

BOOK REVIEW

The Anatomy of Myth: The Art of Interpretation from the Presocratics to the Church Fathers. By MICHAEL HERREN. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. 248. Hardcover, \$78.00. ISBN 978-0-19-060669-5.

The Anatomy of Myth presents itself in a specific context from the opening sentence: “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” (vii). The book consists of a preface, list of abbreviations, introduction, thirteen chapters that cover a range of interpretive approaches that Greek and a few Roman thinkers took to Homer and Hesiod in roughly chronological order, notes, a bibliography, a glossary of names and terms, and a general index. The introduction and the thirteen chapters of the book run between 10-15 pages each, which is likely out of consideration for the student-oriented audience. Also in service to the named audience, the only Greek present in the book is some key terms transliterated; all quoted excerpts are presented in English only.

The introduction covers the term and theories on the origins of “myth” as they relate to systems of belief, and how the three models and four theories outlined fit together. The first model is “authorship,” which contains two stages of theory: poet as liar and poet as sage. Model two is “evolutionary” and contains two further theories: the needs of primitive man and the cult of heroes. The third model is “revelation,” which reacts against the second model by focusing more how god(s) reveals wisdom to humanity. This thematic list fits roughly chronologically with the development of the various representative thinkers who populate the rest of the book. Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the details of Homer and Hesiod, the poets presenting the mythology, and the rest of the book follows the philosophical interpretive trends from the Presocratics to Aristotle to the allegorizing of myth to Plutarch and Origen and the purification of myth using human reasoning to remove the irrational and the unbelievable. Chapter 3 is entitled “*Physis*-Redefining the Gods,” Chapter 4 “Flirting with Atheism,” Chapter 5 “Attacking Poetry,” Chapter 6 “The Beginning of Allegory,” Chapter 7 “Finding His-

tory in Myth," Chapter 8 "*Theos*- Rediscovering God," Chapter 9 "The Growth of Allegory," Chapter 10 "Saving the Poets without Allegory," Chapter 11 "From Allegory to Symbolism," Chapter 12 "Greek Exegesis and Judaeo-Christian Books" and Chapter 13 "Reflection: How Long Lasting Was the Greek Achievement?" Each chapter reviews the major voices and their ideas and reasoning as they relate to interpreting and understanding the mythology recorded by the poets.

The explications of many of the philosophers and thinkers mentioned are generalized suitably for a non-specialist audience, but there are places when the explanations are oversimplified to the point of being potentially misleading to a reader without prior knowledge. For example, in Chapter 10, Herren states that "Plato believed imitation (whether poetry or painting) to be artificial and seriously misleading. Aristotle thought imitation to be innately natural and good" (126-127). While pointing out the contrast in the positions is a valid point that readers need to recognize, without further example, qualification, or explanation, this statement could lead to the belief that Plato and Aristotle were opposed to one another regarding the subject of mimesis and that Plato wholly rejected the idea, when in fact they do agree on some points and Plato does make some allowances for the mimetic arts.

The book overall is a focused, reasonably detailed introduction to how the ancient Greco-Roman world thought about mythology as presented by Homer and Hesiod and how thinking changed over time; however, there is one noticeable issue with the main argument. Herren says "This book entertains a thesis: the exposure of the most authoritative works of the ancient Greeks to public criticism and discussion was a decisive step towards creating the open, pluralistic society that we in the Western nations enjoy today" (viii). The problem is that the second half of the thesis as stated, that contemporary Western ideologies owe something to ancient Greek thinkers, is given relatively little exploration. Of the 13 chapters in the body of the book, only the last three consider post BCE ideas in depth, and the West, mostly Western European Christianity, only gets extended consideration in Chapters 12 and 13. 1500 years of history, thought and literature cannot be adequately explored in the span of approximately twenty pages, especially when compared with the level of detail given to and the number of different writers treated in the BCE periods.

Problems aside, this book does a good job of exploring how the ancient Greeks thought about their mythology and those who recorded it. It is a good introduction to many philosophers who addressed the subject of interpretation

of myth, and the book emphasizes the understanding that the ancient world did not blindly and religiously accept their myths but did question and interpret them in various ways. With a few caveats, *The Anatomy of Myth* would be a useful addition to an intermediate undergraduate philosophy, mythology or theology reading list.

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