

Catherine Collobert, Pierre Destrée, and Francisco J. Gonzales, eds., *Plato and Myth: Studies in the use and status of Platonic myths*. Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2012. Pp.viii + 476. ISBN 978 90 04 21866 6. Hardback.

Recent Platonic scholarship has generally emphasised that Plato's works are not philosophical monographs, but dialogues, and that the interpretation of them must, therefore, take account of their form and dramatic structure. In consequence there has been a renewed interest in Plato's myths. This volume, which stems from a conference held in 2008 in Ottawa, contains twenty substantial papers. While the authors agree on the importance of the myths, they represent a wide variety of views and come from different philosophical traditions.

The question 'What passages should be counted among Plato's myths?' is addressed in the opening chapter by Glenn Most. He suggests eight criteria and, using these, identifies fourteen passages as constituting 'a provisional repertoire of Plato's myths'. These include Plato's best known myths, such as the eschatological stories in the *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus* and *Republic*, Timaeus's account of the formation of the universe, and the Atlantis myth of the *Timaeus* and *Critias*, as well as some lesser known passages such as the story in the *Phaedrus* of how the Egyptian god, Theuth, gave mankind the gift of writing. But Most's list excludes other passages which scholars (including some of his fellow contributors) have seen as mythical. For example, Pierre Destrée's discussion of myth in the *Republic* includes the story of Gyges and the simile of the Cave, while Louis André Dorion argues that Socrates' story of the Delphic oracle in the *Apology* satisfies the majority of Most's criteria and should, therefore, be considered a myth.

Nearly all contributors deal, to a greater or lesser extent, with the purpose of the myths and the relation between myth and dialectic. On these questions there are a wide variety of views. Some see them as primarily persuasive. Thus Most regards them as exoteric in the sense that they help to convince non-philosophical readers that their lives would be more valuable if they studied platonic philosophy. In a similar vein, Destrée calls the myths 'protreptic'. In order to 'touch' their audience they are addressed primarily to the irrational parts of the soul. Monique Dixsaut, writing on 'Myth and Interpretation', argues that myths are about ourselves and aim to persuade us of the power of intelligence, 'a power we must imprint on whatever rebels most strongly against it'. Christopher Moore argues that the choice of a mythical form may depend on the character of Socrates' interlocutor. Having noted that the points made in the *Phaedrus's* myth of Theuth could have been put in more straightforward ways, he reaches the somewhat disappointing conclusion that Socrates chooses the mythical form because Phaedrus has been shown to be someone particularly drawn to myths.

Another line of interpretation sees the myths as expressing truths that are difficult, or even impossible, to convey dialectically. Catherine Collobert argues that poets and sophists produce only 'doxastic' phantasmata which imitate the world of the senses. Philosophers, on the other hand, offer 'informative phantasmata'. As well as being persuasive, these supplement aspects of theoretical discourse and help to speed up understanding. Franco Trabattoni, writing on the *Phaedrus*, sees myth as more than a

supplement to dialectic. Dialectic can point to metaphysical truths, for example that there are Forms and that the soul exists apart from the body, but cannot tell us about them. So the philosopher must rely on myth. This leaves one wondering how a myth can claim to convey truth. Harold Tarrant draws on neoplatonic interpretations and argues that a myth must have a surface meaning that is, at least, believable, but that this can lead us to recognise a deeper truth. The *Critias* story, for example, may not be historically true but it provides a meaningful account of the kind clashes that actually occur, an account in which we can recognise some truth.

In a wide-ranging chapter, Giovanni Ferrari explores the 'Freedom of the Platonic myth'. Within the dialogue Socrates has a certain freedom in constructing myths. In the *Gorgias* he claims the right to believe such a myth unless something better appears. But Plato, the author, has a different kind of freedom. So in the *Timaeus* he opts to explain the universe by means of a story in which the divine creator exercises the freedom of an artist to create a thing of beauty

As one would expect, several chapters concern myths about the fate of the soul after death. Some see these as conveying truths about our present lives. Thus Radcliffe G. Edmonds connects the *Gorgias* myth, which tells how souls after death will face judgment 'bared' of irrelevancies such as power and wealth, to the idea that the Socratic elenchus is also concerned with the condition of the soul. The punishment of 'curable' souls after death refers to the shame of refutation, while that of 'incurables' corresponds to the endless failure to achieve satisfaction of those who follow their desires. Christopher Rowe also relates this story to the pain of undergoing refutation. He sees it as exemplifying Plato's 'two-layered' method, one which uses premises that will seem fairly standard to contemporary readers while also operating with premises and perspectives that belong to a different mind-set.

Annie Larivée and Francisco Gonzales both explore the complexities of the *Republic's* myth of Er. Superficially this myth might seem to show that, because we have chosen our lot, we are justly punished or rewarded for the way we have lived. But Larivée shows that the myth cannot account for moral responsibility and sees it as a 'retrospective thought experiment' that encourages self-knowledge. Similarly Gonzales' very detailed treatment of the myth demonstrates that it cannot constitute a system of justice. He argues that it, in fact, displays 'an irresolvable tension between what philosophy demands and the tragicomedy of human life'.

In 'Theriomorphism and the Composite Soul in Plato', Kathleen Morgan argues that the myths in which Plato describes the human soul as a complex mythological being reveal how our own embodiment conditions the ways in which we can think and speak about the soul. She gives most attention to the account in the *Phaedrus* of the soul as a chariot and argues that pressing the details of an image such as this shows that it is not only an artificial construct, but one which draws attention to its own constructedness. Elizabeth Pender, writing on of the *Phaedo* myth adopts a markedly different approach. She takes issue with scholars who have found difficulty in the fact that this myth includes reincarnation together with post mortem punishments and rewards. Pender, by contrast, argues that there is no inconsistency and that the topography of the myth supports the teleology of the dialogue. But her

argument depends on the questionable assumption that the time souls spend in Tartarus is a form of embodiment.

Five of the mythical passages identified by Most are primarily of political significance. These include the story about the origin of society which Plato puts into the mouth of Protagoras. Here Claude Calame argues for a pragmatic reading of myth which takes account of its narrative context and dramatic framework. Gerd Van Riel argues convincingly that it is designed by Plato to embody the common ground that is taken for granted by both Protagoras and Socrates. The disagreement between them results from their different views of *aretē* which make them interpret the same words and phenomena in different ways. Christoph Horn considers the myth of the age of Kronos in the *Statesman*. He takes issue with the view of Brisson and Rowe that this depicts three stages of human history. He argues persuasively that the traditional two-stage view is preferable because it provides a contrast between the age of Kronos where human life was orderly and free and that of Zeus in which the statesman must regulate, plan and order, if not through insight, then through law.

The account of creation which Plato puts into the mouth of Timaeus is described both as an *eikōs muthos* and as an *eikōs logos*. In a recent paper Myles Burnyeat argued against the translation of ‘*eikōs*’ as ‘probable’ or ‘likely’). He saw Timaeus as ‘trying to engage in the almost ungraspable thought experiment of what it would be like to craft everything’ (‘*Eikōs Muthos*’, *Rhizai* 2 [2005], 163) that calls for practical wisdom which is inevitably less rigorous than the theoretical variety. Thus the story Timaeus tells can be no more than ‘reasonable’. Two chapters in this volume offer powerful critiques of this interpretation, while acknowledging its brilliance. Elsa Grasso argues that it neglects the association of ‘*eikos*’ with likeness and the complex kinds of imagery involved in Timaeus’ story. Luc Brisson argues that Burnyeat’s view ignores the key points (a) that all sensible things are images of reality, and (b) that the status of discourse with regard to truth depends on the ontological status of its object.

Although the quality of the contributions is somewhat uneven, they are well worth the attention of anyone seriously interested in the form of Plato’s writings. By including such a variety of interpretative approaches it does more than any other volume of which I am aware to bring out the thought-provoking character of Plato’s myths. It also has much to offer scholars concerned with Plato’s accounts of the soul and the cosmology of the *Timaeus*.

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