

MYTH IN PLATO

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This is a fine collection of essays by notable scholars seeking to develop our understanding of Plato's use of myth in the doing of philosophy. The editors see the volume as a continuation of Destree and Herrmann's *Plato and the Poets* (2011) which addresses Plato's critique and use of poets and poetry. The present volume includes essays by twenty scholars from Classics and Philosophy Departments in Europe and North America. The first six chapters are composed of a theoretical treatment of myth in Plato (Part 1: 'Reflections on the Nature of Platonic Myths'), and Chapters 7–20 treat the use of myth in specific dialogues and texts (Part 2: 'Approaches to Platonic Myths'). The contributors demonstrate through literary, rhetorical and philosophical analysis how Plato uses myth to adapt his ideas to his audience, to communicate and bolster his philosophical teaching, and to encourage his readers to adopt his teachings. I have organised this review along these three themes.

Several essays focus on Plato's use of myth as a means of audience adaptation. The first essay, by Most, begins with the well-known Platonic paradox of Plato's extreme attack on poets and poetry matched with his extensive use of the same. Most focuses on the contention that Plato's use was due in large part to a desire to reach non-philosophical readers: 'young men (and their parents) who wanted to know what they should do in life' (p. 22). This is followed by Dixsaut's essay which argues that Plato intends his readers to take the myths he employs seriously, but that this is a concession on his part as an author. Plato recognises that there is an irrational part of the soul which cannot be otherwise reached. In a related vein, Tarrant's analysis is directed to the literal and non-literal meanings of myth as employed by Plato and as understood by Socrates' interlocutors and Plato's critics. Myths are tools that Plato the writer has 'available for reaching the minds of others' (p. 65). Moore in his treatment of the myth of Theuth in the *Phaedrus* also focuses on audience adaptation. In particular Moore describes the ways in which Plato's Socrates takes care to speak to his interlocutors in a manner that they can understand and with an eye for persuading them of his ideas and conceptions. Myth generally and the myth of Theuth in particular work to accomplish these goals.

The heart of this work is an extension and deepening of a well-trodden path in studies of the Platonic corpus over the last several decades: taking the literary genre Plato employs to communicate his ideas seriously in our analysis and understanding. Calame's study of the Prometheus myth in the *Protagoras* demonstrates how Plato's *Protagoras* uses both myth and reason (*logos*) to advance the idea that virtue is teachable. Similarly C. delineates Plato's 'conscious appropriation of literature for philosophical ends' through an analysis of Plato's uses of terms such as *eikôn*, *dikasi*, *eidôlon* and *phantasma* (p. 87). Dorion's treatment of myth in the *Statesman* designates the words of the Oracle of Delphi as mythic which Plato employs to establish elenchus as valid and beyond challenge. Horn shows how the use of myth in the *Statesman* enables Plato to explain how the current age of Zeus 'which is marked by a reduced cosmic and political harmony, could arise' from the previous age (p. 416). In the same way Van Riel argues that the fire myth in the *Protagoras* enables Plato to take its content as a given. As he notes, employing this myth 'represents an a priori agreement that is not submitted to a dialectical discussion, but taken for granted as a basic starting point' (p. 163).

A particularly strong essay is that by G. on Plato's use of the myth of Er in the *Republic*. The relationship between myth and philosophy is a dialectical one according to G., and in this way myth can show the limits of philosophy while also heightening the urgency and need for it. In this particular instance the focus is on human fate and human nature, and the myth speaks to this directly. Similarly, Trabattini shows how Plato employs myth in the *Phaedrus* to communicate truth in a most forceful manner: 'The myth, for its part, takes up its work right where dialectics left off, deep in the heart of metaphysical reality, with the aim of somehow representing its true nature' (p. 316). Grasso likewise describes Plato's use of myth for philosophical argument in the *Timaeus* '... that, because it [myth] describes along with the divine world a contradictory relation between two orders that are radically different and yet linked ... builds up a blind spot at the very heart of Platonism' (p. 367).

Pushing the matter a step further, Ferrari contends that all of Plato is fictional and the longstanding *mythos-logos* distinction a false one. Instead, Plato the writer makes use of myth and *logos* as he wishes in the service of his fictional dialogues. As he notes: '(... fictional speechmaking, fictional history, fictional cosmology, fictional reportage, fictional lecture and so on). But they are all just grist for his dramatic mill. It is the whole dialogue that carries his intention' (p. 75). In his examination of myth in the *Gorgias* Rowe focuses our attention on the sentence in the dialogue that introduces the concluding myth on Hades. Here Plato uses myth as a device to establish a new conception of punishment. The myth functions at two levels as it describes Hades and helps to establish his conception of punishment. The myth for Socrates is true and confirms that 'the unjust suffer, are damaged, harmed, and go on being harmed, by the very fact that they commit injustice' (p. 197).

Several of the essays focus on the protreptic nature of Plato's use of myth. This matches a larger trend in Platonic studies that examines the rhetorical features in the Platonic corpus. D. demonstrates how the myths used by Plato in the *Republic* are intended to 'emotionally touch' the audience (p. 111) and are addressed to the irrational part of the soul. Edmonds, in a study of myth in the *Gorgias*, argues that 'Plato makes use of the mythic tradition to condense his philosophic ideas into evocative images' (p. 185). And Pender, in a study of the *Phaedo*, argues that the use of the story of Tartarus in the dialogue 'is to alert the audience to the urgent need to philosophize in the here-and-now in order to seize this brief chance to escape from the horrors of eternal re-incarnation' (p. 199). Thus, examining the use of myth by Plato enables us to see how he is seeking to shape the understandings and passions of his readers to encourage the pursuit of philosophy and a moral life.

A particularly insightful essay by Larivée examines the protreptic use of the myth of Er in the *Republic*. She connects the thought experiment the myth of Er generates – as we contemplate our decision in the past about which kind of life we wish to lead – with 'contemporary practices of self-transformation' practised or advocated today (p. 255). That is, she examines the myth as a tool for promoting self-transformation on the part of readers. As she states the matter, Plato employs the myth to help us to see that 'We chose ourselves, so to speak, and we thus owe it to ourselves to be who we are' (p. 238).

This is a well-ordered and focused collection of essays on the various purposes of Plato's use of myth. The examinations provide unique insights into the dialogues and texts treated and successfully argue for placing myth on a higher status than it has traditionally been held. The essays are based on solid research and are well written. This is an excellent sourcebook for scholars working on Platonic texts.

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