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The Ring inside the Fish: A Comparison of the Use of a Similar Folklore Motif in Herodotus and a Dutch-Frisian Folktale[1]

One of the best known Dutch folktales, "Het Vrouwtje van Stavoren," (The Lady of Stavoren), which is of Frisian origin, features a striking folklore motif: in a fit of fury and spite, after she has just committed an act of outrage which would seem to invite divine retribution, she takes a precious ring from her fingers and hurls it into the sea with the defiant cry that it is as likely that she will be punished by being reduced to poverty as that this ring will be returned to her – and the ring, of course, does return. As a classicist, I am reminded of the story of the ring of Polycrates as told by the fifth century B.C. Greek historian Herodotus (3.40-43). This paper wishes to explore the basic similarities, but even more the telling contrasts, in the use made of this colourful folklore motif in the two stories.

Sith Thompson's multi-volume *Motif-Index of Folklore Literature* shows that the tale of a lost or cast-away valuable ring which is returned to its owner from the belly of a caught fish is recognized as an authentic folklore motif that turns up in a wide variety of cultures.[2] One can readily see why such a remarkable event, spectacularly defying the odds, but still not entirely outside the realm of the possible, would appeal to the folk imagination. A ring is typically a prized object, and in myth, legend, and folktale often invested with magical and numinous powers; in the classical tradition, the story of the ring of Gyges – in Plato's *Republic* (2 259c-260b) – which bestowed invisibility on Gyges and enabled him to seduce the king's wife, slay the king, and seize the kingdom of Lydia for himself, comes immediately to mind. The return of a prized ring in such a virtually miraculous way would be readily interpreted as betokening a dramatic turn of either good or bad fortune – good or bad depending on the full context in which the event occurs; and so this motif could be used for a great diversity of narrative and moral-didactic purposes.

This diversity is well illustrated by the use made of the motif in the Sanskrit play by Kalidasa, *Shakuntala*, dating perhaps from the fourth century. Here the miraculously returned ring portends a happy ending. *Shakuntala* is justly admired for its exquisite poetic style, which is well conveyed by the translation of Michael Coulson in the Penguin Classics series.[3] It was warmly received in the West after it had been translated into the principal Western European languages in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; indeed, it inspired Goethe with the idea of a prologue consisting of a dialogue among the director, poet-dramatist, and a clown at the beginning of his *Faust*.

In the *Shakuntala*, the motif is used in a straightforward fashion leading up to a happiness-filled denouement. The king falls passionately in love with the young woman Shakuntala, and she becomes pregnant by him. However, after she accidentally loses a ring that had been a present to her from her lover, he fails to recognize and acknowledge her, and she leaves his presence rejected and humiliated. This unfortunate turn of events is due to a curse placed on Shakuntala by the sage and ascetic Durvasas, who had felt slighted by the young woman – although the slight had been unintentional and had amounted only to an absent-mindedness on her part; Durvasas had said that the king would fail to recognize and acknowledge her, and that this

curse would be lifted only if he saw some ornament given by him to her as a keepsake. The story ends happily. The ring turns up inside a fish caught by a fisherman and is brought to the palace and the king, whose lapse of memory then vanishes. He becomes remorseful and conducts a long and far-flung search for Shakuntala, eventually to be reunited with her and their young son – whom the king in fact encounters first and feels intuitively drawn to.

In Herodotus' story and the folktale of the Lady of Stavoren, by contrast, the ring is cast away deliberately and its return portends disaster for the protagonist. However, the two stories differ strikingly in the moral-didactic use they make of the folklore motif. The tale of the ring of Polycrates is that of a man's ineluctable fate, in which divine retribution for wrongdoing plays no significant role; the story of the Lady of Stavoren is a morality tale on a grand scale, and the use made of the motif is made to conform to this intent.

As Sir John Myers has pointed out,[4] *moira* (fate) in the sense of an inescapable end assigned to a mortal by the personified *moirai* (fates) is attached only to four individuals in Herodotus: Croesus, Cyrus, Arcesilaus, and Polycrates. (The scope of this paper does not permit me to go into the complex question of fate in Herodotus; suffice it to say that, while I do not think we can set aside the concept of an inescapable fate, I am attracted to John Gould's insight that Herodotus is not operating with a theory of historical necessity, but is rather making use of "the traditional language of a teller of tales whose tale is structured by his awareness of the shape it must have and who presents human experience on the model of the narrative patterns that are built into his stories; the narrative impulse itself, the impulse towards 'closure' and the sense of an ending, is retrojected to become an 'explanation.'")[5]

Much is made by Herodotus of the spectacular successes and prosperity of the sixth century B.C. tyrant and thalassocrat of Samos. But the unbroken succession of Polycrates' good fortunes has a sinister, fateful quality to it, recognized by the king of Egypt, Amasis, who writes Polycrates a letter of warning and advice (3.40): "It is pleasant to hear of the good fortune of a friend and ally; but your successes do not reassure me, for I know that heaven is jealous. I desire for myself and my friends that some affairs may go well and others ill and our lives be not uniformly fortunate. For I have never yet heard of a man whose constant good fortune did not lead in the end to misery and ruin."[6]

He then goes on to advise Polycrates to break this ill-omened unbroken chain of good fortune by casting away what is most precious to him and hardest to part with. Polycrates follows this advice: he boards a ship and sails far into the sea and there he casts into the water his precious seal ring, an emerald set in gold. One might view this deed as an act of what I would call self-immunization magic: by breaking the abnormally uninterrupted chain of good fortune and by thus restoring some human normalcy to his life and appeasing the jealousy of the gods, Polycrates seeks to avert the catastrophe that will otherwise eventually overwhelm him.[7] Such had indeed been the thrust of Amasis' advice. Polycrates' act of self-protection is, of course, to no avail. Five or six days later, a big, fine fish is cut open in the kitchen and the ring is revealed. Herodotus relates that Polycrates took the return stoically, "perceiving a divine hand in the event" (3.42). Although the king of Egypt had advised him in his letter to repeat the act if his first effort failed, he makes no attempt to do so, but simply writes to Amasis what has happened. Amasis' reaction is that Polycrates' situation is indeed hopeless – because of the sheer unnatural quality of his luck, whereby "he was so lucky that he could not throw away a thing without its coming back to him" (3.43). In the end, Polycrates is lured to a cruel and ignominious death by the Persian satrap Oroetes (3.122-125).

Herodotus tells this tale soberly without any high dramatization or moralizing. Polycrates, although spectacularly ambitious and ruthless enough if need be, is not portrayed as an especially evil man; and the archaic Greek understanding of the jealousy of the gods overshadows any idea of

divine retribution for wrongdoing.[8] The story of the Lady of Stavoren is, by contrast, a morality tale, the story of an outrage committed that stems from a haughty and pitiless disposition and that is terribly but justly punished. The principal (and most elaborate) literary version I have read is in the collection of Dutch folktales, S. Franke's *Sagen en Legenden rond de Zuiderzee*, published in 1932.[9] There are other literary versions as well, the earliest one I have been able to locate being in a book on Frisian folklore and folk customs published in 1895 or 1896.[10] Despite Franke's use of the terms "sagas" and "legends," the large majority of the stories and anecdotes in his collection are best classified as folktales.

As the author explains in his preface to what is obviously meant as a book for the general reader, it was his concern to collect and retell in a literary version a representative selection from the rich store of folktales, many of them still circulating in oral form, originating in the coastal regions of the former Zuiderzee, a horseshoe-shaped slice of The Netherlands distinguished for its many picturesque fishing villages and historic towns, many of which had enjoyed their glory days of commercial vitality and economic prosperity in the distant past. This was a region of The Netherlands also notable for its rich folk traditions as reflected in the tales collected and retold by Franke, and with the massive physical, environmental, and socio-economic changes slated for this region as a result of the damming off of the Zuiderzee, its conversion into a freshwater lake, and the massive polder reclamation projects, these traditions were doomed to disappear – a true enough prophecy.

Franke retells two versions of the story. I have chosen and concentrated on the more eventful and dramatic version, which is also the more popular one.[11] The story has become part of national Dutch folklore, and in 1969 a statue of the Lady was erected in the old harbour of the town, not too far from what is now a busy yacht haven. The statue shows the Lady in fifteenth-century costume, peering into the distance and eagerly waiting for her ship, with its expected priceless cargo, to return.

The story is of a fabulously wealthy merchant woman – a widow actually – in Stavoren, which once upon a time was a prosperous port and commercial centre. The Lady has become arrogant in her extreme wealth, despising the poor, whom she blames for their condition. She conceives the desire to acquire a treasure so uniquely valuable and precious that it will inflame the envy of her wealthiest fellow citizens, and so she sends off one of her skippers on a mission to scour the earth for it and to bring it back to her. The captain starts his long and seemingly futile search, at a loss as to what might satisfy the inordinately ambitious cravings of his mistress. Finally, in a distant port, looking through a warehouse, he comes across a bale of wheat, and an inspired thought to him: is not this golden coloured grain, from which our daily bread is baked, the most beautiful and precious treasure imaginable? So he loads up his ship and sails back to Stavoren. His mistress is not pleased; she feels publicly humiliated as the skipper reveals his cargo. Furiously, she orders all of it to be dumped overboard into the water. The captain protests: the poor can be fed with the precious food, and she risks punishment for the terrible sin of spiteful waste she is about to commit – punishment, perhaps, in the form of extreme poverty in which she herself will have to beg for a small measure of grain. This warning leads the Lady to a new outburst of fury, spite, and defiance:

> "'Me poor?' She laughed scornfully and straightway pulled from her finger a precious ring and threw it as far as she could into the sea, and cried out: 'As surely as this ring will never return to me, so sure it is I can never become poor.' "[12]

Years later the ring returns via a caught fish, and then disaster begins to strike: one by one the lady's fleets are shipwrecked and her warehouses burned down, and in eventually she is reduced to abject poverty, forced to beg for her daily bread.

The moral of this folktale is so obvious it does not have to be spelled out. But the folk imagination, as recorded by Franke, has projected the lesson this story carries onto an even larger screen. Not

only is the Lady of Stavoren punished and ruined, but the whole town, so arrogant in its prosperity and wealth, slips into decline as trading routes shift and the port is less and less frequented by ships and merchants. The folk imagination sees retribution exacted also through nature and constructs a vivid aetiology: the cargo dumped overboard becomes a large sandbar (called "Het Vrouwezand" – "The Lady's Sandbar"), which renders the harbour increasingly useless. Thus was explained the process of the silting of Stavoren's harbour over the centuries.[13] Finally, for good measure, the great floods that "swallowed up" the old town are also seen as an act of divine punishment.[14]

This Dutch-Frisian folktale looks back to the glory days of the ancient town in the later Middle Ages (hence the fifteenth-century costume and headgear of the Lady of the statue earlier mentioned) when it was a prosperous port and member of the then powerful Hanseatic League.[15] By the sixteenth century, however, Stavoren was in serious decline, and by the Early Modern Period, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was only a shadow of its former self.

Although the tales of Polycrates and the Lady of Stavoren both feature a protagonist who falls catastrophically from the heights of power and prosperity, the folklore motif of the cast-away and then returned ring is put to conspicuously different narrative and moral-didactic use. Herodotus' story of Polycrates, including and especially the event with the ring, illustrates the archaic Greek conception of the jealousy of the gods and the ineluctability of a person's fate if the divine powers will it to be so. Polycrates' casting away of his cherished ring can be best viewed as an act of self-immunization magic calculated to break the sinister succession of good fortune that must ultimately and inevitably lead to catastrophe. The magical element in Polycrates' act of casting away his ring is underlined by the extreme measure he takes by sailing far out into the sea in order to make it as unlikely as possible that his ring will ever be recovered; in the Dutch-Frisian folktale, this deliberate precaution is absent – the Lady of Stavoren simply acts impulsively as she flings the ring into the water.

The story of the Lady of Stavoren is a morality tale on a grand scale, to which the folk imagination has added a notable aetiological component. This folktale must have originated in the period of decline of Stavoren, perhaps during the Early Modern Period, when the decline was complete, and the time was ripe for the folk imagination to devise a tale of high drama which would explain the decline as what one might term "a terrible but just punishment for the abuse of wealth and power." The fact that the protagonist is a woman is in keeping with socio-economic conditions of Western Europe during the late Middle Ages and into the Early Modern Period, when women, especially in the Low Countries, possessed a relatively high socio-economic status and power that was largely non-existent for their counterparts in the archaic and classical Greek world[16] – although I would suggest that casting a woman in the central role of the folktale betrays some misogyny as well. In any case, this is a larger-than-life morality tale, quite different in intent and tenor from Herodotus' story of Polycrates and his fateful ring.

NOTES

[1] Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the annual meeting of the Atlantic Classical Association in 1996 and that of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Netherlandic Studies in 1997.

[2] Sith Thompson (editor), *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, revised and enlarged edition, Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1966: volume 1, p. 451, entry B548.2.1; volume 5, p. 22, entry L412.1; volume 5, p. 87, entry N211.1; for the more general ring motif, see volume 6, pp. 650-651, entry "Ring."

[3] *Three Sanskrit Plays*, translated and introduced by Michael Coulson, London, New York, etc.: Penguin Books, 1981.

[4] John L. Myers, *Herodotus: Father of History*, Chicago: Henry Regner Company, 1971 (Oxford University Press, 1953), 48.

[5] John Gould, *Herodotus*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989, 77-78.

[6] The translation of Herodotus used is that of Harry Carter, *The Histories of Herodotus of Halicarnassus*, London: Oxford University Press, 1962.

[7] With regard to the magical element in Polycrates' act, I am not really convinced by the explanation offered by Seth Benardete, *Herodotean Inquiries*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969, p. 82, namely that by casting away his priceless ring, Polycrates tried to "transfer" its "power" of enduring art to himself, while at the same time "propitiating divine jealousy." The magic falls under the wider catagory of apotropaic-sacrificial magic and ritual, most recently discussed – from a sociobiological perspective – by Walter Burkert, *The Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religions*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1996, ch. 2, "Escape and Offerings." In ch. 6, "The Reciprocity of Giving," p. 146, Burkert makes brief mention of Polycrates' casting away of his ring, but this act cannot be properly understood, at least not in any primary sense, as presenting a gift to the gods. I hope that my metaphorical term, "self-immunization magic," catches more precisely Polycrates' intent.

[8] On the jealousy of the gods in archaic Greek thought, see A.W.H. Adkins, *Moral Values and Political Behaviour in Ancient Greece*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1972, 78-82; also his *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960.

[9] S. Franke, *Sagen en Legenden rond de Zuiderzee*, Zutphen: W.J. Thieme & Cie, 1932.

[10] Waling Dijkstra, *Uit Friesland's Volksleven van Vroeger en Later*, part one, Leeuwarden: Hugo Suringar, n.d. but probably 1895-96, 46-47; in his preface (p. viii), Franke mentions this work as one of his literary sources for his collection. In the literature that I was sent by the V.V.V. (Tourism Office) of Friesland in the summer of 1996 were included two retellings of the story in contemporary Dutch verse.

[11] Franke, "Het Vrouwezand," 292-301; the other version, entitled simply "Het Vrouwtje van Stavoren," (282-291), does not involve the search for a unique treasure and the dumping overboard of a cargo of grain, but a confrontation between the Lady and an old beggar, whom she taunts and whose warnings she finally scornfully defies by throwing a precious ring of hers into the water.

[12] Franke, 299; the translation is my own.

[13] Franke, 300; Dijkstra, 46.

[14] Franke, 300.

[15] Dijkstra (p. 46) gives some historical background, placing the beginning of the decline as early as the fourteenth century.

[16] Simon Schama's highly acclaimed *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1988, in particular in chapter 7, is excellent on the high social and economic status of Dutch women in the seventeenth century; cf. p. 260: "Much admiring astonishment was expressed [by foreigners] of the aptitude and ... the instruction ... of Dutch women in business affairs."