

Book Review

Sarah Iles Johnston, *The Story of Myth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018, pp. x + 374. ISBN: 9780674185074 (hbk). \$45.00/£36.95/€40.50.

Sarah Iles Johnston's *Story of Myth* offers fresh insights into the study of Greek mythology and puts forth a compelling argument for the importance of considering narratology as a key factor in the dissemination of beliefs through mythology. While Johnston acknowledges the difficulties that arise from a field as complex and varied as mythology, her goal is to compare myths across cultures and genres of narratives in order to emphasise the importance of myths in creating and sustaining the belief in gods and heroes. This goal is based on her argument that myths are stories, and as such are meant to entertain and engage an audience. She supports this by drawing on the work of Claude Calame, in particular his discussion of *feintise ludique* ('playful pretense') which argues for the ambiguous boundary between fiction and reality that certain narratives evoke. Johnston uses this framework to argue that the myths she examines offer a degree of ambiguity in which beliefs can be developed and sustained but never forced on the audience.

Johnston challenges conventional approaches to the study of myth, in particular ritualist approaches and later structural and psychoanalytical approaches, arguing that they essentialise myths. Johnston, while acknowledging that many myths refer to specific rituals, argues that scholars who study them from a ritualist approach fail to consider the when and why of their narration. Johnston argues that the metaphoric and figurative language of Greek myths brings them closer to the reality in which they were being spread, creating engagement with their audience and in turn strengthening the belief systems that they represented.

Throughout the chapters that follow her introduction, Johnston examines a wide range of Greek myths, considering various narrative techniques and theories, such as episodic narration, the creation of primary and secondary worlds and the creation of plurimedial characters. She argues that these techniques allow for the creation of relatable

gods and heroes that exist in the consciousness of their audiences, with each re-telling of a myth contributing to the broader mythology and belief system. Johnston supports these discussions by comparing Greek myths and their narration with contemporary popular culture, from Sherlock Holmes to modern-day films and television shows. A particular example that she explores is the phenomenon of parasocial interactions and relationships, which is 'when a person communicates with another, without receiving a response' (p. 87). While discussions of this phenomenon are largely attributed to popular fiction, Johnston argues that it can also be applied to figures of belief.

The final chapters of her book take a closer look at the myths of monsters and heroes. Chapter 6 considers the recurring theme of transformations that occur throughout Greek mythology, in which Johnston argues that while other cultures feature myths in which transformations take place, none come close to the breadth and focus of metamorphic myths of Greek culture. Johnston returns to her critique of ritualist, structuralist and psychological approaches to myth, arguing that the emphasis on metamorphoses creates a sense of wonder and maintains audience engagement. Finally, chapter 7 continues this thread looking at the myths concerned with heroes. She draws on her earlier discussion of narrative techniques by exploring the structure of heroic myths, in particular their combination of serial and series in order to express different concepts to the audience. Such a technique, Johnston argues, allowed for variation while conforming to expectations, creating and maintaining engagement and belief.

In order to further her argument, Johnston draws several comparisons to other cultural myths, including Hindu, Norse and Mediterranean cultures. In doing so, Johnston argues for the uniqueness of narration in Greek myth. I believe her argument could be strengthened if she had drawn on similarities with other cultural myths, highlighting certain elements, particularly the believability that is created through the creation of Primary and Secondary worlds and the creation of broad narrative frameworks. Johnston concludes by acknowledging that the book has only touched on key elements of her broader argument and calls on more scholars to expand on her ideas and consider myths in new ways. In this way, Johnston defends her narrow focus on a single cultural mythology.

This book was an interesting read and Johnston displays an in-depth knowledge of Greek mythology, providing new insights into narrative structure and presentation of Greek myths. While this is a broad and complex field of study, Johnston's book will hopefully encourage further

developments in the field and lead the way to new considerations of myths across cultures.

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