

*The Myths of Rome.* By T.P. WISEMAN. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2004. Pp. xxii + 389. Cloth, \$74.95. ISBN 0-85989-703-6.

Despite its title, this work is a hybrid study consisting of retellings of Roman myths, a core narrative of Roman history from the foundation of the city through Hadrian, told more or less from the perspective of the Roman populace, and scattered analyses of later reflections of Roman myth and history, especially in European painting of the 16<sup>th</sup> through 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The mixed nature of the work makes it difficult to determine what audience the author has in mind and also difficult to restate and evaluate the central arguments. Running throughout are repeated themes, which, if formulated as propositions, might be said to constitute the intended contribution of the book: first, that Rome was capable of producing and transmitting its own myths; second, that many Roman myths (a term that includes historical legends) were transmitted through dramatic representation; third, that Roman society in general, especially as viewed through the lens of myth, was playful and eroticized, and not merely concerned with power; and fourth, that in the realm of myth (as much else) Rome's relationship to Greece was not one of mere imitation. Such a bare summary does not do justice to the quality of many of the particular analyses offered here, but it does bring to the surface two underlying problems of conceptualization: first, that Wiseman's arguments are largely negative ones, working against views of Roman culture that hardly have much purchase among serious scholars today, and second, that Wiseman, like many classicists, persists in studying ancient material in isolation from methods and approaches developed elsewhere in the human sciences. The latter problem is the more interesting, for it cuts to the heart of what we consider the role of the classicist (and of Classics more generally) to be. Is it to maintain interest in ancient material at any cost? Or is it to integrate antiquity into broader accounts of culture, society and human nature? Obviously much is to be gained from close analysis of case studies, but is it worth the effort if all we learn, in effect, is that the Romans, like all societies known to the "solemn anthropologists" Wiseman disparages (p. 80), told stories that mattered to them? Even the more specific claims that Wiseman advances with great energy give pause when viewed from a broader perspective. For example, Wiseman pursues the argument, already articulated in his previous work on the figure of Remus, that many of the historical legends that permeate classical Roman literature and art took form in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC in connection with internal and external political changes. Wiseman rightly notes inconsistencies and anachronisms that make it hard to date the legends as transmitted to the periods of history they purport to describe (i.e.,

the founding, the monarchy and the early years of the Republic), but does this mean that the legends were therefore invented in their entirety at the date he proposes? More generally, are there comparable cases in other societies where virtually an entire mythic system is developed in such a brief period of time? Finally, even if the stories in question are the invention of early 3<sup>rd</sup>-century mythopoetic geniuses, why do they take hold and get repeated for centuries thereafter? Without some framework for understanding how mythical production and transmission take place in better-documented contexts, we have little basis for judging Wiseman's reconstructions as either true or false.

As for the particulars of Roman myths, it is both pleasing and useful to have them teased out of sometimes recalcitrant material. Flora and Liber become more fully-rounded figures of cult and story, the latter in large part through a detailed discussion of the imagery on 4<sup>th</sup>-century *cistae*; earlier work on the *ludi Apollinares* and the festival of the *Nonae Caprotinae* is integrated into a discussion of the tension between serious and ludic aspects of Roman culture; and the play-acting of the Julio-Claudians comes to be seen as a continuation of mythopoetic impulses manifest throughout the Republic. Ultimately, for Wiseman the Roman "community of self-governing citizens protected by the god of liberty and licence" (p. 225) is itself something of a myth, that is, a story that matters regardless of its truth-value.

But matters for whom? And why? Recurrent references to later Western paintings and poetry suggest an answer—"the Western tradition"—that can only be understood as a new myth to which Wiseman himself implicitly contributes. No reason is offered for including the works in question and excluding others (e.g., why North American political thought but not South American? why art from medieval France but not Byzantium?). Moreover, while no one would deny that studying classical antiquity provides access to a range of allusions and references familiar to later writers and artists—a point Wiseman illustrates through his correction of a museum's label of Tiepolo's *Empire of Flora*—nevertheless, those later works require analysis and interpretation on their own historical terms. We no longer regard Romans as naïve products of Greek influence; why would we expect the same for later adapters of Roman myth and legend? The sumptuous illustrations and textbook-style asides that differentiate this book from standard scholarly treatises are small compensation for a failure to think through problems of mythmaking, canonization and appropriation brought to our attention by the material itself.

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