



Born of the Earth: Myth and Politics in Athens. Nicole Loraux. Translated from the French by Selina Stewart. Cornell University Press. 2000. ISBN 0-8014-3419-X. ix+175.

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In contrast to *The Mourning Voice*, which develops an a-political reading of mourning in Greek tragedy, Loraux's *Born of the Earth* examines the political uses (and abuses) of the rhetoric of exclusion in both classical Athens and contemporary France. Readers of L.'s *The Children of Athena* may be interested to know how this book differs from the earlier treatment of Athenian myths of autochthony. There is indeed much overlap between the two, but their aims and perhaps even audiences remain distinct. *The Children of Athena* is focused on decoding the intricacies of the Athenian rhetoric of autochthony and contains much detailed analysis of texts and topography. *Born of the Earth*, although still Athenocentric, looks more broadly at the role of the historian (both ancient and modern) in mediating between the needs of the present and the authority of the past.

The last chapter in particular demonstrates L.'s engagement with the politics of her contemporary France, and her commitment to reach, with this book, a wider audience. In this chapter, she examines the National Front's rhetoric of discrimination against immigrants in France of the 1990's and particularly the attempt to align modern ideologies of exclusion with an original Athenian model. L. demonstrates how the National Front challenges the Left's democratic stance by re-defining "democracy" in its own image, through appeal to ancient Athens. A speech presented by the representative of the National Front during a

session of the National Assembly on May 2, 1990 cites the Greeks approvingly for “their knowledge of ‘necessary discrimination’ between strangers and citizens” (p.135). The speech also draws an analogy between the metics of classical Athens and the immigrants of modern day France. However, as L. points out, the speechwriter has ignored central elements of the metics’ situation, as protected by law. Moreover, the technical term “metic” itself has been elided from the comparison perhaps, as L. speculates, in order to avoid any allusion to its application to Jews in the 1930’s. The National Front does not want to be seen as anti-semitic. Elsewhere in the same speech, ancient philosophers are cited for their disapproval of contact between citizens and foreigners. Once again, the ancient texts are distorted to serve the rhetorical purposes of the present: in a reference to Plato’s *Laws* “men of all kinds” (*pantodapoi*), a traditional designation of the *demos*, is understood to refer to foreigners, although this sense is absent from the original context. The National Front’s speech, L. concludes, crosses the limits of translation by suggesting that support for the systematic discrimination against foreigners can be located in the ancient documents cited. Historians of antiquity, L. urges, must expose such “caricatures” of Greece as falsifications of both the past and the present. “To do history: this is no doubt the best response to false historians who counterfeit interest only in order to disqualify its methods and its very idea.” (p.142). This is the only explicit critique of a modern political abuse of antiquity, but all the readings in this book are permeated by L.’s acute awareness of the political, even polemical, nature of rhetoric and its appropriation.

Politicians are not the only targets of criticism here. L. also holds modern historians of antiquity accountable for their failure to contextualize their generalizations about the ancient Greeks. A case in point is the transmission of a statement about autochthony (originally in Plato’s *Menexenus*) to the effect that “it is not the earth which imitated women in conception and generation, but women the earth.” L. traces the extraction of the quotation from its context in chapters 7 and 8 and reveals what has been lost to our understanding of Athenian autochthony through this process. Bachofen in *Das Mutterrecht* receives Plato’s quotation as reported by two much later sources, the Renaissance jurist Cujacius (who quotes Plato in Latin), and Plutarch’s *Table-Talk*. He attributes to Plato this formulation without reference to the *Menexenus*: “Because it is not, says Plato, the earth that imitates woman, but woman who imitates (*mimeitai*) the earth.” And other historians reading

Bachofen again borrow the phrase without reference either to Bachofen, or Bachofen's reliance on Plutarch's quotation of Plato.

So runs one outline of the history of "omission," or chain of borrowings. But what is at stake here? What difference does it make to leave out the author of the phrase and to disembody the text from its context? L. has clear and convincing answers to these questions: First of all, somewhere in the chain of borrowings, Plato's perfect tense verb (*memimêtai*) has been changed to a present tense (*mimeitai*) as evidenced in Plutarch's citation of Plato (*Table-Talk* 638a). The perfect tense, while referring to "an event whose consequences endure" still expresses a past event (p.88). Thus, rather than the timeless present suggested by *mimeitai*, Plato's text establishes the anteriority of the earth in the distant past. Also lost in the borrowing of the phrase is the sense of rivalry that is implicit in *mimêsis*. As L. explains, for the earth to come first, necessarily means that woman is secondary. And this is not a trivial point. The rhetoric of autochthony is also a rhetoric of exclusion; to privilege the earth as mother is at the same time to downplay, or even completely elide, the mortal mother. The two are set in a competitive relationship: Gaia as "Broad-chested earth, solid foundation of all forever" (Hesiod's *Theogony* 117) and Pandora as her secondary, artificial imitator. Mortal women, as descendants of Pandora, are even further removed from the original "natural" mother. Moreover, the praise for the generosity of *gê* that one finds in the *Menexenus* is also a way of casting suspicion on mortal mothers, by suggesting that they might begrudge their children nourishment (p.91). It is the earth, not women, who nourishes men.

Autochthony, then, is a discourse of discrimination, a way of privileging men over women and Athenians over all other Greeks. Like many discourses, however, its rhetoric is unstable, its categories easily contaminated. And with several pointed examples, L. shows how the vocabulary of autochthony merges at times seamlessly with that of colonization. Again in the *Menexenus*, the Athenians are described as living and dwelling (*oikountas*) "authentically in their own fatherland, and nourished not by a stepmother like others, but by a mother, the earth where they lived (*oikoun*)" (p.118). Where *oikein* in the present tense describes the uninterrupted habitation of the Athenians in their own land, the same verb in the aorist means "colonize" (p.119). *Oikein* taking an accusative direct object describes full time residence; but the same verb with an indirect object (*oikein en polei* or *en khôrai*) generally refers to the less permanent "residence" of slaves, metics and foreigners. Plato

nevertheless uses the phrase *oikein en* of the autochthonous “residents” of Athens, thus creating something of an oxymoron. In the *Timaeus*, moreover, Athena is said to have established (*katoikisen*) the autochthonous Athenians in her territory, as if she were populating a colony. Thus the permanence and sameness said to characterize the autochthonous inhabitants is undermined by the slipperiness of the language itself upon which this identity depends.

As always, L. combines careful, close readings with a sweeping vision. *Born of the Earth* will appeal to the reader interested in the practice of history itself, in how and why stories get told, and myths perpetuated in the forms that have come down to us. To read this book is to learn something of the craft of a master of the discipline.