

Author(s): John Peradotto

Reviewed work(s):

Familiar Mysteries. The Truth in Myth by Shirley Park Lowry

The Nature of Greek Myths by G. S. Kirk

Source: *The Classical World*, Vol. 76, No. 1 (Sep. - Oct., 1982), pp. 57-59

Published by: Classical Association of the Atlantic States

Kathryn J. Gutzwiller. *Studies in the Hellenistic Epyllion*. (Beiträge zur Klassischen Philologie, 114.) Meisenheim/Glan: Anton Hain, 1981. Pp. 104. DM 47 (paper).

Gutzwiller's study is a modest and sensible redefinition of one of antiquity's most elusive literary forms, the epyllion. Recalling that Allen in the forties had demonstrated the inaccuracy of earlier definitions of the epyllion, the author returns to the ancients, who, she feels, had a clear idea of the form even though they did not deign to use the term "little epics". To support her case Gutzwiller cites Quintilian's grouping of Theocritus' pastoral poems and epyllia with large scale epic poetry—that is, in metrical terms—and Plato's *genos mikton*, the combination of narrative and dramatic poetry which he designated as epic poetry. To this the author adds Callimachus' doctrine of brevity and leptotic style, stating that the "ancients conceived of these poems as epic, but epic written in the manner of the slender Muse of Callimachean poetics." The author proposes, therefore, that epyllia reflect the "subversion of the archaic ideal" and an undercutting of the traditional conventions of epic.

The greater part of this study is devoted to an analysis of many of the better known Greek epyllia: Theocritus 13 (*Hylas*), 24 (*Hêrakliskos*), 25 (*Hêraklês Leontophonos*); Callimachus' *Hymn to Demeter* and *Hecale*; the *Europa*; and the *Epithalamium of Achilles*. Read at one setting, the examination of these small poems in the light of the author's initial definition of the epyllion belabors the point considerably, and underscores the fact that this investigation was undertaken first as a dissertation. Read one at a time and as individual pieces of literary exegesis, they are no less than enlightening, treating with, among other things, the underlying unity of Theocritus 25 and the anti-heroic posture of the *Epithalamium*.

Duquesne University

JERRY CLACK

Shirley Park Lowry. *Familiar Mysteries. The Truth in Myth*. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1982. Pp. x, 339; (incl.) 31 ill. \$19.95.

G. S. Kirk. *The Nature of Greek Myths*. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1975. Pp. 332. \$3.75 (paper).

One might expect that a book subtitled 'The Truth in Myth' would be a theoretical, philosophical investigation of the veracity of mythic expression in comparison with more self-conscious, self-correcting modes of perceiving and expressing reality. Lowry's is not such a book. It deals with myth as description, not as explanation. The mythic truth here is truth to human nature, understood largely in a modified Jungian framework (but happily free of the jargon), filtered through Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces* and *Masks of God*, to which she readily acknowledges an enormous debt. But her book is aimed, even more than Campbell's were, squarely at the non-specialist initiate to myth study, and may therefore be quite useful to high school and college teachers in general humanities courses on the subject; concerning speculation on theory, Lowry maintains a modest silence in order, it appears, to concentrate on the presentation of rich analogies between the content of specific myths the world over (including *Star Wars* and Christmas cards) and our presumed "nearly universal human experiences," especially during the formative, impressionable years of childhood. The book is nicely structured to cover a variety of mythic im-

ages and narratives under a few powerful basic categories: the *pattern* of the hero's life and of the conquering of death; and the polar *settings* within which the pattern is enacted: cosmic centers of order on the one side and Chaos with its monsters on the other.

Lowry's writing is spirited and her renditions of mythic narratives lively and economical. In the end one can say of her book what a reviewer once said of Campbell's *Masks of God*: "It all adds up finally not to an argument that . . . one could follow but rather an incantatory invitation to some significant experience." If you have never before read a book on myth or encountered the controversies surrounding its study, you will probably leave this one as excited as, I suspect, Lowry's students leave her mythology course.

However, classicists, especially those introducing myth to more sophisticated students at the college level, may hanker after something that gives them some sense of the theoretical problems raised by myth and its interpretation. That is not so easy a bill to fill. Kirk's *The Nature of Greek Myths* (first published in 1974) is an attempt to carry the issues raised in *Myth, Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures* (1970) to just such a wider audience. It discusses problems associated with the definition of myth, theories of its interpretation, and the relation of Greek myths to folktales, to their Eastern influences and literary embodiments, to rituals, and to the emergence of Greek philosophical thought. In addition there are chapters, mainly historical, on Greek origin-myths and hero-myths, especially the myths of Heracles, on which Kirk is exceptionally interesting.

We can be grateful to Kirk for carrying us beyond what he calls the "paraphrase industry," and the often mawkish impressionism with which it invites us to confront mythic narratives. Furthermore, his sceptical eclecticism identifies the excesses of generalization in certain "monolithic" theorists: Max Müller (myths allegorize natural phenomena), Andrew Lang (myths constitute an explanatory 'proto-science'), Bronislaw Malinowski (myths validate social institutions), Mircea Eliade (myths restore the power of creative origins), and the ritualists (myths derive from rituals, or at least serve as verbal correlatives to them). His review of Freud, Jung, Cassirer, and especially of Lévi-Strauss, whose method he himself employs in his study of Heracles, is at once more respectful and less secure. Kirk's examination of the notoriously vexed attempts to distinguish myth from folktale is salutary but inconclusive, and might have benefited from William Bascom's "The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives" (*Journal of American Folklore* 78 [1965] 3-20). His suspicion of 'myth' (and of 'mythology') as a collective term, though it is grounded in the undeniable lack of agreement on the taxonomic parameters of the term, verges toward a sterile nominalism. His assault on the notion of "mythical thinking" as "a hangover from the crude psychologism of the late eighteenth century and the unworlly epistemology of the early nineteenth" is good as far as it goes, but fails to suggest the full complexity of the problems raised by examining the presumed dichotomy between so-called primitive and modern thought processes (see, for example, R. Horton and R. Finnegan [edd.], *Modes of Thought* [1973] and, more recently, J. Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* [1977]). Similarly, Kirk's discussion of the development of philosophy out of a myth-dominated order is discriminating enough not to characterize it simplistically as a movement from the non-rational to the rational, but one would like to have seen a more reflective awareness of the philosophical status of the term 'rationality'—is it culture-bound or universal in the form developed in Western society? (see, for example, Brian Wilson [ed.], *Rationality* [1970]). Furthermore, there are no

references to any theoretical studies in narrative analysis (i.e., possible general rules of implication, negation, compatibility, etc.) to support the discussion of consequentiality or non-consequentiality in tales. Finally, just as in his earlier *Myth*, Kirk continues to use the terms 'imagination' and 'entertainment' as if they were ultimate categories not requiring further explanation, or not submitting to further questions such as: By what rules does the imagination operate? Why is it that the mind is 'entertained' or pleased by this or that element or narrative rather than another? Why are people of a given culture or period 'entertained' by one kind of story, but not by another?

In the final analysis we are all in Kirk's debt for the questions he raises, if not always for his way of responding to them. In the eight years since *The Nature of Greek Myths* first appeared, it is doubtful if one can yet find a comparable single volume with which to introduce students of Greek myth to its theoretical problems. But Kirk could write a better book on myth today, and one may hope that he will.

State University of New York at Buffalo

JOHN PERADOTTO

FILMS

LATIN

- You See What You Say:
An Introduction to Latin
Prepositions 12½min color
- The Romans 23½min color
Roman history survey.
- The Roman World 23min col
Roman cities and towns.
- Buried Cities: Pompeii and
Herculaneum 14min color
Shows life in these cities.
- Trier, Roman Imperial City
5min color History of
the German city.

GREEK

- Myths of Greece 3 filmstrips
Zeus' Revenge: The Crea-
tion of Pandora
Hermes and Apollo
Phaëton's Folly
- The Greeks 28½min color
Greek history survey.
- Greece: The Immortal Land
40min color Combines
the ancient and modern.
- The Aged Land 25min color
Ancient/modern Greece.
- The Acropolis 11min color

Films are available for sale and rental. For more information on these films, request a free copy of the Language Catalog.

INTERNATIONAL FILM BUREAU INC.
332 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago IL 60604
(312) 427-4545

