

Trzaskoma, Stephen M., R. Scott Smith and Stephen Brunet (eds.), *Anthology of Classical Myth. Primary Sources in Translation*. With an Appendix on Linear B Sources by Thomas G. Palaima. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004. Pp. 576. \$14.95 (pb). ISBN 0-87220-721-8.

*Anthology of Classical Myth* is an elegant book and a welcome addition to the field of college level classical mythology textbooks. It offers, in a purposeful and orderly manner, a considerable amount of otherwise not readily available material, maintaining a tone of cultivated but lively and personally engaged learning throughout. It contains selections from 52 authors, ranging in time from Hesiod and the Homeric Hymns to the late antique Hyginus, Proclus and Fulgentius (4<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> c. A.D.); the appendices expand that range even further by adding materials from inscriptions, papyri and the Linear B tablets. The authors are introduced in alphabetical order - a liberating feature allowing for unfettered exploration of the material; the navigation is made relatively easy through an index/glossary, a series of genealogical tables, and a half-dozen or so geographical maps.

In assessing the scope and import of this anthology one should keep in mind that it was designed as a supplementary, and not a stand-alone volume. As the editors themselves point out in *A Note to the Instructors*, the anthology should "complement either a selection of major primary sources, or one of the major textbooks on classical myth that rely heavily on excerpts of such primary sources". The major primary sources, of course, are Homer, Hesiod and the Greek tragedians, on the one hand, and Vergil and Ovid, on the other. Of these authors only Hesiod has a full presence here; the tragedians are represented by fragments of lost works, while Homer is not included at all (but all of the Homeric Hymns are); five of Ovid's *Heroides*, and two sizeable fragments from Vergil's *Aeneid* represent the major Roman sources.

Therefore, the bulk of the anthology consists of 'minor' primary sources, such as lyric poetry, both Greek and Roman, and above all, excerpts from the prose works of learned mythographers (such as Apollodorus, Hyginus, Parthenius), historians (Herodotus, Diodorus of Sicily, Arrian), art historians (Pausanias), philosophers (Plato, Cleanthes, Lucretius), and philosophizing thinkers of all stripes and hues (the satirical Lucian, the rationalist

Palaephatus, the allegorizing and etymologizing Cornutus and Fulgentius, and many others).

The choice of texts, then, is what makes this anthology unique and really interesting. For these texts collectively offer a more comprehensive look at the role and significance of myth in the context of ancient societies than any single one of the major sources can. They remind us that myth could be as puzzling to the ancients as it is to us today, and that ancient theories of interpretation deserve, perhaps, to be studied as much as the modern ones. Also, they show clearly that the image of the gods we have received from the major literary sources does not necessarily reflect the notion of divinity, or the relative importance of individual gods, present in the minds of ordinary people.

The tension between the humanistic approach to myth, as exemplified by our major literary sources, and the pull of religious scruples felt by the (moral) majority resulted, apparently, in the allegorical interpretation of myth prevalent in most ancient mythographers. Reading their comments and elucidations we realize that even a Homer was not a universally accepted authority in matters of myth; his portrayal of the gods was considered idiosyncratic and was repeatedly criticized by the lesser minds of later times. To mention but one example, while Homer himself seems to have taken in stride the notorious affair of Aphrodite, Ares and Hephaestus, many of his ancient interpreters--even Plato himself-- were shocked by it, and went to great lengths in trying to explain away such unseemly behavior among the gods. A certain Heraclitus (1<sup>st</sup> c. A.D.) claimed that Homer was only following the doctrine of Empedocles "by calling *strife* Ares and *love* Aphrodite... and bringing them together after their ancient rivalry in one accord...", or alternately, that he was giving there an allegory of metalworking, "for Ares can reasonably be called iron, which Hephaestus easily masters", etc.

Myth and religion, of course, go very far back in prehistory, and their relationship is not easily explained; but what the texts collected here show clearly is the inter-connectedness of myth, religious ritual and religious belief. The gods, as they emerge from these texts, are not just the human-like agents of impersonal destiny. Their divinity was taken seriously, and their manifestations in human lives recorded scrupulously. As an example one may

mention a report on a sacred grove of Asclepius in Epidaurus (Pausanias). In the grove a number of inscriptions were kept, testifying to the miraculous healings effected by the god; one of the inscriptions had been dedicated by Hippolytus, the son of Theseus, who "is said to have been raised from the dead by Asclepius". The same Hippolytus, whom Euripides portrays as a pure and upright follower of Artemis and a devotee of Orpheus, was seen, in some quarters at least, as a truthful witness to the divine powers of Asclepius -- a pre-Christian Lazarus, as it were.

Another example concerns the famous witch and feminist *avant la lettre*, Medea. We remember her mainly on account of her impassioned speeches on women's rights, and the lurid story of betrayal and revenge from Euripides; her children do not loom large in the story, we imagine them as mute victims, a bloody postscript to a tragic story, as it were. However, from the same author, Pausanias, we learn that children in Corinth regularly cut their hair and wore black in honor of Medea's children. In real life, in the city of Corinth, people apparently remembered Medea's children all too vividly, and observed ritual mourning for them for countless centuries.

The list of rituals, relating to a specific deity or a specific story, is long and fascinating: it involves not just the ubiquitous sacrifices; there were also statues to be clothed and carried around, while people would sing the songs of praise; the relics and tombs were venerated; holy water was being sprinkled in order to purify and sanctify persons or places; stones at crossroads were anointed; obeisance (*proskunesis*) was being performed while offering to the gods "myrtle, frankincense and sacrificial cakes"; ritual purification was done at the seashore, and there was fasting and initiation into the mysteries; sacred food was partaken of on various occasions - the list goes on and on. One might mention, in passing, that many of those rituals were common to other Mediterranean cultures, too, and that they have ultimately found their way into the latest major religion arising in the area, namely, early Christianity.

However, in spite of all their historical and antiquarian interest the majority of these texts lack one thing - the flight of imagination that could raise them above the pedestrian and into the higher spheres of art and literature. Thus, although they are primary sources, they

must nevertheless take second seat to the likes of Homer, Euripides, Vergil et al. For the very reason one might want to study classical myth today is not to learn all the particulars and implications of the 'original' stories, but rather to enjoy fully the works of the literary giants for whom myth was a medium of choice. It is only through their works that one can truly approach and hope to understand the ancient world, for

An age becomes an age, all else beside,  
When sensuous poets in their pride invent  
Emblems for the soul's consent  
That speak the meanings men will never know  
But man-imagined images can show:  
It perishes when those images, though seen,  
No longer mean.

(A. MacLeish, "Hypocrite auteur")

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