

## BOOK REVIEW

*Rationalizing Myth in Antiquity*. By GRETA HAWES. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. xiv + 290. Hardcover, \$99.00. ISBN 978-0-199-67277-6.

*Rationalizing Myth in Antiquity* deserves a warm welcome.<sup>1</sup> Greta Hawes eschews the scholarly tradition of beginning with chroniclers such as Hecataeus who preceded Herodotus and instead plunges *in posteriores* res of authors from the Second Sophistic period.<sup>2</sup> This liberates readers from the “same old, same old” beginning from Hecataeus, and encourages a synoptic view backwards to Hecataeus. In consequence there appears a history of ideas for a period often considered “derivative” of “superficiality” which entails a “demise of authentic engagement” with the mythic (185). Out go the witless, unimaginative trolls, in comes a period fertile of ideas which stand comparison with the “best” earlier authors.

While Hawes includes several generally known authors (Plutarch, Pausanias), she reclaims four understudied authors, Conon and the three authors of *peri apiston* treatises (anon., Palaephatus, Heraclitus) for serious study; each receives a generous chapter. Finally, she tackles the whole question of Greek rationality, an area teeming with diversity of opinion, often vitriolic *Streitfragen*. The Introduction does just that, as she introduces conceptual threads which deftly spool out through the six chapters; there follows with a Conclusion which effectively produces a well-woven tapestry; she is in consequence a latter-day Ariadne for a labyrinth of authors. The chapters’ subheadings make it easy to follow the threads through the mythic labyrinth; a pity that the publisher did not include subheadings in the table of contents. Two appendices on technicalities of the *peri apiston* treatises betoken solid scholarly underpinnings; passim the reviewer found nothing significant lacking, and several references new to him.

The aforementioned “under-studied authors” belong to the editions of *Mythographoi / Mythographi Graeci* (Westerman 184, Festa 1894–1902), for

<sup>1</sup> Thus Elsa Simonetti, *Universa. Recensioni di filosofia*, Anno 4, Vol. 1 (2015).

<sup>2</sup> Using the term not in the narrow Philostratean sense, but more generally, from mid first century to early third century AD.

access to which there is no longer need for antiquarian bookseller or large research library, since now those editions also live online. But traditional classicist training based on the so-called “best” authors remains. Most will have heard of, e.g. *D-K* or *FGH*, but the more specialized collections of the *Mythographi Graeci* or others such as Mueller’s *Geographi Graeci Minores* (1855-61) literally and figuratively remain closed books. Less rarified thinkers nevertheless knew many things about Hellenic culture which the “best” authors could not know or chose not to retail, the more so because knowledge was so diverse and local that unless one was prepared to undertake a Herodotean *periplus* of regional libraries and savants, one’s view would inevitably be basically blinkered. As Hawes trenchantly observes (“Palaephatus’ infamy as a repetitive, banal and unimaginative author may be well deserved, but ridicule gets us nowhere” (37). Precisely so.

Hawes offers a hermeneutics of ancient “myth” interpretations, a *Wissenschaftsgeschichte*. She rightly notes scholars have regularly taken the famous rationalizations of Xenophanes and Protagoras as destructive (18). This is patently not so. There can only be a destruction of a world-view when there exists a plausible alternative view; destructive rationalization of a religious explanations can only succeed when there exists an alternative system which is both non-religious and naturalistic, which possesses an empirical symbol system (mathematics) yoked to empirical observations of natural phenomena. Such a system did not exist in antiquity, nor could it.<sup>3</sup> Empirical observations did exist, and so did the symbol system of a mathematics which included elements of what later became differential and integral calculus, including, even, the Riemann series. But all these ancient knowledge systems did not “speak” to each other, mathematicians were remarkably unaware of potential colleagues’ work; knowledge was so fragmented and, in the case of mathematics, so undeveloped, that the aforementioned yoking never arose.

Consider *adunaton*. As a logic term, it is promiscuous in Aristotle’s *Analytics*; for example it is *adunaton* to believe in “a” and “not-a” simultaneously. Here ancient logic and mathematics connect directly with today. But in the literary-rhetorical sense, it is *adunaton* that rivers can reverse their flows. In the religious sense, practitioners of “magic” can reverse the course of rivers via their use of powers derived from other than what is defined as “religion”. Put differently, the

<sup>3</sup> My “The Sociology of Religious Knowledge in the Roman Empire Until AD 284”, ANRW 2.16.32677-2773 at 2700-1 with further discussion and references, including H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York 1975) 415.

debate was not about whether people could have extraordinary powers, but rather the source of those powers.<sup>4</sup> Since Greco-Roman religion essentially constituted a do-it-yourself system, no one of these aforementioned views would be dominant. Logic, literature, natural observation and religion reflect, refract, and traject each other.

Whether it be an issue of credibility or conceptual liquidation of “belief”, I applaud Hawes’ discarding it as an issue of belief vs. disbelief, plausibly substituting “credibility” (46, with eleven other instances).<sup>5</sup> We both agree that “myth” as used by scholars is tainted (73 note 103 generously referencing my own work). One of her many excellent contributions lies in her demonstration that “rationalizations” did not constitute a secularizing of mythico-religious traditions but, rather, a reinterpretation. Consider a detail from Plutarch’s *Theseus* (152–153). I would expand the mention of his connections with democracy, since originally he constituted an Athenian strategy to compete with the alarmingly strong pan-Hellenic reception of Dorian Hercules, in vain since he had nil influence outside of Attica. For internal Attic consumption, however, Theseus served nicely as a prefigurement of democracy; since his political arrangements were evanescent at best and few if any laws were ascribed to him, he constituted a *tabula rasa* for justifying the radical democracy.<sup>6</sup> Contrariwise, in the oligarchic revolution of 411 BC the oligarchs (“The Four Hundred”) found laws attributed to Solon an real asset (the Athenians were in the habit of ascribing a panoply of “old” laws to him), as they jobbed in a mythico-rationalized Solonic Council of 400, to which they, The 400, very conveniently claimed they were returning to Athens the better to purify her from the alleged excesses of the radical democracy.

At some points I would churlishly ask more of Hawes. The language of mythic narrative includes words such as *thauma*, *teras*, and *paradoxos*; Hawes usefully references the paradoxographers (94 note 3), but fully to understand

<sup>4</sup> Elijah and the priests of Baal 1 *Kings* 18 and Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity*, (Cambridge MA 1978) c.1, esp. p.11ff. and my “Sociology” *supra* 2752-64 As for observations, rivers can be seen to reverse course because of the Etesian winds pushing them (Seneca *NQ* 4a2.22-23, *Hdt.* 2.20; more recently the Mississippi River in 1812 (earthquake), 2005 and 2012 (hurricanes), [www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2012/08/120829192423.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2012/08/120829192423.htm); common in fantasy literature, L. Frank Baum, *The Patchwork Girl of Oz* (Chicago, 1913) 26.

<sup>5</sup> The word “belief” has wretched problems: Rodney Needham *Belief, Language and Experience* (Chicago 1972) with my “Sociology” *supra*, 2697-2711.

<sup>6</sup> (H. J. Walker, *Theseus and Athens* (New York, 1995) 4-6).

those three common yet value-laden words of mythic narrative one needs at least to sketch and compare their usage in the source authors. Again (94 n5) she calls attention to mythology and schoolbooks, expanding her earlier discussion on mythological compendia (74–78). Many further possibilities arise. *P Hamb.* 3, 199 contains a tantalizing bit of additional information on Apollo Smintheus (*Il.* 1.38-9) which can lead to the *Mythographus Homericus*, MH aka D-scholia.<sup>7</sup> Then there is what I would call “implicit rationalization.” Consider Cerberus, to whom Hawes devotes parts of several pages (8, 57, 206, 240–241). The number of heads varies from one to three to at least fifty and sometimes, despairingly, “many”.<sup>8</sup> Contrast that with Cerberus presented in Greek art, where it is hard to find more than a single-digit number of heads. Obviously it was, and is, difficult to represent a very many heads. Thus the painter or sculptor had to rationalize implicitly numerical traditions in the interest of art. Does implicit entail explicit?

“Rationalization” and its cognates has never, to my knowledge, received a convincing discussion; classical studies takes it as a “given” that logical analysis then and now are identical.<sup>9</sup> A case could be made that it is the wrong word, via the enormous amount of work done in the social sciences on rationality, particularly but not exclusively, in its relation to “magic”. If Hawes errs here, it is in company with virtually all classicists, including, but not limited to, E. R. Dodds in his *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, 1951). Still, *facilis descensus*; classicists would profit greatly from considering the excellent studies of rationality from scholars in other disciplines.<sup>10</sup>

That most of this review considers the implications of Hawes’ book betokens my admiration. Her approach based on the texts leads to her conclusion that rationalization of Greek myth was not destructive. My approach based on the nature of scientific and religious “knowledge” concludes that no rationalization could ipso facto be destructive. Our approaches complement each other; I eagerly anticipate further fruits from her research.

*In nuce: tolle lege.*

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<sup>7</sup> Rafaella Cribore, *Gymnastics of the Mind* (Princeton, 2001) 207–209.

<sup>8</sup> West on Hes. *Th.* 311, Frazer on Apollodorus 2.5.12.

<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Lloyd has come close in his *Magic, Reason and Experience* Cambridge 1979, chapter four, especially 122-5.

<sup>10</sup> Bryan Wilson, ed., *Rationality* (Oxford, 1979).

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