Sarah Iles Johnston*, The Story of Myth.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018. Pp. 384. $45.00 (hardcover).

Attempting an explanatory account of Greek myth would strike many as a Herculean labor, if not a Sysiphean task. Hence, the delicate balance that Sarah Iles Johnston strikes in *The Story of Myth*—between reprising the modern study of Greek myth, deftly placing myths in conversation with fresh and far-ranging interdisciplinary research, and enlisting assorted *comparanda* that clarify myth's narratological and performative effects—is nothing short of a heroic accomplishment. All the more so given her ability to convey so ambitious and conceptually sophisticated a study in an accessible and engaging voice.

The Story of Myth begins with a sharp introduction that offers a history of the term *mythos* and working definition of the cluster of ancient Greek narratives that have, since the eighteenth century, usually been called myths. Johnston isolates four characteristics that constitute her own heuristic definition of Greek myths as narratives that 1) had to do with the gods and heroes and the enduring implications of their stories for humans; 2) drew upon a large but limited cast of specific and interrelated characters; 3) were set in a distant past that was nevertheless continuous with present time; and 4) unfolded in geographically specific places located within the known world (8–9). Myths were also "*stories* meant to engage and entertain their listeners, rather than simply convey information" (9), a point that may seem obvious but, as Johnston will show, fell to the wayside for scholars preoccupied with recovering their *real* meanings and functions. In a deliberate departure from earlier work, she emphasizes the manners and environments in which Greek myths were conveyed and the effects these performances would have had on audiences who already took for granted that theirs was a world co-inhabited by gods and heroes.

Chapter 2, "Ritual's Handmaid," surveys over a century of scholarship on Greek myth in order to situate and justify the need for a different approach. From William Robertson Smith and James Frazer to Jane Ellen Harrison and the legacy of the Cambridge Ritualists, Johnston sketches this intellectual history with an eye to how it has, in turns, enriched and hindered the study of myth. As the chapter's title suggests, she is critical of approaches that have treated myths as ancillary phenomena that can be pruned down to their essential cores and rent from mere literary and artistic vehicles; such assumptions, Johnston shows, reduce myth to any given scholar's perception of what a given example *really* is or is about. The ritualist emphasis on myths' aitiological functions—that each arose "to explain why this or that ritual existed" (58)—has also foreclosed much consideration of the particular occasions on which they were narrated. While many did, indeed, bear aitiological, thematic, contextual, and other connections to a specific ritual or festival, Johnston notes that the Greeks themselves were conspicuously silent about the relationship between myth and ritual: why the former might be narrated in connection with the latter, or what types of myth were suitable to this task. Rather, she concludes, "the Greeks

understood their myths, first and foremost, as a means of entertaining both themselves and the gods" (64). To take this proposition seriously displaces quests for *other* explanations of why Greeks narrated myths on such occasions with inquiry into the *effects* of witnessing these narrations.

In Chapter 3, "Narrating Myths," Johnston controverts the tendency to excise Greek myths from their narratives, a habit, she argues, that has not only occluded how myth helped to create and sustain belief in divine beings, but also excluded ancient Greek myths from broader research on the power of narrative.

Instead, she enlists contemporary inter-disciplinary scholarship on the complex effects of engaging narratives in order to theorize what emotional and cognitive dispositions the latter piqued in their audiences. Johnston commences with the example of the *historiola,* a compact narrative whose recitation to solve an immediate problem constituted a type of performative utterance. *Historiolae* were perceived to "work," she explains, by establishing mythic paradigms that could condition parallel scenario in the here and now (e.g., a *historiola* about Isis curing Horus's fever might ameliorate the fever of the reciter's child). The unspoken premise of these myths was that although the realm of the gods was geographically distant from that of mortals, theirs communicated continuously with "our" own; narrative recitation could thus collapse the two into a shared realm, momentarily bringing divine circumstances to bear on quotidian. Despite their pervasiveness among other ancient Mediterranean cultures, Johnston observes that *historiolae* were rare among the Greeks, who largely refrained from narrating myth to affect the everyday world. Rather, Greek myths tended to *merge* worlds, cultivating enduring intimacy between their subjects and audiences. In her words, "Greek mythic narratives carried a greater potential for making the audience feel as if their world and the world portrayed by the myth were one and the same and as if they lived on a continuum with the events the myths narrated" (67).

In the second part of the chapter, Johnston explores narratological features of Greek myth that contributed to this synchronicity. She introduces a number of concepts that may be unfamiliar to many readers, including what psychologists call *parasocial interactions* (PSIs), which occur when one person thinks about or even communicates with another agent unilaterally, and *parasocial relationships* (PSRs), sustained interactions of this sort. This "widespread human capacity to form strong emotional and cognitive attachments to figures with whom there can be no social relationship in the normal sense of that term" (89) is foundational, Johnston argues, to theorizing how certain narrative performances reinforce and strengthen belief in gods and similar beings. She then distinguishes between two different types of episodic narration: *series,* which consist of self-contained stories with little connection to one another beyond continuity of characters; and *serials,* in which a chronologically determined sequence of episodes contribute to an overarching narrative presented, ideally, in order. Irresolution is characteristic of both forms but more so for serials, whose audiences come to invest incrementally in characters only

for those bonds to rupture when a run is complete. Johnston determines that Greek myths partake of both types of episodic narration, and also that type correlated with the nature of its protagonists. Usually delivered in discreet doses, stories about the gods tended to be more open-ended and disconnected, akin to modern series. Stories about the exploits of heroes, however, were never disembedded from fuller accounts of their lives; each episode participated implicitly in a serial about its heroic character, in part, because the heroes' humanity mandated that their stories eventually come to an end. "Gods escaped these chains of temporality almost completely" (249). Narrative form thus communicated implicit statements about the differential ontologies of these beings.

One significant contrast between ancient and modern episodic narratives is that stories today operate with stronger chronological constraints. The circumstances of performance were such that Greek audiences were far likelier to enter stories, whether series or serial, *in medias res,* to consume episodes out of sequence, as it were. That any narrator could pick up where another had left off also meant that consumers of Greek myth never faced the full relational dissonance of a series or serial finale; even if the circumstances of a hero's death were known, other episodes about his life could always surface. Johnston joins these narratological considerations with attention to narrative features—for instance, the inclusion of mundane details, appeals to the existence of physical proof of what is being described, or narrator interjections—that persuade audiences of their plausibility, that such events *really* transpired, albeit in an earlier time, among people not unlike themselves. Altogether, these characteristics of Greek myths colluded "to firmly anchor the extraordinary within the ordinary" (118) while ensuring the vividness, memorability, and relevance of their characters and events. As a consequence of how they were narrated, then, myths encouraged extra-performance or inter-episode contemplation and, in turn, the development of strong PSRs with their characters that "further sustained the beliefs the stories had nurtured" (121). All the more so since in antiquity there were no institutions or authorities adjudicating the fictionality of certain narratives while safeguarding the veracity of others; Greek society actively encouraged such beliefs in various ways.

In Chapter 4, "The Greek Mythic Story World," Johnston elaborates two topics flagged in earlier chapters: the suitability of "almost any myth, focusing on almost any character…for recitation at almost any festival dedicated to almost any god" (121), and the significance of place and time in these narrations. She begins by reprising J.R.R. Tolkien's theorization of story worlds, which delineated Secondary Worlds from Primary (the one in which we live) on the basis of how a Secondary World immerses audiences "so completely and yet so subtly that they pass into it without even noticing that they are doing so" (123). After laying out Tolkien's criteria for what makes a world truly secondary—it must be partitioned from the Primary World by a distinct border and sufficiently different from it in geographic, botanical, zoological, and technological features—, Johnston determines that the story world of

Greek myths was not, in fact, a strongly secondary one. What *mirabilia* do punctuate their narratives are more akin to the modern genre of magical realism, where fantastical elements are integrated into and normalized by characters in the everyday world. This is not because the Greeks were *unable* to devise worlds that satisfy Tolkien's criteria; examples do exist, but their reception histories demonstrate conscious efforts over time to minimize extraordinariness. As a general rule, Greek myths adhered to "familiar geographic templates" and unfolded in times that, while distant, formed a common history with the present.

The chapter also pays close attention to how divine, heroic, and even monstrous characters were implicated in vast relational networks that served to "anchor and validate each individual myth, in an infinitely reciprocal way" (134). The latter effect is well illustrated in "crossovers," where a cameo by a figure familiar from one context lends authority and verisimilitude to a new story and its cast. Interconnectedness thus amplified the power of Greek myth, as any single iteration was a synecdoche for its collective force. Again, Johnston is clear that these qualities do not produce a Secondary World; that modern readers of Greek myths might have the opposite intuition is largely an effect of how we tend to encounter them, typically in anthologies or collections whose presentation and interpretive apparatus render their contents cohesive, restricted, and distant. Rather, this story world, with its suppleness of possibility and abiding relevance, permeated the quotidian landscapes of ancient Greece, underwriting a form of religion wherein "conceptions of divinity were anchored not by sacred texts or doctrine, but rather by shared beliefs" (146).

Chapter 5 explores the ontological status of Greek gods and heroes to bring into focus a key argument of *The Story of Myth.* Johnston asks whether the gods and heroes existed apart from the stories in which they featured. This question gives rise to another: If so, what was the relationship between divine beings and their mythic characters? "To what extent, if at all, did the Greeks distinguish between the gods and heroes as they appeared in narratives and the gods and heroes whom they worshipped?" Such considerations are inseparable from her larger thesis about the role of myths in sustaining and elaborating religious beliefs.

As in other chapters, Johnston finds productive avenues into her questions in adjacent fields of inquiry, here, philosophical and narratological work on the ontology of fictional characters and interdisciplinary studies of how humans think about invisible beings. Some characters are limited to single instantiations and, therefore, are virtually inextricable from the narratives in which they appear. Others, portrayed by multiple authors or artists, possess core properties that ensure recognizable consistency across representations but with a fluidity of identity and experience that renders them largely autonomous of these contexts. Fictionalized versions of real-life people are beholden in plausibility to the figures on whom they are based, while Invisible Others anchored by canonical narratives (e.g., the biblical god) fall somewhere between the second and third types: they are likely to acquire the same narrative independence as characters represented multiply, but with greater

constraints on account of being "real." However, the Invisible Others of ancient Greece, with its absence of theological dogmas and canonical texts, were largely unchecked by authoritative accounts in their narrative possibilities. As Johnston explains, "there were no widely agreed-upon sources of knowledge for 'Real Hermes,' for instance, that could be clearly distinguished from 'fictionalizing' portrayals of Hermes; different portrayals of Hermes simply had to sit alongside each other, none of them irrefutably able to claim to be true" (154). Thus, Greek gods and heroes, as with the Invisible Others of any culture lacking type four's theological infrastructure, were imagined and reimagined within an ongoing, multivocal conversation about who they were and what they had done.

Johnston enlists the interrelated concepts of plurimediality and accretion to describe characters that accrue traits from myriad instantiations, held together by a common name. Importantly, a given audience or individual will conceptualize a named being on the basis of the most familiar traditions or representations, which implies considerable idiosyncrasy in how the Greeks imagined their gods and heroes. So, too, do ideas about Invisible Others accord with an appropriate "ontological template" for thinking about such beings. The anthropologist Pascal Boyer has observed that most cultures construe gods and related beings as possessing most salient characteristics of the template for *person,* even if they also have properties such as refined or immaterial bodies and special cognitive powers that run counter to this ontological category. Counter-ontological entities of this sort can only violate a category in so many ways before they strain cognitive intuition, becoming incredible. Greek mythic narratives, Johnston proposes, promoted belief in such entities by aligning them closely with the *person* template, thereby strengthening the plausibility of their existence, just as other features fostered cognitive and emotional bonds between entities and audiences.

The final chapters examine in greater detail two subsets of Greek myth, stories of transformation or metamorphoses, and those of heroes, whom Johnston defines as "humans who either are born with or acquire status and abilities beyond that of other humans, which they retain after death and can use to benefit the living humans who worship them" (220). Whereas the former reminded audiences of the "continuing lability of the world," with each transformation serving as "a memento of, and thereby evidence for, the gods' ongoing, and very personal, engagement with the world and its mortal inhabitants" (180–81), the latter negotiated the relationship of divinity to humanity, of cosmic time and events to the present world. Another concept to emerge from these chapters is that of *affordances,* characteristic features of an agent or object or entity that circumscribe but do not determine the potential meanings or uses of the figures and phenomena to which they are attached (195). Johnston finds affordances more helpful than symbols, which imply an essential and nearly static meaning, for articulating the complex ways in which myths accumulate and convey fairly regular ideas; this concept also thwarts quests for the cipher that will unlock a myth's fundamental meaning. Both chapters also make responsible

comparisons between Greek myths and the myths of other ancient cultures, especially South Asia and the Near East. These juxtapositions underscore the qualities, assumptions, and anxieties that make Greek myths distinctively "Greek."

Even a review of this length does little justice to *The Story of Myth*'s richness, both analytical and with respect to its abundance of well-curated mythic content. Having already exhausted the reader's patience, I will simply observe, in view of Johnston's larger body of work, that this study marks a deliberate pivot from highly instrumental instances of mythmaking on the part of *bricoleurs*—religious actors such as the Derveni author or the initiators behind Orphic *lamellae*—to the vast, taken-for-granted mythic repertoire from which such figures sampled to devise proprietary religious programs. This distinction between back- and foreground mythmaking is important and one that stands to refine ongoing scholarly effort to theorize ancient Mediterranean religious beliefs apart from the anachronistic, Christo-centric connotations of this language.

On another note, having enlisted several essays that preempted *The Story of Myth* in courses on Greek religion, I anticipate the book being a wonderful teaching resource: Johnston's creativity excites students and her extensive engagement with contemporary (or relatively more so) cultural analogies aids readers in grasping the subtle narratological distinctions she draws. Likewise, her incorporation of such diverse materials and methodological perspectives—ranging from comparative literature to religious studies to media studies to cognitive science, with much else in between—extends vectors for guiding equally diverse modern audiences toward a sophisticated appreciation of Greek myths. By this metric, she has more than met her stated goal of demonstrating their potential contributions to broader conversations about the formation of religious beliefs and the particular ways in which narratives affect their audiences.

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