Podcast Transcript

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Philology and the Comparative Study of Myths

Podcast with **Paola Corrente** (3 June 2019).

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Sidney Castillo (**SC**): *Paola Corrente is Professor at Universidad del Pacífico, in the Department of Humanities, and also a researcher for this university. She has a doctorate in Religious Sciences and master's in Anthropology both from the Universitad Complutense in Madrid, in Spain, and a bachelor's degree in Classic Philology from the Università di Salerno, Italy. Professor Corrente conducts research on several subjects regarding mythology, religion and literature – especially creation myths and the imaginary Beyond – other comparative studies of the ancient Mediterranean world, and collaborates with renowned scholars of ancient religions and Assyriology. Welcome, Professor Corrente, to the Religious Studies Project.*

Paola Corrente (**PC**): Thank you.

SC: *For starters – we know that your work is in philology, so I think that that's an obvious question: how philology can contribute to the study of religion.*

PC: Well, the obvious answer is the text. So you know that we have different kinds of religion in the world. Some of the major religions have texts. So not all the religions of the world use texts. But for the religions that have texts, philology helps us with interpretation of these texts and this gives us a big help in interpreting and understanding of religion. Because we have, like, solid information from people who are living in these times, and understand things that they were writing about. So, for me, it's a big help in interpretation.

SC*: Now, with regard to this approach, what are the methodological challenges when doing research in comparative mythology with a philological approach?*

PC: Well, I like the word challenge because, you know, comparison can be complex. Because you need to know several languages, several different cultures and traditions. You have to know a lot of

things. And it's very unusual that one scholar can know all these things. So you need to collaborate. And collaboration, for me, it's a big thing. So you have to collaborate with different specialists in different fields of study – which is what I do, and what I did for my dissertation. So, for the philology, I will tell you about a case. . . . I study comparative mythology and religion from ancient Greece and Mesopotamia. I know Latin and Greek, so I can translate texts from Latin and Greek. But I didn't study Akkadian or Sumerian, so I need help with the texts – so collaboration: I need someone to work with. In this case it's one of the supervisors for my dissertation. So we are in constant contact, because I need him to guide me through the translation. And I think this is a very good thing. Now not all people like this. I do. I do like collaborating with other scholars because you learn a lot of things. And you can change your way of thinking about things, because you discover things that you didn't know before. So it's a big thing. And I like it. I do it constantly.

SC: *As for the translation work, for example, I know that that's a big deal. And when it's translating for a philological approach, how do you manage to try to read from the sources and translate the words from one language to another?*

PC: Well that's complicated, because when you translate a text – especially, again, with the case of languages from Mesopotamia – sometimes the translation is very complicated, because Sumerian, especially, is a complicated language. So scholars disagree on the translation of things, for example (**5:00**). So that is a big problem. Because you don't know, sometimes, which is the correct translation of a text. So these change your interpretation, of course. So this is a big problem that I have, for example, with Mesopotamian myths, especially with the Sumerian version of these myths. Because Sumerian is a very complicated language. And translating it is very, very complicated. With Latin and Greek we don't have the same problem because we have . . . I mean classical philology was a very ancient tradition. We have a lot of texts. And our knowledge of Latin and Greek grammar is very, very solid. So it's very strange if you find a text that you don't know exactly how to translate. But the case with Mesopotamian sources is different. And this is, again, a challenge, no? Because you have to . . . in this case, you use of a lot of imagination, based on what you know about this culture and this myth that you are studying, to help with the correct translation. And comparison is very important, because sometimes you have the same or a similar myth in other traditions, and so you know exactly how to translate it in these others cultures. And so maybe this can help you choosing the correct word or verb that you need in that text. It's not always a certain translation, but it's a way of solving the problem.

SC: *Of course.*

PC: So you can use what you know of other situations, similar situations, and apply it to this particular myth that you don't know how to translate. I have some of them in my dissertation very famous myths whose translation is not certain. So you have to use your imagination. I like it.

SC: (Laughs). *So regarding that point, your doctoral thesis revolves around the concept of dying god, right? And the presence of gods with this feature in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern civilisations. Could you share with us some of your major findings?*

PC: Well, I think the most important is that the dying god does exist! Because, as you know, this category is very controversial. So now the position is that it was a wrong idea that the dying God does not exist – that it was a misunderstanding. And things like this. But studying, especially some texts – again, from Mesopotamia and from near Eastern tradition, and texts from Greece too, about Dionysus – so studying these texts and these myths I found out that the dying god exists, actually. And it is very curious that these three gods from Mesopotamia, Ugarit and Greece – or say from Mesopotamia, from Near East and from Greece – which are, like, the most certain examples of a god who dies and comes back, are ignored usually. So they are the gods who are usually not studied and not brought into the category. And they're the only ones with whom we have certain proofs that there is the death of the god involved. So I would say that this is the major finding: the existence of this figure.

SC*: Yes. But this way of classification of classifying as to certain gods with this particular feature – where does it come from?*

PC: Well, the category of dying god was in . . . well it existed before, but it's famous thanks to Frazer and his book, The Golden Bough, which is a beautiful – well, there are several books about magic and religion. And so he introduces this category. And he was studying especially three gods, and some others (**10:00**). And he was trying to find this kind of divine figure in other cultures. So there was a lot of criticism against this category. And some of this criticism is real – there are some problems with what he was saying about the dying god. But in my opinion, what he said in general was correct. Now what I'm doing is . . . I think it's useless to just keep criticising him, which is what people do usually. I think there is no point in doing this. So I was trying. . . . It was very fascinating for me, these books and this category. So I started to investigate about it. And I found out that the first thing to do is to reorganise the category, which is not totally wrong. We just need to do a difference between the different deities who are involved in the process. And so, again, Frazer talked about the gods that I studied: Baal, Dionysus – but he didn't treat Inanna, which is the Mesopotamian goddess, because he . . . . In part, he talked about these myths, but he couldn't have the texts that we have now. So I think

Inanna is the most important of these gods. And so my dissertation focusses basically on her and Baal. So I focus on them because no-one pays attention to the text about them. Which I think highly interesting. Because they clearly talk about death and resurrection or coming back from death of these gods. So there is no way of denying the death or resurrection of gods if you read the Ugaritic text about Baal, or the Sumerian and Akkadian texts abut Inanna. Dionysus is in the same, although the case with Dionysus is more complex. I think that the category is working. We have just . . . we need to reorganise it. And that's what I was trying to do with my dissertation. I think we have to make a difference between the different ways these gods die. Because sometimes they don't die – they just disappear or they sleep. And, instead of denying the entire category, I think it's more clever just to reorganise it.

SC: *OK. In regard to the last thing you said, and you wrote in your thesis as well, about the multiple modalities that a dying god goes through in their respective myths to be considered as such. There is the physical death, the absence, fettering, sleep, katabasis or alternation. How were these different processes understood by their own civilisations?*

PC: I think that, in general, the perception was the same. I understand that the death, the absence, the sleep, etc., was the way they had to point at the non-activity of the gods. So it's easy – when someone is absent he can't do his work for example. When we are sleeping, we don't work. We don't do what we normally do during the day. So it was the same, for me, with gods: when the gods were absent they just couldn't do what they had to for work, for nature, for man. They were just . . . you couldn't ask for what you wanted because the god, in that moment, was not working. So I think that the meaning of all these things is the same: the inactivity of the gods. There was just a different way of expressing the inactivity. You can express it in different ways. Because a myth is basically a story. So you have an author who is writing about this story, and we have to consider the fantasy, the imagination, of this author – who invents things, or changes things that he knew from other stories that he was hearing. And so he would introduce some changes (**15:00**). So instead of the absence he would talk of the journey to the underworld – just to make a different . . . to give a different accent to his way of telling the story. I think the death, the real death, is a different thing. It's about the activity of the gods, but from what I discovered during my investigation, I think that the background is different. So I put the death of the gods and the resurrection in their specific context. And this is the new part of this issue, this ancient question of the dying gods. For example given that, in general, these different ways of dying are expressing the same things, we can understand better the words found in the ancient texts. For example, the common metaphor for death is sleep, of course, No? We know it is something that we can observe. Someone who is sleeping, we can think that he's dead. Because he doesn't do

anything: he doesn't move, he doesn't talk, he doesn't walk. So we can think he's dying or he's dead. So in the text, in many of the texts about the gods I have studied, we find the first metaphor for death which is sleep. And so we find it for the resurrection, they use the same word that indicates standing. For example, in Greek, the word which indicates resurrection is the verb *anistemi*, which basically means "standing". When you sleep in your bed and then you stand from your bed – that is the meaning of the verb. And then it was used for the resurrection, so about Jesus, for example. In the Greek text about the resurrection of Jesus, we find this verb. Then it was translated into Latin, which is from where we take our resurrection, the word. And it's curious that in the text, in the Sumerian text – which is the most ancient that we have – we find the same word to indicate the resurrection of Inanna the goddess. To say that she lives again, they use the Sumerian verb to say "to stand". So it's very interesting these similarities, even in the use of language, in the words.

SC: *Is this a common feature, understanding the same exercise, the same action but with different words and how they are perceived by other civilisations? Like the case you just mentioned with resurrection?*

PC: Well it's . . . I don't know if it's all the civilisations that would use the same word. Because I'm talking of cultures who are related . . . between them. So they have relations, several cultural relations between them. So I wouldn't be surprised to find the same language, the same words in Greek or in Sumerian, or in Ugaritic or in Akkadian because we are talking of a similar cultural context. And we know that maybe even in this case it's not proved yet. But it's possible. But we know that in other things, Greeks received myths and stories from the Near East. So maybe this would be one of these cases. So the fact that we have the same words can be a normal reaction because again, as I was saying before, the most common metaphor for death is sleep. So maybe you can find this all over the world? I don't know, because I didn't see all the traditions of the world. But maybe we will find the same things because it's a normal thing (**20:00**). The first thing when you think about, when you are talking about death is sleep. So maybe you would find the same things all over the world, I don't know. But in the case of the culture I'm studying it can be either a common reaction that sleep . . . . So when I want to point to the resurrection I use the verb which means standing from the bed. Because it's the normal thing. Or the other option is that there was an influence from the Near East in Greece, which is possible. I started to do this kind of investigation of whether there is a direct influence from the Near East or there are two independent things that just develop in the same way, because they respond to the same thing. They are the only two possibilities, but I can't say, now, if this idea was born in one culture and then it goes to other cultures, or just it was a natural development with the different cultures. It can be both things.

SC: *Now given all that you have shared with us so far, what would you recommend for achieving proper classifications in the study of comparative myths and religion?*

PC: That's complex. A complicated one. Well, first of all – which is what we were commenting on in the beginning – to do a proper classification we should know properly myths and religions of different cultures, and we should know how to do classification properly. And this is complicated because there is not a set-out way to do it. And there are a lot of prejudices in the study of myth and religion. And many people just don't like comparison. So it's complicated. But I think we just have to have a good knowledge of cultures, the different cultures that we are studying – which is a big thing, because you have to know a lot of things. You have to know language, and society, and art, and literature and philosophy. It's a lot of things. But you can do it. And then . . . so to do the comparison, you have to know at least two cultures. So it's a lot of previous planning to reach such a level of knowledge. And then you have, I think you have to have your mind open to the possibility of doing this classification. And sometimes, especially in certain fields of study, scholars don't like theories for classification. And the case with dying gods was a very good example because they just deny it and say, "No. It's not good doing generalisation or categories." Why not? I mean if we study something, we want to understand what we are studying. And in order to do that we have to theorise and categorise about things. But it's not something that all people, all scholars, like.

SC: *And so regarding that, you mentioned Jesus earlier. And you were talking about resurrection and dying gods. Do you think that this was some sort of a problem with trying to achieve these classifications?*

PC: Yes. I think it was a problem. It is a problem because when we think about the resurrection our first thought goes to Jesus of course – it's normal. But it doesn't mean that before Jesus . . . I mean we have . . . there is no proof that before Jesus, gods couldn't resurrect. Why not? The problem is that we are using the resurrection the way we know it in Christianity, and resurrection in Christianity has certain features. And we are using what we know about Christian resurrection to cultures who are more ancient (**25:00**). We can do that. We have to understand what these ancient civilisations would understand from resurrection, or would express with resurrection, and we have to see if we can apply the same word to them. But I am not a fan of this fashion, now, of re-thinking about words "Was that not correct? Do we have to change the word?" No I think that we use the word resurrection. We know the word resurrection, right, in the case of Jesus? And we can use this word, we can apply this word to other gods. And we just explain what this word means for the other gods. And what these other civilisations understand for resurrection. I don't see the need of changing the word. We are used to it,

so it's part of our tradition. We can use it, we just make the differences between the resurrection in the case of Jesus and the resurrection in the case of our gods. And that's it. There is no confusion, because we can understand the differences, so we just say it. But in this case, I studied the word resurrection in different traditions and again I see that it's the same word. So the fact that they will use the same word means something, right? Otherwise they would have used another one? I guess that they . . . at the beginning they – let's say Judaism and Christianity – they would perceive the resurrection of Jesus in the way that was very similar – not the same, similar – to resurrection of the other gods. But then, of course, there is . . . I mean, Jesus is such an important and particular figure that everything concerned with him is so special for him that we can't use it with other things. But it does not mean that resurrection of death didn't exist before. What did *not* exist in, at least in the Near East, at least from what we know, it was the association of the resurrection of the gods with the resurrection of human beings. This aspect was absent from . . . at least from the Mesopotamian sources and Ugaritic sources. But not totally absent from Greek tradition, for example. So yes, there is a difference of course. But I think the important thing is to explain things, not just to deny them. There is no point of doing this. Just say the things in the clearest way, so people understand, and that's it.

SC: *Of course. Well it has certainly been really stimulating to hear about these kind of things and some of the major things that we can obtain from philology. Are there any other thoughts that you would like to say?*

PC: Well I would say that . . . well, of course, studying languages is basic. And, for us, it's a big help in interpretation. So I would like that especially in certain cultural situation like Latin America, it would be easier to study ancient cultures. Because in Europe it's still possible. We don't know for how long, because, you know, they are trying to eliminate Latin and Greek from school. And we know that these are eras of technology. So people think that Latin and Greek and philosophy and history is useless – this is what people think. So the possibility of studying ancient cultures in general would be an important thing. And I love especially, I love philology, but I love mythology and I always study it with a comparative approach. So I think the comparison . . . many people are afraid of comparing things. Because they think that at the end we want to say: "This is better. This is the worst." So, this culture's better. And then all the consequences that can come from that (**30:00**). I don't see comparison in this optic. I think it's a great thing because we can see how human beings react to things. That's why I use comparison. I like to see how a Greek man would deal with something – in this case the death of god. And then I like to see if, in China, they have similar things, why they have similar things, and how do they react to these similar things? And then I go to America and I see if there is something like this. I don't judge. You know: "This is ok." "This is not ok." "They are stupid." or "They didn't know

what they were doing." No. I just want to study and to see, because I am interested in human beings. And for me, mythology and religion is a way to understand people. And so I try to see, to study, to read several cultures because I try to understand men. We have men all over the world, and I want to know how they do things all over the world. So, for me, comparison is very, very important. Because it's the understanding of a specific myth, a specific action, or everything you are studying. So I would call for comparison, and the comparative approach to mythology, or religion, or literature – or these big disciplines in the history of humankind.

SC: *That's a very good way to wrap it up. Professor Corrente it has been a pleasure to hear this. Thank you for sharing your knowledge with us.*

PC: Thank you.

SC: *And we hope to see you again, here at the Religious Studies Project.*

If you spot any errors in this transcription, please let us know at editors@religiousstudiesproject.com. If you would be willing to help with transcribing the Religious Studies Project archive, or know of any sources of funding for the broader transcription project, please get in touch. Thanks for reading.

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