
The Phaedrus is saturated with myths and yet in this dialogue, as in many others, Plato takes a critical attitude towards the interpretation of myths. Has Plato implicated his readers in the very activity under scrutiny in this dialogue and, if so, why? Is there something about the nature of Platonic myth that bypasses the criticisms in this dialogue? How exactly does Plato use myth in his portrayal of the conversation between Socrates and Phaedrus? How are we as readers to interpret these myths in light of the criticisms at the start of the dialogue? What is their truth status and what role, if any, do they play in philosophical theorizing? It is the task of this book to answer these and related questions.

This book presents an integrated approach to the dialogue, which traces a coherent line of argument through its many themes, carefully exploring the text to show how the issue of myth in particular complements and reinforces some of the central themes of the dialogue, particularly those that concern the definition of rhetoric as a leading of the soul (psychagogia, 261a) and the self-knowledge theme (229e—230a). Focusing on one dialogue has the benefit of allowing detailed analysis of why Plato uses myth to respond to the particular needs and demands of a given dialogical situation (p. 263), which is part of Werner’s overall thesis. In addition, the book shows a rich and detailed knowledge of Greek literature and culture related to the interpretation of myth. The introduction and first chapter explore the historical and cultural context of myth (p. 3–7), debates about the complex interplay between mythos and logos in Greek thought prior to Plato (p. 5–8), and allegorical interpretations of myth, which attempted to preserve the authority of myth in a time of increasing scrutiny over its status (p. 28). This grounds questions about Platonic myth in larger debates about discursive modes and their authority.

Werner begins by settling on the following working definition of Platonic myth: «those passages in the dialogues that consist of unbroken narrative or storytelling (a ‘tale’) and that bear a vital relation to the cultural past (a ‘tradition’)» (p. 9). The central questions posed concern the role of these passages, why they are interspersed with non-mythical material at certain points, and their truth status (p. 11–13). On the latter, Werner outlines four interpretative possibilities (p. 11):

(i) The Dogmatic view – Plato regards his myths as substantially and philosophically true; they make claims that he would be willing to defend.
(ii) The Debunking view – Plato regards his myths as wholly or largely false, or at least as falling short of what constitutes genuine philosophical truth.
(iii) The Yogic view – myth is Plato’s way of expressing views that are beyond the capabilities of human understanding; myth «supplements the limits of reason».
(iv) The Pragmatic view – myth is used for educational purposes, perhaps as part of philosophical conversion.

Some of these positions are puzzling. There is a large gap between falsehood and «falling short of …genuine philosophical truth» in (ii). Many scholars would argue that myths such as the palinode make claims that Plato would be willing to defend (for example, claims about the tri-partite structure of the soul are defend-
ed in a non-mythical context in the Republic), whilst also holding that the myths are not ‘substantially true’ if that means that they are true in every point of detail, or that they provide explanations for their insights. With reference to (ii), Werner argues that it follows that «we cannot use the myths as a source for understanding Plato’s own philosophical views». Not so if we separate falsehood from «falling short of genuine philosophical truth». So Werner acknowledges, suggesting that «perhaps the myths are partially true, either as a kind of ‘hypothesis’ (or ‘true opinion’) that requires further explanation, or as a type of likeness or image» (p. 12). Werner ultimately wants to distance himself from (i), (ii), and (iii), and argues for a version of (iv): myth has an essential connection to human psychology. It is a part of the soul-leading activity – psychagogia – discussed as part of ideal rhetoric, both for those not yet on the philosophical path who need to be persuaded in a discursive mode more appropriate for them, and for philosophers who might need «signposts for inquiry» (p. 197). This is compatible with (i) in the sense that myths could not be used in this productive way unless they contained some claims Plato would be willing (if not wholly able perhaps) to defend. Werner also argues for some version of (iii) insofar as Plato uses myth to draw attention «to the limits of language and knowledge in certain key areas» (p. 14). Indeed, «this is one of the main reasons for using myth in the Phaedrus…to point to second order questions or to certain limitations» (p. 58). Where Werner differs from the Yogic view is in highlighting that myth cannot transcend the limits of rational argument because «all attempts to describe the soul or Forms will fall short: «far from transcending the limits of reason, Platonic myth only magnifies them for our consideration». Plato’s mythmaking exemplifies a belief that human understanding is finite and limited. But more than that, myth is a «self-consciously limited mode of discourse» (p. 81) that does not just respond to human limitations, but makes us aware of them too, and so it contributes to a kind of self-knowledge. In this way, Platonic myths can bypass some of Socrates’ criticisms at the start: for they contribute to one of the tasks with which Socrates is centrally concerned here: self-knowledge.

Much time is spent developing the theme that myth is part of psychagogia, widely recognized as one of the dialogue’s central themes. The question is why, and how, myth can perform this role. Werner answers this question in light of the account of rhetoric, and the account of soul expounded in the palinode (p. 37). «For each part of the soul there is a form of discourse to which that part has a unique connection» (p. 70). In contrast to Ferrari (1987: 102) and Nightingale (1995: 143–4) who also argue that each of the three speeches are connected to a specific soul part (Lysias’ with appetite, Socrates’ first speech with thumos, and the palinode to reason), Werner argues not that the three speeches are designed to appeal to appetite, thumos, and reason, as they suppose (a reading which ignores the second half of the dialogue, p. 70 n.50); rather, it is the tripartition of discourse – rhetoric, myth, and dialectic – that corresponds to the tripartition of the soul. Platonic myths, such as the palinode, «make a special appeal to the spirited part of the soul» (p. 68). This view is very appealing. It integrates the variety of discursive modes in the dialogue, and it shows them to be intimately connected to both the psychology expounded in the central section, and to the rhetorical substance of the second half of the work (esp. 277b8–c2). For psychagogia to
function effectively Phaedrus needs to reject the first two speeches, just as he needs to reject the goals of appetite, allow the palinode to engage his spirit (and appetite) in the service of reason, as the horses must follow the commands of the charioteer, and engage reason in the dialectical practices of the second half of the work. Moreover, for Werner, the presentation of all three discursive modes for Phaedrus (and the reader) provides a model for «intrapersonal communication» within the soul (p. 43, 57, 66–8), by showing how the charioteer should frame his communications to lower soul-parts in terms of their desires.

One of the puzzling features of this view is that some variant of the dogmatic view (i) must be assumed at the outset so that the palinode’s claims about the soul can be used as part of Werner’s interpretative framework. Since its status is a matter of dispute (265b–c with 246a), and part of the focus of the inquiry at issue in the book, this is problematic. Perhaps this part of the argument would be better served by supporting claims about the soul in the palinode that are explained and argued for in detail in non-mythical contexts (e.g. Republic IV); this surely inclines readers to entertain such views more confidently, regardless of the reasons for their mythical expression in the Phaedrus. Werner acknowledges the difficulty of his position (p. 269), but one suspects that he does not take this approach because «the limits of language and knowledge» to which myth draws our attention for Werner (p. 14) are limits he believes apply across discursive modes, even to philosophical dialectic, and so ultimately all claims, even those that try to ground their suppositions on the basis of reasoned argument (e.g. those in Republic IV), nonetheless fall short of the truth and should be taken as initial and provisional (p. 251). «Discourse (language) as such is limited, whether that discourse takes the form of myth, Platonic dialogue, or dialectic. In this sense, the difference between mythical discourse and philosophical discourse is one of degree and not of kind» (p. 15); for real knowledge consists in contemplating Forms (p. 90–95). For Werner, myth is just better than philosophical conversation at drawing attention to its limitations.

Leaving such issues aside, some of the most pressing questions concern (a) what it is about «those passages in the dialogues that consist of unbroken narrative or storytelling (a ‘tale’) and that bear a vital relation to the cultural past (a ‘tradition’)» (p. 9) that «make a special appeal to the spirited part of the soul» (p. 68), (b) how they can perform this role, and (c) what the implications are for understanding the truth status of Platonic myth. Werner’s thesis involves specific claims both about the nature and limitations of reason in the soul, and about the cognitive resources of thumos. On the former, Werner argues that «we have a need for modes of discourse other than the purely rational» in part because reason is impotent so myth must appeal to emotion (p. 124). Though scholars sometimes do make such claims on the basis of the image of the charioteer’s dependence on his horses, it is not clear that reason is inert, or that it can be divorced from emotion in the way suggested here. First, it is unclear what features of the image point to theoretical commitments. Furthermore, surely one of the features captured by the image is the possibility of motivational conflict between three distinct drives, something which depends on reason having driving passions and emotions of its own. The charioteer is responsible for the growth of the wings, whose natural tendency is for upward motion, and it is not clear how helpful the
horses are in the ascent given that their natural tendency is for downward motion (246d6–e1 with 247b3–5, 248a4). Reason is not figured as inert, but it yearns for the plain of truth (248b–c) and moves the soul to understand (imaged by the growth of wings). Werner’s argument could float free of this criticism, however. Whatever the motivating force of reason, it may be the case that some interlocutors are not capable of engaging their reason in a dialectical manner, and so an appeal to thumos is required, as Werner argues.

So how do myths engage thumos? Werner argues that thumos is not irrational because it can respond to logos, conceptualize objects of desire, and find ways to attain them, but it is non-rational in the sense that it engages simply in means-ends reasoning (p. 66–7), and it is unable to think outside of its own prudential desires to consider overall questions about the good of the soul (p. 71). Thumos must be approached in terms of considerations that appeal to its own desires, and in accordance with its own distinctive mode of reasoning. According to Werner, myth provides «considerations for the horses» (p. 81, cf. the palinode provides «language, imagery, and substantial considerations» for thumos), which are considerations that make reference to the values, desires, and interests of this part of the soul, do not appeal to what is good for the soul overall, and include «a promise of some degree of satisfaction to those [specific] interests». Werner persuades that the palinode at the very least includes an appeal to thumos orientated goals. He argues that the palinode is framed in terms of its goals - honor, victory, and reputation (p. 68–9). Socrates describes a ‘struggle’ for the forms (247b3), employs the chariot image familiar from the Olympic games, depicts competition amongst souls (248a–b), and asserts that the philosopher wins the true Olympic games (256b4–5), for example. Though Werner seems right to argue that the language of this particular myth includes an appeal to thumos, this does not yet show how the palinode appeals to thumos insofar as it is a myth. The language of honor, shame, and victory, is also employed in a host of non-mythical contexts in the dialogues, so it is not clear how intimate the connection is between this kind of language and myth. Perhaps it is true of many traditional myths that they use language and imagery which is appealing to spirit insofar as so many of them deal with the adventures of Gods and heroes, but there are many elenctic contexts in the Platonic dialogues that also draw on the language of shame, consider arguments as contests (e.g. Grg.), and depict Socrates as a courageous seeker after truth (Symp., Phd.). The conversation of Alcibiades I, is one in which Socrates appeals to Alcibiades’ love of spirited goals and offers the ‘kind of promise’ to which Werner refers: «if your spirit and appetite truly want what you desire, then follow my lead» (p. 168), as a way of enticing Alcibiades to philosophy. This is helpful psychagogia indeed, but it is performed in a dialectical, not a mythical, context here. If so, there does not seem to be anything about the language of honor, shame, and victory, or appeals to spirited goals, that «confirms the close relation between myth and thumos» (p. 70).

Clarifying the conceptual resources of thumos is clearly crucial for Werner’s thesis; for the very possibility of an intra-personal dialogue rests on the supposition that thumos is capable of entering into such a dialogue. Also at stake here is the truth status of myth; for if myth is designed to appeal to thumos then one way in which one can establish the truth status of myth is by clarifying what this
part of the soul requires, rationally speaking. But it is not clear whether the account of *thumos* in the myth can carry details about its distinctive mode of reasoning. The fact that *thumos* is capable of obeying reason could mean not that it listens to distinctive considerations designed to appeal to its concerns, or that it understands why such considerations are appropriate – even for itself, if these are couched in terms of its own satisfaction. *Thumos* might follow reason in the sense that it is able to listen to it; repeated exposure to images and commands, indicate what it should do in a particular case (e.g. restrain itself). This view is a perfectly possible alternative, which requires less sophisticated conceptual apparatus to be extracted from the imagery surrounding *thumos*. If for the moment we allow Werner’s claims about the appeal of myth to *thumos*, then, myths could appeal in the sense that they expose the interlocutor (and reader) to insights that should be followed; *thumos* is able to listen in the sense that it is capable of obeying reason’s authority.

This is where a further strand of Werner’s argument came to the fore. More persuasive than claims about the content of myth – its language of honor and shame, or its prudential reasoning in terms of *thumos* orientated goals, content which seems to have no essential connection to «those passages in the dialogues that consist of unbroken narrative or storytelling (a ‘tale’) and that bear a vital relation to the cultural past (a ‘tradition’)» (p. 9), were those features of his argument that drew on formal features of myth to explain its appeal to *thumos*. Werner argues that insofar as we are embodied human beings we are «inevitably given over to imagistic thinking» (p. 261). Though there «may well be other forms of imagistic and emotionally charged discourse (such as poetry, tragedy, or comedy)... myth possesses a unique set of characteristics – like its aura of authoritativeness and its central place in Greek education, that make it particularly well suited to *psychagogia* and perhaps more efficacious than other available means of discourse» (p. 132 n. 68, p. 259–63). The status and authority of a traditional tale, expressed in an unbroken narrative form which encourages the reader to submit without interruption and respond to its sheer audacity and power is perhaps one reason why the palinode as *a myth* can appeal in particular to spirited types who respond to authority better than reasoned argument. The palinode arouses willingness to follow Socrates deeper into the more sober theorizing of the second half of the dialogue because we are already committed to the authority of his speech even though we do not understand it yet (and indeed could not on the basis of the myth alone); for that, as Werner argues, we need arguments and explanations of the sort Socrates begins to provide in the second half. But the myth motivates us towards the right sorts of values by its sheer grandeur and authority, the prestige of its form. This traditional tale encourages us to view the philosophical life as noble and adventurous, so that we already respect the commands of reason, and we are thereby psychologically orientated in the way Werner argues is required for subsequent philosophical engagement. This line of argument has the virtue of focusing on the distinctive form of myths, and makes rather more minimal claims about the cognitive capacities, or distinctive reasoning powers, of *thumos*.

Clearly the motivating power of myth will be a double-edged sword for Plato. Werner’s insightful reading of the Cicada myth persuades us that it is a «myth
about the palinode» (p. 150), which serves as a warning of the dangers of enchantment. We need to reflect critically on the myth, and that is one of the reasons why Plato both uses myth and at the same time raises questions about its status and authority. For ultimately for Werner Platonic myths are subject to the same criticisms as traditional myths; they are unverifiable, external, doxastic, unstable and distracting. But «the psychagogic, self-reflexive, and other uses to which Plato puts his myths mark them off as distinct from traditional stories, and as a valuable tool for the philosophical writer» (p. 264). The central difference between Plato and the allegorizers of myth towards whom Socrates was so dismissive at the start of the dialogue is ultimately one of function. «While myth itself is a flawed and alien mode of discourse, the right kind of engagement with an alien discourse can itself be a form of philosophical dialogue, and can help turn an individual towards more advanced forms of philosophical inquiry» (p. 43). Werner’s conclusion is that the issue of myth’s status is itself sown into the dialogue to encourage the right kind of response, one that serves to contribute to a harmonious intrapersonal dialogue within the soul.

This is an impressive book in many ways, from which I learnt much about myths in general, the possibilities for interpreting Platonic myths, and the Phaedrus. There is much attention to textual detail and real breadth of learning in the discussion of the cultural resonances of myth, even if at times it is a little hard to digest. I learnt more about the Cicadas and their popularity as insects, their carved representations, and their interest for biological research at the time, than perhaps was necessary for the argument (p. 135). The material could be leaner and the argument cleaner at times, but it is a book I am glad to have read and would recommend to all those interested in Plato’s use of myth, and the Phaedrus.

Cambridge

Frisbee Sheffield

---


GNOMON 2/88/2016