

# BOOK REVIEW

## THE GREEK ROOTS OF MYTH CRITICISM

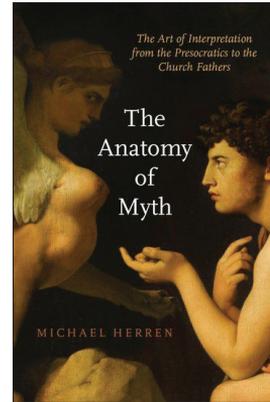
**Michael Herren.** *The Anatomy of Myth: The Art of Interpretation from the Presocratics to the Church Fathers.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. 231 pp.

The roots of modern discussions of mythology are commonly traced back to ancient Greece. However, this tends to be mentioned either in vague generalizations or by spotlighting a particular writer or philosopher identified with the origin of a particular concept. For example, the idea of ‘euhemerism’ – i.e. the idea that gods were actually exceptional human beings who became interpreted as gods through deception or misunderstanding – is frequently identified with a certain Euhemerus, but without further elaboration. Alternately, Greeks are more generally identified with the origin of objective scientific thinking and associated philosophy, of which the objectification and interrogation of myth, rejecting it as an account of the world or its history is an organic part. Passing statements on such thoughts and connections is where most of us get our knowledge of the importance of Greeks for the study of mythology. The continuous recirculation of such claims with little or no historical context can make it difficult to untangle their accuracy, particularly when it can start to seem like a cliché that everything from geometry to democracy gets traced back to the classical world. When it comes to theories on myth, Michael Herren’s *Anatomy of Myth: The Art of Interpretation from the Presocratics to the Church Fathers* provides an insightful and accessible analytical overview that so many of us need.

The opening words of the preface frame the work clearly in relation to its intended audience:

*This is a book for students. By students I mean anyone interested in learning how ancient ideas influence modern thought and modern ways of being. My book, though written for students, is not a textbook; that is, it is not a simple summary of the main lines of myth interpretation as explained by previous scholars. Rather, it is a fresh attempt to look at the methods of interpreting the myths contained in ancient authoritative texts in the context of the history of ideas. (p. vii)*

In the title, ‘anatomy’ refers not to the make-up of myths *per se* but rather to thinkers of the past performing ‘anatomies’ on myths, cutting them up, looking inside and coming up with explanations for what they are and how they work. Herren’s work, in its turn, is an anatomy of these discussions. As he states immediately, his approach and emphasis is to trace the history of ideas. This orientation also leads Herren to explore connections of myth criticism to the history of related concepts, such as allegory and symbolism. For example, he points out (pp. 160–161) that Saussure’s theory of the sign



was presented already more than 1400 years earlier by Augustine in his explication of the symbol. Herren's *Anatomy of Myth* has a great deal to offer a reader of any level, and it is written in a casual yet learned style that many will find appealing.

## Setting the Stage

After the preface and a list of abbreviations, the work is organized with an introduction followed by thirteen chapters. These are altogether 169 pages, which is a very manageable length. (The thirteen chapters are not grouped into larger sections; grouping into sections below is a practical tool for discussion.) Another 27 pages are given over to endnotes and bibliography. Herren is a scholar of classics and medieval studies. Readers less familiar with the classical world will very much appreciate the 20-page glossary of names and terms, which can be quite comforting if you have set the book down for a few weeks and have lost sight of the meaning of the Greek word *plasma* (comparable to 'fiction') or want to make sure you are not mixing up Heraclitus with Hecataeus. The book is also well-indexed. It is a book to be read and used.

The introductory chapter is excellent and should be read by all students starting to study mythology or myth criticism. The first chapter, "The Paradigm of the Poets", lays out an understanding of the key poetic works identified with Homer and Hesiod and the models of the world that they present. This becomes particularly important because Homer and Hesiod appear viewed as authors of the poems identified with them no less than Aristotle is with his works, which allows them to be interpreted as cosmologists and philosophers as discussed in some later chapters. Herren also situates the traditions identified with these poets in a cultural-historical setting with reference to other mythologies. It is characteristic of the work that the social prominence of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* is situated in relation to the historical or imagined Trojan War as the event forming the basis of a unified Greek identity (p. 15). The second chapter, "What Makes a Work Authoritative?", discusses both supernatural inspiration, so significant for the poets, and the spread of the technology of writing, fundamental to the later transmission of the poets' works as well as to the spread of philosophical and other works that engage with them. Herren is conscious of the locations of different authors and their chronology, mentioning, for example, that Xenophanes (most of the sixth century BCE and into the fifth) was born in Ionia and ended up settling in a colony in south-western Italy. For readers less familiar with the world of that time, it would have been interesting to have a bit of information about the circulation of texts in the period, but it is of course not possible to comment on everything while keeping the work to such a manageable length.

The introduction and these two chapters form foundations for discussions to follow. Subsequent chapters are organized according to the historical emergence and development of ideas about mythology. Threads of discussion are introduced in more or less a chronology of their entry into debate, and followed through sometimes several adaptations within a chapter before going back to discuss the next idea. Consequently, discussion does not follow a strict chronological progression, nor is it arranged by thinker or author, either of which would make it much more difficult to follow the development of individual lines of interpretation.

## Re-Evaluating Mythology

The third chapter, “*Physis* – Redefining the Gods”, advances into the earliest preserved discussions of philosophers. The chapter valuably stresses that the earliest discussions and polemics were not aimed at rejecting gods as such. Instead, they are situated as contributions to debates that sought to reconcile ‘gods’ with changing ideologies and epistemologies of the time, such as conceiving the world as having a natural order to which gods must also conform, or construing a moral universe, within which gods should be unable to violate moral ideals. The ideas and concerns introduced in this and subsequent chapters become threads that get traced through centuries of debate across the course of the book. Throughout, Herren makes a much-appreciated effort to keep the relationship of philosophers’ views on acceptance or rejections of gods (or their redefinition as a singular god-type agency) within the reader’s field of vision.

Chapter 4, “Flirting with Atheism”, advances into theories of gods and mythology as constructs, such as ideas that gods are projections that somehow satisfy human needs, or that they are invented as instruments of social control. Chapter 5, “Attacking Poetry”, focuses on the emergence of the view that poets and poetry are suspicious or simply deceptive. Plato holds a prominent position in this discussion, which connects with questions of genre, and perspective is added by considering the changes occurring in the premises of different classical thinkers. Chapter 6, “The Beginnings of Allegory”, opens the dimensions of the emerging framework of non-literal interpretation – described by Herren as “a code of substitution” – and the potential to implement that framework as an instrument of mediating ideas.

Particularly significant in Herren’s approach is that he situates different ideas in relation to evolving discourses. For example, he makes the interesting proposal “that allegorical interpretation arose out of the need to defend the ancient poets” (p. 79). Placing the emergence and evolution of different frameworks for interpretation in relation to preceding discussions offers a much deeper perspective than people can normally gain on these topics without plunging into the depths of classical scholarship.

## Salvaging History from Myth

Chapter 7, “Finding History in Myth”, turns to the rationalization of the fantastic. The discussion brings out the tension between, on the one hand, the importance of mytho-heroic agents and events, such as Theseus or Heracles and feats ascribed to them, and, on the other hand, the irreconcilability of descriptions with understandings of the natural order of the world. In “The Paradigm of Poets”, Herren highlights that “[t]he Trojan War marked the watershed between myth and history,” in which heroes “have no magic weapons or armor and possess no flying horses, nor can they fly or make themselves invisible” (p. 17). The turn to rationalizing heroes of still earlier eras reflects a change in thinking about the history of the world. Within this new frame of thinking, “there [wa]s no reason to believe that the past was qualitatively different from the present” (p. 85), an idea that would become a stable principle for generations of philosophers to come. Accordingly, monsters like the Minotaur had to be rejected, and the many stories

of the past reconceived as affected by imagination or misunderstanding – the chain of thinking produced Euhemerism. The events underlying fantastic accounts might be reconstructed, for example, through the assistance of etymology, while material evidence was considered a strong foundation for affirming the historical foundation of events. Herren makes the interesting observation that classical authors might be sensitive to identifying forged writings, but seem not to reflect on the possibility that physical evidence might be tampered with.

This discussion is extremely important in bringing out the turn in thinking about time and history. Viewing the remote past as operating according to the same natural laws as the present is taken for granted today. However, it differs considerably from the way of imagining earlier eras as open to forms of the fantastic no longer deemed probable, a way of thinking found in mythologies around the world. Some readers may nevertheless stumble a bit because the chapter opens with cases of human heroes who have been said to accomplish amazing feats. The vast majority of this book's discussion concerns precisely gods and cosmogony, while some debates, such as the morality of gods, seem irrelevant to human heroes. Herren states that "[t]he Greeks knew what myths were" (p. 6) but goes on to say that they had no word for the concept, and myth never enters into philosophical discussion as a category itself (pp. 6–7). He brings up the diversity of ways in which myth has been defined, but it would have been helpful to the reader to clearly state the definition being used in the book. Such a definition could bring into sharper focus whether Greeks saw stories of impossible feats of heroes as categorically the same as stories of the consummation of sky and earth, or whether they saw these as different but considered the fantastic as equally problematic in both.

### **Advancing Theory and Terminology**

The eighth chapter, "*Theos* – Rediscovering God", brings into focus a trend across schools of thought to conceive an ultimate divine agency in the background of the world, which Herren proposes may be motivated by social issues of an era, pointing to the long Peloponnesian Wars and subsequent political instability in Athens (p. 99). Chapter 9, "The Growth of Allegory", again takes up the strategies for salvaging the works of poets with a more elaborate discussion of the role of etymology. This chapter explores how the instrument of allegorical interpretation was applied in a new brand of approach that viewed Homer and Hesiod as thinkers who encoded cosmological theories into their works, anticipating those of contemporary thinkers, reconciling myths with philosophy. Chapter 10, "Saving the Poets without Allegory", follows yet another line of interpretation, traced to Aristotle, whereby the fantastic is not a concern so much as the potential for stories and agents to offer models of behaviour and action to be emulated or avoided. Chapter 11, "From Allegory to Symbolism", discusses the significant advance in thinking from treating stories as based on a code of substitution, where interpretation removes one element in replacing it with another, to symbolic interpretation, where meaning in representation is more dynamic. The development addressed in this chapter is particularly significant, although it starts off with case studies that do not keep the same pace as in other chapters. These chapters, as well as the twelfth, will be of interest well

beyond mythology research because they link to the history of interpretive and rhetorical strategies of much broader application.

## **Classic Myth Criticism and Christianity**

This discussion of symbolic interpretation leads to chapter 12, "Greek Exegesis and Judaeo-Christian Books". This chapter shows how the discourse of interpretation provided Christians with the tools to develop interpretations of their own religious texts, advancing and refining theories such as that of symbolic interpretation. Herren earlier points out that "[f]or the most part, Christians seemed interested in burning one another's books, not the pagan classics" (p. 61). Classical criticism also enabled Christians to utilize those classics within their own religious frameworks, even arguing that the classics had anticipated Christianity. Chapter 13, "Reflection: How Lasting Was the Greek Achievement?", does an important job of distinguishing between religious affiliation or identity on the one hand and education and text circulation on the other, stressing that, basically, early Christian thinkers had a classical rather than especially Christian education, the latter being rare. From today's perspective many readers may find it interesting that the Bible was not initially considered a text for teaching religious doctrine precisely because some texts could so easily be interpreted in undesirable ways. When considering the Greek achievement of performing anatomies on myths, not only do we find it as the heritage of Christian interpretation of biblical texts but also what appears to be a precondition for the survival of so much classical mythology in Christian milieux.

These last chapters are extremely interesting and valuable, but my impression was that the book ends a bit abruptly. Chapter 12 carries discussion of myth criticism into the era of the Church Fathers, as promised in the title, and this is complemented by the brief, five-page discussion in chapter 13. I must admit, however, that I was a bit surprised by the limited scope of the latter chapter. When the introduction stages discussion so wonderfully by commenting on continuities of classical mythology and myth criticism through the present, I anticipated a correspondingly broad closing discussion. Of course, there had to be limits to maintain the book's concise length. The book is, I think, very strong as it stands, but the concluding chapter was surprisingly light, and seemed simply to follow on the preceding chapter rather than to provide a conclusion to the book as a whole.

## **Summation**

The value of Herren's book should not be underestimated, and I unequivocally recommend it to anyone interested in the history of myth and myth criticism. It is easy and enjoyable to read and filled with a fascinating array of information, making connections that shape into clear and compelling arguments. Tracing different threads through centuries of discussion leaves the reader a dynamic overview of not only contributions of classical authors to ways of interpreting or anatomizing myths, but also how these relate to one another, evolve over time, and link to the cultures and historical contexts

in which they emerged and progressed. Today the different approaches discussed appear as theoretical frames for the interpretation of objectified 'myths'. The outcome of Herren's nuanced anatomies of the different anatomies is that they emerge as contributions to broader discourses about mythology, what it is, and how it relates to the world or society. These discourses reflect tensions between inherited traditions and changing ideas of different times, traditions that get redefined, rejected and also reclaimed and reinvented. This was not owing to a dichotomy of 'myth' versus 'science' that has become so commonplace, but rather in the confrontation of inherited discussions and descriptions of the world and how it works with the ideas held by educated elites on the one hand and philosophers on the other – ideas that may seem no less mythic from the perspective of today.

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