

*The Cambridge Companion to Greek Mythology*. Edited by ROGER D. WOODARD. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp. xvi + 536. Paper \$29.99. ISBN 978-0-521-60726-1.

[A list of contributors and contributions appear at the end of the review.]

In a recent issue of the American Philological Association Newsletter (April, 2009), the organization's president, Josiah Ober, dedicated his letter to the recent proliferation of companion volumes. Ober offers three primary reasons why he is troubled by the recent trend. First, the explosion of these volumes is owed largely to publishing houses' business interests; as reference works, companions sell. Second, the aims of companion volumes are not always clear or consistent; should they aim at being an authoritative overview of the current state of scholarship, a guide to the subject for the uninitiated, or a place to present new research? Third, Ober wonders whether time devoted to working already plowed fields will come at a loss to new, innovative work.

Ober's letter is worthwhile reading for every classicist, and for my part it leads to a confession: when I agreed to review the Cambridge Companion to Greek Mythology (henceforth "CCGM"), I had given little thought to companion volumes as a trend in classics. Indeed, I had just contributed a few pieces to one and was thus complicit in the growth of the phenomenon. After some reflection, it seems timely to approach the CCGM as a test-case for Ober's concerns, so I beg the forgiveness of those readers whose primary reason for reading this review is to decide whether to purchase the book. Let me then cut to the chase: this is a good volume with excellent contributions by experts in the field, but the parts are in many ways better than the whole. Those interested in any aspect of Greek myth will likely find a thought-provoking article on the topic along with selected further readings. But readers should be aware at the outset that not all contributions are equally suitable for any one constituency, as I articulate below.

The CCGM is divided into three sections: Sources and Interpretations; Response, Integration, Representation; and Reception. The scope is vast, dealing with Greek myth from the earliest texts in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC down to the modern silver screen. The first section might have been more aptly titled "Myth and Genre," as the articles mostly treat how Greek myth intersected with specific ancient authors and genres. The second section offers more thematic studies (e.g. myth and religion, art, politics, and Ovid). The final section en-

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ters the realm of reception, starting with an article on women and Greek myth and moving on to the influence of Greek myth in the middle ages and the Renaissance, its reception in British and American literature, and finally adaptations in modern cinema. Although the third section alone is entitled "Reception," the entire book can be viewed as a survey of the reception of oral Greek myth by Greek poets, writers, thinkers, critics, Roman poets, the middle ages and the modern world. Boyle's illuminating piece on Ovid is instructive. Although the piece is located in section II, Boyle argues that because Ovid viewed myth as a collection of fictions (*fabulae*) divorced from Roman cult practices, he used it primarily as an instrument for thinking and exploring human experiences. Ovid's employment of myth is thus arguably just as much an act of reception as are the Christianizing allegories of the middle ages and Renaissance, though no less dependent on the time in which the appropriation took place.

Unlike a companion to, say, Ovid, myth is so vast a topic as to be unwieldy, creating unique difficulties for the editor. Complete coverage is impossible, even though the blurb on the back claims that the CCGM "presents a comprehensive and integrated treatment of ancient Greek mythic tradition." So offering a laundry list of topics left uncovered would be unfair and self-indulgent. Yet surely a *companion* to Greek mythology should somehow treat the knotty problem of the nature of myth itself and what the study of it entails; although many of the contributions touch upon these topics, a relatively uninformed reader in particular would benefit greatly from a comprehensive overview. There are other significant gaps as well. No contribution, for instance, treats the relationship between myth and history or that between mythography and history. Early mythographers such as Pherecydes, Acusilaus and Hellenicus are hardly discussed on their own terms, while Carolyn Higbie's generally useful but slightly outdated overview on Hellenistic mythographers treats the impulse to compile myths in the Hellenistic period as a phenomenon unique to that time, although compilation and organization were at the core of most earlier mythographers as well. There is little to nothing on Herodotus or Thucydides, and minimal discussion of the Greeks' and Romans' rationalizing or allegorical interpretations of their own myths. Palaephatus is nowhere found, while Euhemerus/-ism merits only four brief mentions, none of which directly explains it or discusses its influence.

The CCGM will thus not be a resource for every specific question, author or aspect of Greek myth. This is not a fatal flaw, since the book offers so much food for thought. But what do we as a field want Companion volumes to be? Some articles in the CCGM offer

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clear, unobjectionable overviews of a subject that seem clearly intended for the uninitiated; others present more sophisticated arguments with selected examples to illustrate their points; still others advance wholly new arguments that—Ober warns—may well languish because they are buried in a companion volume.

Woodard's own contribution, for example, although comprehensive and thought-provoking, can be seen as a test-case for some of the issues facing companion volumes. "Hesiod and Greek Myth" is by far the longest contribution in the volume, coming in at a staggering 82 pages (no other is longer than 34 pages), and the most involved in terms of argumentation. The title is a bit misleading, since the piece is less an explication of Hesiod than an exploration of the Near Eastern and Indo-European antecedents and parallels to the myths in the *Theogony* and *Works and Days*. Woodard first surveys the main Near Eastern parallels to the succession myth in the *Theogony*, most of which are by now well known to those working on or teaching myth. [[1]] Such extensive treatment seems out of place in a companion volume, especially since much of the same territory is treated in Martin West's *East Face of Helicon*, and a summary overview might easily have sufficed. Woodard's supposition that the most likely point of entrance of the succession myth into Greece was through the Phoenicians in Cyprus (essentially reviving and modifying Güterbock's Ras Shamra thesis) puts too much credence in the problematic theogony preserved in Philo of Byblos and implicitly ties the entrance of the myth to the arrival of writing in Greece. But even more problematic for a volume of this type is the elaborate argument, partially following Vernant, that the Ages of Mankind myth in the *Works and Days* reflects a specifically Indo-European tradition. This position does not follow the party line and seems worth advancing (though I hasten to add that I do not control all of the evidence and cannot adjudicate on its merits), especially since it has the potential to change the way we look at Hesiod. But does an argument so elaborate and complex as to be accessible to only a few experts belong in a companion?

Jonathan Hall's far more accessible "Politics and Greek Myth," by contrast, uses three representative case studies to show the ideological appropriation of myth by *poleis*. [[2]] But Hall, like Woodard, puts forward new argumentation, arguing that the Pisistratids were influential in creating the apparatus of the Theseus myth. Diskin Clay ("Plato Philomythos") also employs a representative selection of Platonic "myths" to remind us that "of all Greek philosophers, Plato is the most mythopoeic" (p. 212) and that "Plato's real quarrel is not with Greek myth; it is with the poetry of the Greek *polis* and its false

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and debasing representations of reality" (p. 213). Clay thus illustrates how Plato's own mythopoeia is meant to act as a countercharm to the misrepresentations in traditional Greek myth. Likewise, Claude Calame ("Greek Myth and Greek Religion") chooses five case studies in which a mythical tale was called upon to legitimate cult practice. [[3]] This mainly occurs through aetiology, but the activation of a myth in ritual also unites the past with the present to form "an active history" that serves as collective memory but can also be adapted to fit the present religious or political context.

All three contributions strike a fine balance, offering a general survey of the topic with illustrative examples. But selection comes at the cost of coverage. A student reading through a translation of Greek lyric poets and intrigued by the use of myth in (say) Pindar and Bacchylides might naturally turn to Nagy's "Lyric and Greek Myth" for guidance. What will she find? First, an excellent discussion of lyric as genre; Nagy is careful not to assume that his readership comes to the topic already informed. The crucial explication of the relationship of the performative setting to the composition of myth follows. The position advanced—"the performing of a composition is an activation of myth, and such activation is fundamentally a matter of ritual" (p. 19)—is illustrated by focusing on (primarily) Sappho and (less so) Alcaeus, the ritual space of the Messon on Lesbos, and the Kallisteia festival. Understanding the context of performances and the creation of mythical poetry is fundamental to understanding Greek myth. Yet the focus on performance means that a reader looking to learn about Pindar and Bacchylides, lyric poets who employed *narrative* myth extensively in their hymns, will have to be content with short discussions of *Nemean* 7.61–4 and *Olympian* 1.28–32 and two offhanded references to Bacchylides. Likewise, Nagy's "Homer and Greek Myth" focuses on the thesis that the performative framework is crucial to understanding the activation of an epic *mythos* (defined again as the performative act itself). Unlike lyric, which lays claim to the truth of purely local myths, epic myth privileges the past over the present; myths become delocalized in the hands of an epic poet and thus in a sense become falsehoods controlled by the "master narrator."

As it happens, there is as much Pindar in Nagy's piece on epic as in his article on lyric. This is also true of Richard Buxton's "Tragedy and Greek Myth," which offers a summary discussion of the Jason/Medea myth in *Pythian* 4 and compares it to the accounts in Apollonius Rhodius and Euripides' *Medea*. This piece, exemplary for its clarity, treats the location of tragic myths (i.e. in liminal spaces in terms of place, ethnicity and the mind) and offers a general treatment of how the gods are represented in tragedy. Although Buxton

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hints at the differing notions the tragedians had of the gods (pp. 177–8), his approach is rather to generalize and to discern what is common among them. Students will be grateful for his gentle (but hardly “simple”) synthesis, whereas scholars are unlikely to learn much here. Contrast Woodard’s article.

Given the subject matter, tragedy easily lends itself to discussions of myth, but old comedy, as we learn from Bowie’s “Myth in Aristophanes,” presents more difficulties. Despite its title, almost half of his article treats the fragmentary remains of old comedy, chief among them those of Cratinus’ *Dionysalexandrus*, in which Dionysus becomes a failed Paris. Aristophanic comedy, as it turns out, is not overly mythical, at least in a narrative or structural sense. Much attention is naturally given to Aristophanes’ parodies of tragedy, especially those in *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Acharnians* (a superb discussion). But Bowie also treats the sundry—and often sophisticated—ways Aristophanes employs myth, assuming familiarity with Euripides’ plays and (e.g.) the Telephus myth on the part of the reader.

Jenifer Neils’ knowledgeable “Myth and Greek Art: Creating a Visual Language” begins *in medias res*. After taking the reader through an art-historical reading of a kylix by the Codrus painter that illustrates seven exploits of Theseus (ca. 430 BC), Neils traces the development of Greek mythical art (that is, of its visual language) that made such a piece possible. She focuses on two questions: what tools did artists have for depicting myth (and how the visual language itself came about), and how did artists make their theme relevant? Although necessarily selective, Neils’ contribution serves as a fine introduction to her topic.

Ada Cohen’s intriguing “Mythic Landscapes of Greece,” on the other hand, offers a kind of “first-look” into the emerging scholarship on mythical landscapes. Cohen acknowledges the difficulties in the subject; notions of landscape in archaic and classical Greece can be traced only discontinuously (I wonder if at all), and the Greek predilection for anthropocentrism means that only isolated elements of landscape appear in art. But despite a long, discursive discussion in which Cohen wrestles these isolated elements (caves, countryside, mountains, rivers, underworld, etc.) to a draw at best, I find it hard to agree that these “solitary forms could act as signals for the imagination to roam in dreamy places. This surely amounts to a rich and viable conception of landscape” (p. 327). Cohen’s article raises interesting questions; but one must make giant leaps of faith to reach substantial answers, perhaps because the evidence is not there. It is

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unfortunate that the article does not include the Hellenistic and Roman periods, where there would be more, and in many ways more interesting, material to investigate.

Those interested in *Nachleben* will have much to digest, though here too the articles are irregular in focus and coverage. The section begins with an excellent (and obligatory?) article on “Women and Greek Myth” by Vanda Zajko, which has little to do with women in Greek myth. Zajko pessimistically—and I think rightly—rejects our ability to extract useful information about real ancient women from ancient myths about women. Instead, she turns to a more positive discussion of modern feminist reactions to and rewritings of Greek myths. Following Brumble’s piece (mentioned at the beginning of this review) comes Sarah Annes Brown’s wide-ranging overview of the appropriation of myth by English and American writers, which insightfully discusses the impulses of writers who sought the pure, unmediated, authentic past, stripped of all intervening appropriations of myth, and of other who owed just as much to such intermediate layers (e.g. Shakespeare, Milton). Although a Cambridge publication will naturally be aimed at English-speakers, it still seems lamentable that little is said of Greek myth’s influence on or appropriation by other cultures.

As the final contribution, Martin Winkler’s piece on myth in cinema again reminds us how malleable myth continues to be. The tradition of reshaping myths to reach contemporary audiences (“neomythologism”) reaches back into antiquity itself, a gentle reminder to classicists who groan when in the movie *Troy* Menelaus dies at an overly protective Hector’s hands that the movie has grossed about 250 times their average lifetime earnings. Winkler explores why modern directors of mythical movies make certain decisions (particularly interesting are Tessari’s *Fifteen Commandments* of modern mythico-historical filmmaking and the views of Harryhausen). After all, the modern director’s motive—to please an audience—is not as far removed from that of early Greek poets as we might want to admit.

The CCGM’s coherence, then, lies in its constant attention to each successive generation, genre, or medium’s reaction to Greek myth, that “multifaceted, multifarious and multivalent ... phenomenon” (p. 1). The volume is filled with (mostly) stimulating articles that will (mostly) enlighten readers interested in a given subject. But there is wide divergence among the articles in terms of scope, purpose, coverage and level of sophistication. In short, I remain unsure to which audience the book is pitched. In any given instance a general reader, an undergraduate, a teacher or scholar might benefit from consulta-

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tion, but it is impossible to know who will until one has pulled the book off the shelf and read the article in question. Companions should surely seek internal consistency, in order to avoid becoming idiosyncratic collections of articles orbiting at various distances and in widely divergent paths around a central topic. If consistency cannot be achieved, perhaps we should abandon companion projects altogether and return to producing fundamental even if drier handbooks offering answers to the most common questions and providing references to the most recent scholarship on a topic—and allow groundbreaking work on a subject to find its way to scholarly journals.

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[[1]] Namely, the five Hittite texts that seem to form a cycle of myths taken from the Hurrians (*Song of Kumarbi*, *Song of LAMMA*, *Song of Silver*, *Song of Hedammu*, *Song of Ullikummi*), the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, the very fragmentary theogony of Dunnu, and San-chuniathon's Phoenician theogony (*apud* Philo of Byblos).

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[[2]] (1) The bones of Orestes and Spartan-Argive politics; (2) The-  
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[[3]] The *HH to Demeter* and the Eleusinian Mysteries; Bacchylides  
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