical gospels, *Mark* and *John*, say nothing at all about Jesus as a child, while *Matthew* and *Luke* give some information but not much. Each of the latter has a version of his birth (*Luke* 2:1–20; *Matthew* 1:18–25). In addition, *Luke* (2:21–38) gives an account of Jesus' circumcision and presentation in the Temple, and *Matthew* (2:13–23) tells of Herod's murder of all the infants in Bethlehem, the flight of Joseph and Mary into Egypt, and their return to Nazareth. Finally, *Luke* (2:41–52) describes the visit of the twelve-year-old Jesus to the Temple.

One reason why the gospel writers say little of Jesus' childhood years is that they are, understandably, interested primarily in Jesus' mature message and miracles along with his death and resurrection, which are all notable aspects of his adult life. Perhaps another reason is that the authors knew little of Jesus' childhood since, as a rule, not much attention is paid to the childhood of future celebrities because it is not known at the time that they will turn out to be celebrated persons (Hägg 2012, 6).

But in time early Christians must have sensed an ellipsis, as narratologists call it, in the biographies of Jesus, a period in which events must have occurred but are not narrated. What happened to Jesus between, say, his presentation as an infant in the Temple and his appearance as a twelve-year-old in the Temple? This biographical gap in Jesus' early life was presently filled by works known collectively as "infancy gospels." Many such apocryphal gospels were composed, beginning in the second century A.D., providing details of Jesus' early years and also of Mary's life and pregnancy. The so-called *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, written around 150 A.D. and about a dozen pages in length, was one of the earliest and most influential, treating Jesus between the ages of five and twelve. Its author identifies himself as Thomas the Israelite, who is otherwise unknown.

According to the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, the five-year-old Jesus was once playing by a brook that he had commanded by his word alone to be gathered into clear pools of water. Then he fashioned twelve sparrows out of clay. But the day happened to be the Sabbath, and when a certain Jew saw him, he told Jesus' father Joseph that in fashioning the birds Jesus had profaned the Sabbath. Joseph reprimanded Jesus, who said to the clay birds, "Away with you!", whereupon the sparrows flew away chirping. The Jews were amazed to see this.

Then the son of Annas the scribe took a stick and muddied the water that Jesus had miraculously gathered together. When Jesus saw that, he was angry, asking the boy what harm the water had done to him. "See," said Jesus, "now you also shall wither like a tree," and immediately the boy withered up. Wailing, the boy's parents carried him away and went to Joseph's house, reproaching Jesus' father and asking him what kind of child he had who did such things.

As Jesus walked through the village a child who was running bumped against him, whereupon Jesus caused him to die on the spot. The dead child's parents blamed Joseph, who spoke about the matter with Jesus. Jesus agreed to remain silent but caused his accusers to become blind.

Next Jesus made a fool of his teacher Zacchaeus, who commented to Joseph, "He is something great, a god or an angel – I don't know." As the Jews consoled Zacchaeus, Jesus healed all those whom he earlier had cursed. But after that everyone avoided provoking him.

One day Jesus was playing with a boy who fell from a roof and died. The boy's parents accused Jesus of throwing him down, whereupon Jesus leapt down from the roof and called the boy back to life, asking him, "Did I throw you down?" The boy said he had not.

And so the narrative continues, with Jesus sometimes as a sort of divine brat and sometimes as a miracle worker and sometimes as a pedant who displays his cleverness and knowledge to the adults around him. The narrative concludes with a scene borrowed from the canonical

gospel of *Luke*, in which Jesus's parents come upon the boy, now twelve years old, conversing in the Temple with teachers and elders, who are full of praise for his learning (Schneemelcher 1991, 1: 439–453; cf. Hägg 2012, 172–179).

Just as the Jewish author of *Joseph and Aseneth* fictionalizes the life of Aseneth before and during her marriage to Joseph, the Christian author of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* fictionalizes the early life of Jesus. From where does the author of the gospel get his content? Wishing to portray his subject's childhood but possessing scanty information, Thomas, like many other ancient biographers, employs the device of proleptic scenes (Hägg 2012, 6), that is, he attributes to the child traits that are deemed characteristic of the later adult. Thus the young Jesus is made to possess two notable features of the mature Jesus. One is that he has supernatural powers, performing miracles for good or bad, such as to raise persons from the dead. Most of the infancy gospel consists of episodes in which the five-year-old Jesus harms and heals his playmates and their parents at whim. Another is that he is cleverer than anyone else around him, humiliating even his teachers by means of his mental superiority, just as later the adult Jesus will impress his followers with his knowledge and wisdom. Thomas thus constructs Jesus the child as a foreshadowing of Jesus the adult.

Overview

Different kinds of gaps can be found in traditional narrative and tradition-inspired literature, and they elicit a variety of responses.⁷ The omitted scene in the Greek fisherman's narration of the Elias legend is an objective gap, for the narrator himself acknowledges that he does not remember the conversation between the seaman and the villagers, and without this climactic scene the narrative does not make sense to a listener or reader who does not already know the story. The narrator might have chosen to improvise the climactic conversation on the basis of his understanding of the logic of the narrative, but he does not. Other texts of the Elias legend suggest that oral narrators have sometimes done so, since the final scene in different texts varies in its content but is stable in its narrative function.

In contrast, we have no reason to suppose that Hesiod thinks he is leaving out anything crucial when he recounts the myth of Pandora in his poem, *Works and Days*. If he relates his story somewhat elliptically, omitting details that he presumes his listeners already know and slanting his narration towards the moral he has in mind, he is only doing what many oral narrators do when they recount a story in order to make a particular point. Similarly, we have no reason to think that Ovid is conscious of neglecting the story of Pygmalion and his ivory statue when he focuses his attention on the protagonist rather than upon the bride, or that the narrators of the Joseph story think they are omitting anything pertinent when they provide little information about Asenath, or that the composers of the canonical gospels believe they are doing the story of Jesus a disservice by focusing upon their subject's adult life. So it would be inaccurate to describe these texts as having gaps in the way that the Elias text does. And yet for many readers these texts require, or at least invite, completion. Why is that?

In their individual literary and historical contexts, the narratives in question are reasonably adequate and complete; however, once they are removed from their original contexts of transmission and find themselves in different contexts, or are treated as stories without a specific context, stories that can be recounted for their own sake, then questions may arise that did not arise earlier. Thus if one takes the Pandora myth from its Hesiodic context and considers it by itself as an account of the origin of women and human miseries, questions about the source of the jar of miseries and the motive of the person who releases them may now seem pressing. If one plucks Ovid's story out of his *Metamorphoses* in order to rework it as a stage-play, it becomes artistically necessary for Pygmalion's bride to have a name. A Jew

⁷ For kinds of gaps and responses not discussed here, such as those in early historians and mapmakers, see Artese 2003.

who reads, many centuries after it was composed, the biblical account of the Hebrew patriarch Joseph's marriage to the daughter of an Egyptian priest may think that such a marriage requires an explanation, just as a Christian well acquainted with the canonical gospels may come to wonder about the unmentioned years of Jesus' life. In sum, for all their diversity, all but one of the narrative gaps considered here are subjective and can be explained in the same way. They are byproducts of recontextualization.

The gaps, such as they are, are not the same in their importance. At the more urgent end of the spectrum is the Elias text with its omission that renders its text partly incoherent, as when in mid-joke a raconteur realizes that he or she cannot remember what happens next. Nearby stands the Pandora myth with its subjective gaps. For how can an interpreter of the story as a story evaluate the action without knowing the source of the jar and understanding why the woman removes and then replaces its lid? Next comes the Joseph legend, which poses an ethnico-religious problem but also offers a fine opportunity for an imaginative narrator, and then the Jesus legend, which invites expansion but does not require it. At the less pressing end of the spectrum stands the Pygmalion legend, in which the lack of a character's name is merely an artistic inconvenience.

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Latin summary

De lacunis mythicis. Varia genera omissionum interdum occurrunt vel occurri percipiuntur in narrationibus traditionalibus vel in litteraturā, quae traditione impulsae est: usitatum exemplum est aliquem narratorem animadvertere se non omnino recordari fabulae, quam narrare coepit, et se itaque partem quandam omittere. Qua condicione apud auditores fortasse narratio non intellegibilis efficitur. Sed multi casūs omissionis narrativae non sunt ita conspicui. Ab lacunis simplicibus obiectivisque distingui possunt lacunae subiectivae et minus perspicuae: in multis huiusmodi casibus narratores nihil maioris momenti vel revera necessarium in proposito suo omittunt, et lectores illas lacunas percipiunt atque easdem explere incipiunt. Hac symbolā delibero ex. gr. de lacunis, quae depromptae sunt ex antiquā litteraturā Graecā (ex mytho Pandoraae), ex antiquā litteraturā Romanā (ex fabulā Pygmalionis), ex antiquā litteraturā Hebraicā (ex narratione Iosephi) et ex primordiali litteraturā Christianā (ex narratione Iesu). Delibero de viis vere variis, quibus interpretes textūs hereditarios harum narrationum extendunt, cum verbi gratiā nomina excogitant, causas agendi inveniunt, fabulas in recessu actas conficiunt, et generaliter omissiones biographicas explent. Denique phaenomenon lacunarum subiectivarum explicare conor, cum suspicari, etiamsi eis sit varietas quaedam, eas habere unam eandemque causam.

English summary

Different kinds of omissions sometimes occur, or are perceived to occur, in traditional narratives and in tradition-inspired literature. A familiar instance is when a narrator realizes that he or she does not fully remember the story that he or she has begun to tell, and so leaves out part of it, which for listeners may possibly result in an unintelligible narrative. But many instances of narrative gap are not so obvious. From straightforward, objective gaps one can distinguish less-obvious subjective gaps: in many cases narrators do not leave out anything crucial or truly relevant from their exposition, and yet readers perceive gaps and take steps to fill them. The present paper considers four examples of subjective gaps drawn from ancient Greek literature (the Pandora myth), ancient Roman literature (the Pygmalion legend), ancient Hebrew literature (the Joseph legend), and early Christian literature (the Jesus legend). I consider the quite varied ways in which interpreters expand the inherited texts of these stories, such as by devising names, manufacturing motives, creating backstories, and in general filling in biographical ellipses. Finally, I suggest an explanation for the phenomenon of subjective gaps, arguing that, despite their variety, they have a single cause.

Keywords

classical mythology, myth, legend, folk narrative, Pandora, Pygmalion, Asenath, Infancy Gospels.