
Recent decades have witnessed numerous studies which deal with Greek, mostly Athenian, attitudes to foreigners and the extent to which such attitudes comprise a Greek self-definition through the construction of an Other. This fruitful area of investigation has led to many important insights about ideology and self-representation within Greek — again, mostly Classical Athenian — culture itself. While the study of the Other in Greek thought often involves the ‘Barbarian’ in Greek texts, Vasunia’s book is the first of its kind in making Greek attitudes to Egypt its central subject. Indeed, Vasunia (hereafter V) is quite right to emphasise the importance of such a topic, given the widely attested fascination Egypt held for Greek writers across a range of periods and genres. V’s project consciously differs from that of Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena* in not attempting to argue that Greek culture is purely derivative of Afro-Asiatic cultures. Rather, V aims to show how Greek responses to Egypt are purely about Greek self-affirmation and ethnocentrism (p. 31). Tragic, historiographical, philosophical and rhetorical texts all come under V’s purview, and, even though he acknowledges the large number of depictions of Egyptians in Greek art, his study is essentially logocentric, with only very brief discussion of relevant visual material. In any event, this book is a notable addition to what has become a burgeoning field not only in Classics but other areas of the humanities which seek to examine Western attitudes to non-Western cultures.

V’s book is part of a series called ‘Classics and Contemporary Thought’ and his mostly post-colonial and, at times, post-modernist approach to his subject shows him to be *au fait* with much theorising in contemporary cultural criticism. The insights of Marx, Freud, Foucault, Said, Derrida and Lacan, amongst others are periodically invoked, sometimes to telling effect. This approach enables V to make a number of stimulating and genuinely interesting insights into the texts he discusses, but, at the same time, has the effect of making much of his work doctrinaire and reductive. For although he claims to challenge the simplistic binarism of ‘Self versus Other’, V continually denounces
Greek accounts of Egypt — from those of Aeschylus to Isocrates — as hopelessly ethnocentric, imperialist and pernicious. It is true, of course, then as now, that every account of a different culture will include ethnocentric biases that will often say more about the investigator than the subject — and V's approach, so heavily-informed by modern theory, is particularly susceptible to this pitfall. Yet the biases in the range of Greek texts that V discusses exist on varying levels and come with varying nuances. The moralistic condemnation V metes out to one Greek author after another, then, not only begins to grate pretty quickly, but neglects elements in the texts and Greek culture of the time that deserved fuller consideration.

Chapter 1 deals with Aeschylus' *Suppliants* and Euripides' *Helen* in which Egyptians feature more fully than in any other extant Greek drama. In the Aeschylean play V sees a stereotyping depiction of the Egyptian suitors as lecherous, tyrannical barbarians (pp. 38ff), whose black skin is repulsive to the Danaids who prefer death to marriage to these men. Not much to disagree with here, but the Danaids do not have an 'erotic preference' for Hades, as V claims (p. 52), and the kind of erotic nexus he attempts to build around the blackness of Hades and the Egyptians, and the Danaids' resistance to marriage (p. 47ff) is not convincing. Also V downplays the fact that the views about Egyptians come mostly from a chorus of young women who need not reflect any normative view of Aeschylus and his contemporaries. These women detest the idea of marriage in general, not just to Egyptians, as V acknowledges (p. 55), and this would fly in the face of the role ordained for women by the polis of Aeschylus' day. The rest of the trilogy would also undercut aspects of the attitude of the Danaids: firstly by reference to the murder of the Egyptian husbands and subsequent punishment in the underworld, and secondly in the likelihood that Aphrodite herself champions the decision of Hypermnestra, to spare her Egyptian husband (Aesch. fr. 44). As part of such a trilogy, the *Suppliants* is not a simple endorsement of Egyptian-bashing. V's attempt to see another Greek equation of Egypt with despotism and death in Euripides' *Helen* culminates in the Freudian suggestion that the lechery of the Egyptian Theoclymenos for Helen enacts Greek male desires or fantasies which are ostensibly made the preserve of the barbarian Other (p. 73) — an interesting but inevitably speculative idea.
In Chapters 2 and 3 V sees the portrayal of Egyptian tyranny, inversion of nature and stagnation as the most prominent themes in Herodotus’ famous account in book 2 of his *Histories*. V not only makes Herodotus a part of a discourse that misreads Egyptian realities, but he condemns him in Foucaultian terms as the purveyor of a panoptic gaze. What alternative was open to him is never made clear by V, who reduces Herodotus to the early prototype of the pith-helmeted Victorian explorer casting an imperialistic eye on all he surveys (p. 101). Moreover, V underplays the evident admiration the historian had for much in Egyptian culture and his willingness to acknowledge Greek debt to Egyptian achievements (e.g. 2.35, 53, 148, etc.), which V himself seems willing to concede to him, albeit cursorily (p. 245-6). But, generally, Herodotus’ accounts of Egyptian architecture are, according to V, underscored by an imputation of despotism and tyranny in that Egyptian rulers virtually enslave their people by compelling them to build vast temples and pyramids (pp. 81-2; cf. 107-9, etc.). Two important points need to be made here. Firstly, a charge against Egyptian pharaohs does not constitute a charge against all things and people Egyptian. Secondly, the Greeks were quite willing to condemn the presence of tyranny amongst their own people and did not fetishise it as an all-too-eastern phenomenon, as V implies. It is significant that when V cites Aristotle (*Pol.* 1313b) as further evidence of Greek hostility to Egyptian tyrants who exploit their people, he barely pauses over the philosopher’s mentioning of numerous Greek tyrants who do exactly the same thing (p. 82 n. 12). V also discusses the Egyptian world-view and ideology of their architecture and claims that royal building projects were not monuments to pharaonic vanity, but rather ‘brought together a diverse group of interconnected interests and workers’ (p. 108). But the evidence for such a utopian building scheme is not to be found in the quotes V adduces from secondary sources. Nor can it be sustained in the face of inscriptions such as the one by Queen Hatshepsut who announces herself, in fine imperialist ethnocentric fashion, as ruler of all the world, having subjugated all foreign lands (p. 108 n. 59). Indeed, elsewhere V himself refers to Egyptian monuments, *inter al.*, as promoting the *Weltanschauung* of the dominant elite (p. 177). This is, of course, much more plausible, but further underlines problems in his overall treatment of Herodotus’ account and V’s own attempt to ‘rehabilitate’ the ideology behind the royal building programmes.
V’s discussion of Plato’s attitude to Egypt (Chs. 4 & 6) is rich and complex, but ultimately V extracts from it the same conclusion as he does with other authors treated in the book. Thus, the Platonic portrait of Egypt is self-serving, deceitful and wilfully misconstrued (esp. p. 244). V makes the idea of writing as a specifically Egyptian medium — associated with secrecy, deceit and despotism — a major strand in Plato’s reception of Egypt. To deal with the latter chapter first: V focuses on the *Timaeus* and *Critias* and the story of Atlantis, preserved in the holy, secret archives of the Egyptian priests of Saïs. Plato’s mission in these and other dialogues is to assert the superiority and anteriority of Greek — essentially Athenian — culture to that of Egypt. This he does by making Egypt preserve the story of proto-Athens’ victory over the all-powerful and sophisticated Atlantis; this account is then passed on to Solon, and the rest is (Athenian) ‘history’. V argues, therefore, that Plato uses Egypt as a source for Greek history and a place of transmission of Greek culture, which is then ultimately returned to its place of origin by the venerable figure of Solon. Such a grand Platonic fiction, V then claims, is motivated by a Greek, or at least Platonic, inferiority complex in the face of the genuine antiquity and profundity of Egyptian culture, whose achievements are thus seen to be indebted to Greece, rather than vice versa. This, in my view, is the most stimulating part of V’s book, and his reading here is a very attractive one, providing much food for thought.

More tendentious, however, is V’s discussion of especially the *Phaedrus*, in which he claims that Plato contrasts the antiquated Egyptian records with the openness of Greek culture whose hallmark is orality and the ability to deal with the present. V essentially reproduces Derrida’s famous critique of Plato’s orality-literacy dichotomy (‘La Pharmacie de Platon’) and its implications for subsequent western metaphysics (pp. 155ff). He then presents Egyptian hieroglyphics as being able to transcend the problems both of this dichotomy and the vexed issues concerning the referential capacities of words, which V sees at the heart of the ‘Greek tradition’ (p. 174). There are many difficulties here, not least of which is V’s glib identification of hieroglyphics as a virtually post-structuralist medium (p. 173). With such a cosy appropriation of an ancient means of communication, V leaves himself open to charges of anachronism and cultural ethnocentrism that he so readily dishes out to the Greek authors in his
book. More generally, V too often conflates Plato and the ‘Greek tradition’ — is there just one? — regarding concepts of the efficacies of language and its relation to the truth. He writes ‘... in the Greek tradition, language stands in for something else, or is mimetic of something else, and truth is always located in this something else, whether it is an essence, a Platonic Form (ιδέα) or an Aristotelian Being (ὁν)’ (p. 174). The difficulties raised by this statement can hardly even begin to be tackled here, but suffice it here to say that V ignores the range of differing views held not only by Plato, but by figures like Parmenides who posited no distinction between thought, language and being (B 2, 3, 6 DK). A similar view was conceivably maintained by Protagoras and some other Sophists (Pl., Thet. 167a7-8), so that language in fact is a prescriptive, not descriptive, phenomenon as treated by these thinkers. Conversely, we can cite Gorgias’ brilliant iconoclasm (B 3.83ff DK; cf. MXG 979a-980b) that λόγος need have no relation to anything outside itself, yet in its psychological grip on us is still a δυνάστης μέγας (Hel. 8). One could continue indefinitely with major counter-examples to V’s claim about the ‘Greek tradition’, starting with the great Homeric liar Odysseus, but the point here is that his dichotomy between Greek and Egyptian attitudes to language and writing grossly oversimplifies the issues and weakens this section as a whole.

To his credit, V casts a wide net over the material to include discussion of Isocrates’ Busiris — a work ostensibly in honour of the Egyptian king — and Alexander’s conquest and occupation of Egypt. V sees in the Busiris, a parody of encomia, and, rather than give a detailed exegesis of the text, his reading is largely informed by various theories of comedy and parody (esp. pp.199-207). The by now predictable upshot is that this text is yet another instance of Greek xenophobia, this time laced with pernicious humour. V’s account of Alexander’s foray into Egypt contains interesting points, especially in his embracing of Egyptian culture. But when we are told that the most formidable warrior-prince of all time was primarily motivated to conquest by Homer’s references to Egypt and the more recent Greek discourse he had supposedly gleaned from Herodotus, Isocrates and Plato (pp. 253-6, 287, etc.), we can be forgiven for thinking this is too much to believe. Likewise, practical and strategic considerations are more likely to underlie Alexander’s quest to discover the source of the Nile, rather than
a desire for a purely gratuitous exercise in colonialist exploration, as V suggests (pp. 275-82).

If I have mostly focused on areas of disagreement in this review, this is, firstly, because I think the issues V raises are indeed worthy of fuller consideration and, secondly, to counter V’s consistently polemical tenor and dismissive treatment of his Greek sources. V’s quest to find the worst or most capricious motives in every Greek account of Egypt begs too many questions and pays too little attention to trends in Greek thought that have some bearing on his inquiry. Not least among these is the important debate developed by the Sophists — and found in Herodotus (e.g. 3.38, etc.) — surrounding νόμος and φύσις. Yet the major implications of this debate for ethnicity and cosmopolitanism receive only the briefest mention (p. 184 n. 3). While I found much to disagree with in V’s book, it should be noted that V has unearthed an important topic and dealt with it in a rich and theoretically-informed fashion, which will make it a useful starting point for further discussions of this and related issues. But if the Greeks of the fifth and fourth centuries BC fall short of the tenets of current ethno logical theories, it should also be noted that there is a whole lot more to be said about them, too.

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