

**Greta Hawes, *Rationalizing Myth in Antiquity*, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 304, £ 60.00, ISBN 9780199672776**

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*Rationalizing Myth in Antiquity* analyses how ancient rational interpretation constituted an effective and compelling way of reading Greek myth by bringing its discrepancies under historical standards of plausibility.

For this purpose, Hawes proposes a “series of ‘snapshots’ of rationalization at work” (p.224). Each of the six chapters extensively examines: Palaephatus’ *Peri Apiston*, Heraclitus’ *Peri Apiston*, and a late Anonymous’ *Peri Apiston*, followed by three more eclectic texts, namely Conon’s *Diegeseis*, Plutarch’s *Life of Theseus*, and Pausanias’ *Periegesis*. Each chapter deals in depth with the main theme, while constantly referring to other related works and authors. An assessment of Palaephatus’ identity and chronology is found in Appendix I, while Appendix II provides an accurate commentary on and translation of the anonymous *Peri Apiston*. The volume is completed by a rich and very useful bibliography, an *Index Locorum*, and a *General Index* of names and subjects.

Through a long trajectory from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC to the Second Sophistic era, Hawes shows how the interpretation of myth gradually identified an interconnected set of narratives (standard versions and multiple variances) that provided the grounds for their further interpretation. This dynamic process gradually sketched the boundaries of the Greek canonical mythic corpus, while exerting an enduring influence on traditional narratives and their reformulations. The flexible nature of myths, depending on the context of storytelling, was further emphasized by their constantly shifting and eclectic interpretations.

Hawes broadens the scope from rationalization to Euhemerism and allegoresis (p.23), showing their overlaps and cross fertilization: these three distinct hermeneutic techniques attribute a fundamental value to proper interpretation by resorting to genealogical analysis and manipulation of mythic material. Within such a framework, the particular feature of rationalization is that it works on the shifting boundary between myth and history, while creating a homogeneous vision of the

past. Rationalization appeals to the “empirical plausibility” (p.9) of *historia*: it remodels misunderstood accounts – especially foundational, aetiological, traditional stories – to conform to contemporary cultural norms and conditions. It connects distant temporal dimensions, reshaping their relationship in new terms, and reading the discrepancies between past and present in a new light.

Hawes effectively demonstrates that rationalization did not intend to oppose, threaten or defeat Greek myth. Instead, myth worked alongside different and seemingly extraneous kinds of knowledge (such as science and history). This approach thus confirms the implausibility of a gradual purification and refutation of *mythos* by *logos*, contributing to totally dismiss the now-outdated conception of the “Greek miracle” (this point is supported with a carefully selected bibliography, p.18).

The first chapter is dedicated to Palaephatus, the starting point on Hawes’s path: setting aside the ungracious attitude of 19<sup>th</sup>-century philology that labelled him a pedestrian and vacuous compiler, she convincingly demonstrates how Palaephatus’ *Peri Apiston* marks a shift in the history of conceptualization of myth, stressing his hermeneutic, ideological and linguistic consistency, and methodological awareness. In fact, Hawes assumes – in response to N. Festa and A. Santoni (p.40) – that the Preface and the repetitive structure displayed in the subsequent 45 entries (each based on a refutation-reformulation scheme) belong to one and the same hand. In Appendix I, readers can find a well-grounded discussion suggesting that Palaephatus was a Peripatetic (probably a student of Aristotle) and dating the composition of the *Peri Apiston* in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. Palaephatus was the first to identify a sort of “empirical” category of myth, under which he gathered homogeneous material drawn from the Panhellenic context: by so doing, he developed an exemplary mythic repertoire and a standard reference format for further rationalistic interpretations. Hawes dedicates an interesting part of the chapter (pp.64-68) to analysing Palaephatus’ use of the metamorphic tendencies of language, comparing it with the riddling oracular utterances (ἄδύνατα oracles in particular): much the same hermeneutic activity is at work in both cases, through a “process of domestication” (p.67) designed to decipher the original message.

Heraclitus' *Peri Apiston*, explored in Chapter II, is a severely fragmented text dating back to the 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> centuries that exhibits the typical "Palaephatean" double narrative. Hawes shows that the eclectic criticism, refutation techniques, and compositional methods taught at the Imperial rhetorical schools reach a coherent synthesis in this work, despite the lack of any explicit methodological stance.

Chapter III focuses on the anonymous *Peri Apiston* (a commentary and translation of the text, based on Festa's edition of 1902, are provided in Appendix II). The work collates the author's own interpretations with examples drawn from other sources, thus exhibiting a peculiar hermeneutic eclecticism and linguistic variety. Hawes expounds the interaction between different stories, and especially between myth and other forms of knowledge: historical plausibility is here mostly identified with a standard of biological accuracy.

Chapter IV concerns Conon's *Diegesis*, a collation of narratives from different sources. According to Hawes, the rationalizing passages are characterized by a "double narrative" of rationalized and traditional variants. The use of this method, recurring to allusive and unsystematic cross-references, induces the reader to figure out the relationship between the two versions proposed. In response to the *Quellenforschung* advanced by U. Höfer and A. Henrichs, Hawes stresses instead the need to question *how* Conon employs the source material for the purposes of rationalization (p.144). In this chapter, the Author also deals with the thorny problem of mythography and its definition, proposing a compelling solution (p.135) according to which mythographic texts share a common "mythographic impulse": they are characterized by a straightforward presentation, and tend to treat myth as an independent entity.

Chapter V analyses Plutarch's *Life of Theseus*. Hawes notes how the Chaeronean proposed a dichotomous division of two kinds of knowledge based on chronological criteria, considering the remote past – with its prodigious, incredible stories – an area "off limits" for authentic historiography. But while the *Theseus* adheres to historicist standards, the *Romulus* (its parallel life) resents of the miraculous nature of Rome's success and its divine origins, as demonstrated and legitimized by mythical narratives. For this reason, Hawes concludes that the *Life of Romulus* and the *Life of Theseus* respectively show the uses and limitations of rationalization.

Chapter VI employs Pausanias' rationalizing attitude to reinforce the new, holistic, critical reception of the *Periegesis* as an evolution from the "turn-of-the-century boom" interest in the fascinating tour of Greece as a mere repository of mythical material (cf. J. Frazer and J. E. Harrison). Hawes shows instead that the single stories, arranged according to the order of the geographical locations encountered, are bound together by wider conceptions: in fact, as the Author points out, "as the landscape becomes increasingly 'mythologized', interest in the mythological λόγοι *qua* myths lags behind" (p.177).

The section entitled *Pausanias entrapped?* directly questions P. Veyne's corresponding core chapter containing a commentary on Pausanias in *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination*. Intuitively enough, Hawes needs to reckon with this milestone work published in 1983. She underlines how the French scholar appealed to a single, unchanging conception of myth, thus neglecting the recently published *L'invention de la mythologie* (1981) by M. Detienne, who had stressed *plurality* as a fundamental aspect of the experience of myth in antiquity, arguing that Greek myths formed a complex mesh of sets of differently combinable stories. More generally, Hawes says in her *Introduction* (p.4) that she does not share Veyne's conclusions and method, and she proposes a radically different way of questioning the relationship between myth and rationality.

Hawes challenges the very choice between belief and disbelief suggested by Veyne, shifting the focus to the issue of "credibility". She goes on to explain that the *Periegesis* is not a work of myth criticism, as Veyne believed; quite the contrary, it tends to illustrate the "descriptive and explanatory function" (p.189) of myth in relation to the physical landscape.

Finally, Pausanias appears as the perfect author for rounding off Hawes's brilliant exposition, since in the *Periegesis* (a geographical-historical tour of the Greek land) myth and history are harmoniously and closely connected.

This book (which originated from a doctoral dissertation defended at the University of Bristol in 2011, and prepared under the direction of Richard Buxton), succeeds in shaping rationalization as a valuable critical approach to traditional sources, as well as a brilliant, creative and fluid way of storytelling.

Rationalization – standing between discontinuity and permanence, innovation and genealogy – appears to be at work *within* mythic tradition, while compelling and questioning it at every step, in order to formulate new, proper and persuasive versions of myths. Such is its power and originality, that Hawes carefully showcases proposing several contextualized textual examples, and skillfully proves with strong arguments and constant references to a broad scholarly production.

One of the merits of the Author's analysis lies in that it explores the fluidity of the barrier between myth and rationality in antiquity by means of an original selection of mainly late texts. This choice helps to show how the dialectic between *mythos* and *logos*, or more precisely between myth and history, spans the whole course of Greek cultural development, thus contributing to dismiss the idea of a “time-definite turn” or “progressive improvement” from mythological to rationalistic thought. Her work also provides a very accurate picture of the complexity of methodological and exegetical eclecticism in the ancient treatment of myths through different genres, while also attributing a well-deserved importance and dignity to hitherto unjustly neglected authors and texts.

The book as a whole constitutes a precious contribution to the revaluation of rationalization, and will hopefully pave the way to further fruitful investigations.

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