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for I.B.G.

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This book is dedicated to Iain, who is now honour-bound to read it.

March 2013 *Westbury on Trym*

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Abbreviations

Abbreviations of journal titles follow those used by *l'Année Philologique*. Other abbreviations follow those set out in *OCD*^{3}, with the following additions:

Abbreviation	Reference
Anon. *Incred.*	Anonymous, *Peri Apiston* (*Excerpta Vaticana*) ed. N. Festa, 1902, *Mythographi Graeci*, Vol. III.2, Leipzig.
Heraclit. *Incred.*	Heraclitus, *Peri Apiston* ed. Festa 1902.
Palaeph. *Incred.*	Palaephatus, *Peri Apiston* ed. Festa 1902.

Pi Patel: 'So, you didn't like my story?'
Mr Okamoto: 'No, we liked it very much. [. . .] But for the purposes of our investigation, we would like to know what really happened.'
'What really happened?'
'Yes.'
'So you want another story?'
'Uhh . . . no. We would like to know what really happened.'
'Doesn't the telling of something always become a story?'
'Uhh . . . perhaps in English. In Japanese a story would have an element of invention in it. We don't want any invention. We want the "straight facts", as you say in English.'
'Isn't telling about something—using words, English or Japanese—already something of an invention? Isn't just looking upon this world already something of an invention?'
'Uhh . . . '
'The world isn't just the way it is. It is how we understand it, no? And in understanding something, we bring something to it, no? Doesn't that make life a story?'
'Ha! Ha! Ha! You are very intelligent, Mr. Patel.' [. . .]
Pi Patel: 'You want words that reflect reality?'
'Yes.'
'Words that do not contradict reality?'
'Exactly.' [. . .]
'I know what you want. You want a story that won't surprise you. That will confirm what you already know. That won't make you see higher or differently. You want a flat story. An immobile story. You want dry, yeastless factuality.'
'Uhh.' [. . .]

[Long silence]

'Here's another story.'
'Good.'

Yann Martel, *Life of Pi.*

Introduction

At first glance, myth and history seem unambiguously separable. Used casually in popular parlance, they settle into an easy opposition. This distinction is underpinned by the very reasonable observation that our most prominent examples of myth, the stories of gods and heroes from ancient Greece, *are* flamboyantly unhistorical. And yet, the rapidity with which myth can slip into history and vice versa is striking: if a myth can be shown to have its roots set into historical foundations, it is viewed in a very different light. The British adventurer Tim Severin has made a career out of demonstrating this very phenomenon with a series of captivating expeditions. In 1984, following in the wake of the Argonauts, he sailed a replica Bronze Age galley from Greece to the Black Sea. Proof that Jason might indeed have managed this voyage so many centuries ago came when these latter-day Argonauts reached their destination. On the banks of the Enguri River in modern-day Georgia, Severin watched as prospectors threw sheepskins nailed onto wooden frames into the currents and brought them up glistening with gold flakes. Here, finally, was an explanation for the mysterious goal of Jason's quest: he took from Colchis not the talismanic pelt of a flying ram, but knowledge about the gold-panning fleeces which made King Aeetes so immensely rich. The modern logic underpinning Severin's quest is undeniable: myths may capture the imagination, but they are more valuable when historical proof can be offered.

This is not an exclusively modern preoccupation. Just as Severin's golden fleeces do not lack ancient precedents,[1] so too can we discern

[1] This method of gold extraction is mentioned by Strabo 11.2.19 and App. *Mithr.* 103. Braund (1994) 24–5 considers the connection an example of feedback: 'It is entirely possible that [...] accounts [gathered by anthropologist Botchorishvili in the

a steady interest in the historicity of myth in antiquity. Greek mythology was part of a conceptual world whose validity and utility often had little to do with strict factual accuracy. Indeed, the longevity of Greek myth as a creative storytelling tradition which flourished alongside scientific and historical speculation throughout antiquity proves its success in this regard. Nonetheless, the Greek myths were stories about the past and some Greek writers did expect such stories to furnish an appropriately sober vision of it. This book is about those writers. It is a study of their dissatisfaction with the historical problems posed by myth, and of the contexts in which such problems became unworkable. More than that, it is a study of their solution: a specific form of rationalistic interpretation which recast myths as misunderstood accounts of actual events. These interpretations, born out of doubt and dissatisfaction, should test the Greek mythic system to breaking point. In fact, they show up its resilience, fluidity, and capacity for continual innovation.

The Greek mythic tradition was never without its critics, and these critics had plenty of ammunition. Greek mythology was full of logical and chronological inconsistencies; its tendency towards plurality meant that the same story might exist in any number of mutually contradictory forms. Recounting a myth often meant choosing a preferred variant from amongst many on offer or tidying up glaring discrepancies. To these basic criticisms of mythical logic were added ethical and theological ones. Myths frequently cast the gods in a bad light, showing them with strikingly human vices. The unrivalled authority of these slanderous stories proved a very real moral and educative dilemma. These criticisms of myth are all found in extant Greek writings and represent attempts to bring mythology into line with particular standards of rationality. They have all, at various times, been described as mythic 'rationalization'. But such diverse revisionist modes are too easily—and too frequently—conflated into a generalized picture of the Greeks' approaches to their own mythology. From this broad range of critical approaches, then, I have drawn out just one strand, the criticism of myth using strictly historicist principles and the particular kind of interpretation to which it gave rise, which I call 'rationalistic interpretation',

1940s] of the use of fleeces for gold-winning in Svaneti derive from memories of the legend and rationalization, for both are widely known and re-told in contemporary Georgia.' For ancient rationalizations of the golden fleece, see ch. 3, pp. 123–5.

or simply 'rationalization'.[2] In singling out this tradition of myth criticism, my study makes a virtue of discrimination: we cannot hope to understand rationalistic interpretation fully without elucidating its characteristic qualities and the ways in which it differs from other ancient approaches to myth. Indeed, close attention to the specific trends of its uses has a payoff in that it highlights the particular facets of Greek mythology which attracted rationalistic attention and thus brings into clearer relief the differentiated nature of mythic narratives in the ancient world.

Rationalistic interpretation, exemplified most clearly by a late fourth-century BC treatise, Palaephatus' *Peri Apiston*, is a recognizable interpretative and narrative strategy which reflects specific attitudes towards myth. These attitudes embraced, on the one hand, the desire to preserve the place of myths as powerful cultural property and, on the other, the recognition that these stories violate empirically perceived norms of reality. The paradoxes posed by these jarring incongruities could only be resolved if Greek myths were transformed into stories which fitted a conception of the past which led, without pause or break, to the present. In other words, they must accord with the laws of possibility as distilled from the experience of contemporary reality. The transformations effected by rationalistic interpretation revolve around the identification of ambiguous situations or figurative language which might have been misconstrued at some point in the past. In this context, Greek mythology comes to be seen as a record of past misunderstandings which could be reverse-engineered to show that these stories of fabulous monsters and other-worldly deeds derive in fact from prosaic events. The end result is a new version of the traditional story which preserves elements of the original while adhering to a stricter standard of possibility. This version, a fully integrated narrative, functions not only as an interpretation of

[2] This is, of course, a term loaded with centuries of accumulated meaning reflecting diverse attitudes to both ancient and more recent phenomena. Hunter (1982) 107–13 briefly discusses ancient 'rationalism' and 'rationalization' in the context of similar trends since the Enlightenment. (Her conclusion is notable: 'Rationalization has led us to the term rational principle. What relationship does the latter have to rationalization? To ask such a question serves to highlight the difficulties inherent in the term rationalism: it has become virtually meaningless, by being applied to every rational procedure in the ancient world' (113).) Ford (2005) 65–83 provides a wide-ranging study of the use of the term 'rationalism' to describe both modern scholarly approaches and ancient forms of interpretation. He notes that this designation is seldom used consistently to describe a precise approach, but more commonly indicates a set of (positive or negative) attitudes towards the material at hand.

the traditional myth, but also as an independent variant which could act as a substitute for it in a suitable narrative context. In one way, this is a 'closing off' of myth within very narrow conceptual boundaries: the rationalists considered here are concerned primarily with the historical truth-value of myths; their roles as imaginative and symbolic phenomena fall largely by the wayside. In another, it demonstrates the plurality of the Greek mythic system and its capacity to incorporate sceptical attitudes and the variants that they inspire.

This deceptively simple technique functioned in antiquity within a remarkably persistent and relatively pervasive interpretative tradition. And yet, it has not been well served by modern scholarship.[3] The very idea that mythical 'truth' should be measured against a purely historicist standard puts it at odds with recent views on the nature of Greek myth, which rightly assign to such stories a conceptual significance derived from symbolic and social modes, and not from the accurate portrayal of actual events.[4] Thus the bald assessment of Paul Veyne, 'Far from being a triumph of reason, the purification of myth by *logos* is an ancient program whose absurdity surprises us today'.[5] Criticism of the tradition cannot be easily separated from criticism of its most prominent ancient proponent. Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff attacked Palaephatus' *Peri Apiston*, describing it as a 'wretched, failed effort' ('das elende machwerk')

[3] Ancient rationalizing texts are becoming increasingly accessible in translation. Of particular note are Jacob Stern's translations and commentaries of Palaephatus and Heraclitus, Anna Santoni's insightful Italian edition of Palaephatus, and Kai Brodersen's bilingual edition of the same author for the popular press, Reclam. Significant too are projects which present the three *Peri Apiston* treatises together: Sanz Morales (2002), Ramelli (2007), and Torres Guerra (2009). Nonetheless, little work has been done on the tradition as a whole. The only full-length study of rationalistic myth interpretation, Friedrich Wipprecht's two-volume *Zur Entwicklung der rationalistischen Mythendeutung bei den Griechen*, appeared over a century ago and marks the end of the most fruitful period for the modern study of rationalization, fuelled mainly by interest in Palaephatus (see Appendix I). More recently, Paul Veyne's *Did the Greeks believe in their myths?* has proved immensely influential on the relationship between history, rationality, and myth. I have not found Veyne's work useful as a basis for my own. Our conceptions of this subject—in terms of both content and how this content should be communicated—are fundamentally incompatible. This book, then, serves as a foil to Veyne's, although the criticism is merely implicit for the most part. For a direct reappraisal, see ch. 6, pp. 178–85.

[4] As a brief illustration of this conflict between opposing views on the value and veracity of myth as a historical source, note the strong criticism of Martin Bernal's use of Greek myths of colonization to reconstruct historical truth (Bernal (1987) esp. 84–109, Bernal (2001) 91): esp. Hall (1992), Coleman (1996) 286–7, Lefkowitz (1996) 9–11, 17–19.

[5] Veyne (1988) 1.

composed in a banal, everyday style ('allerweltsgriechisch') which wasted great effort for little reward.[6] This influential assessment still casts a shadow over ancient rationalizers: it has often been echoed and seldom directly challenged in the intervening years.

The reputation of rationalization for naive simplicity is well deserved, but overstated. Lurking within such disparagements is the danger that they, in effect, license the continued disregard for rationalistic trends in ancient texts and downplay their importance within the Greek mythic system. Certainly, they ignore the great amount that this tradition of myth criticism can teach us. The relationship between myth and history in ancient Greece was complex and polyvalent, and the naivety which apparently underscores the rationalizers' conception of this relationship does not change this. As we will see in the course of this book, while ostensibly simplifying the relationship between history and myth, rationalization reveals, paradoxically, the fluidity of such concepts and the difficulty inherent in categorically distinguishing one from the other. Mythic rationalization is an authentic part of Greek literature and culture. It provides an insight into Greek critical thinking in accordance with a particular conception of plausibility and displays one of the ways in which Greek writers approached the rich traditions of their mythic past. In this context, it deserves serious attention as one of the few indigenous modes of myth interpretation in antiquity.

It is exactly this element of rationalistic interpretation, its embeddedness in the very culture which it critiques and seeks to revise, which makes it such a captivating, and slippery, subject. This same element likewise underlies its potential to contribute fruitfully to our understanding of the nature of myth in ancient Greece. It has become customary for books on Greek 'myth' to offer a definition of this problematic term as a *prolegomenon* to its study. This book breaks with this custom, or, rather, postpones it somewhat: a detailed discussion of the implications of ancient rationalization for 'myth' as a conceptual category appears in Chapter 1 (pp. 73–91). The study of rationalistic interpretation is not conducive to a survey of the phenomenon of Greek myth in its entirety, but it does bring into focus one particular facet of it. This, indeed, is its strength: Greek myth was not a monolithic tradition but a fragmented and eclectic one which drew on a complex and differentiated network of stories told and retold in a myriad of contexts. Overly dogmatic concern with definitions tends

[6] Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1895) 101 n. 184.

to lose sight of this. This study offers a description of one particular ancient conception of myth. The 'definition' (if it can be called that) which rationalistic interpretation projects is of a popular, canonical body of stories which are, by their very nature, *untrue*. This is, of course, a partial vision of myth, relevant primarily to a specific set of material and derived organically from a particular set of attitudes towards it. It is also somewhat deceptive: the practice of rationalization has much more in common with the conventional elements of Greek myth than the rationalizers themselves acknowledge. And fundamentally, of course, the rationalizers are spurred on by the belief that something *truthful* can be found in these stories. This disconnect between abstract definitions and practical applications, indeed between rhetoric and reality, is a distinctive element of the rationalizing tradition which we will find recurring in many guises in the chapters that follow.

THE ORIGINS OF RATIONALIZATION . . .

To speak of ancient myth interpretation in overly abstract terms distracts us from the deeply pragmatic nature of the Greek mythic tradition. Myths were bound up in the eminently practical activity of storytelling; criticisms levelled at them, and deliberate manipulations of their narrative forms, can only be understood in such contexts. This empirical approach underpins the structure of this book: each chapter is devoted to a single author's use of rationalistic interpretation. It makes sense, then, to introduce the topic in the same way, through exemplary passages drawn from early mythography and *historia*.

The origins of rationalization are typically traced to early prose writing. Indeed, this is the one element of the rationalizing tradition which *has* received substantial attention. Previous studies have tended to cut a well-marked path through relevant passages in the early prose writers and philosophers, a trail that leads directly and inevitably to a convenient terminus: the systematic treatise of Palaephatus.[7] The attractions of such approaches are obvious: the Archaic and Classical periods provide a natural hunting ground for evidence that the advent of new tools of rational enquiry forced the Greeks

[7] These surveys include: Lobeck (1829) 987–9, Festa (1890) 52–7, Wipprecht (1902), Nestle (1942) 131–52, Osmun (1956) 131–2, Roquet (1975) 18–24, Dowden (1992) 42–7, Stern (1996) 10–11, Sanz Morales (1999), and Ramelli and Lucchetta (2004) 205–7.

to reconsider their myths. My study, by contrast, takes Palaephatus' fourth-century text as a starting point and traces the tradition forward into the Second Sophistic and beyond via two additional rationalizing handbooks (by Heraclitus and a late, anonymous writer) and three more eclectic texts—Conon's *Diegeseis*, Plutarch's *Life of Theseus*, and Pausanias' *Periegesis*. The relatively late dates of these texts mean that their applicability to our understanding of the rationalizing tradition has never been fully realized. And yet, by comparison with the Archaic and Classical material, this later period gives us relevant texts in a much better state of preservation. It also provides a greater amount of more secure evidence regarding mythographical norms, educative practice, and the literate transmission of mythic narratives.

The development of new modes of scientific and historical enquiry in Archaic Greece put pressure on traditional forms of knowledge. Early prose writers grapple overtly with differing assessments of the trustworthiness of stories about the past. The authority of poetry and its mythical content came in for particular criticism. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the celebrated opening words of Hecataeus' *Genealogiae*: 'I write in this account what I consider to be true: for the Greeks' stories are many and laughable, or so it seems to me' (fr. 1 Fowler). This striking statement has a self-confident innovator firing a warning shot over the bows of mythology. Authority is no longer the preserve of established tradition, but answerable to the mental calculations of the individual.[8] And yet, in spite of its suggestiveness, we must be careful not to overstate the significance of this claim: what counted as 'stories' (*λόγοι*) in the early fifth century? Why precisely did Hecataeus find them so 'many and laughable' (*πολλοί τε καὶ γελοῖοι*)?[9] And how did he measure the truthfulness of his own version of events? In fact, some truly 'laughable' stories did find their way into Hecataeus' work. Amongst the fragments of the *Genealogiae*

[8] I can here barely scratch the surface of this intriguing fragment (or indeed the storytelling practices of its author). The boldness of fr. 1 resides not just in pitting individual intellect against accepted tradition (see Bertelli (2001) 81–3 and Fowler (2001) 101–3), but also in pointing to the problematic truth-value of such material (Bertelli (2001) 81) and in championing the superiority of written accounts over oral ones (see Bertelli (1996) 67–8 and Bertelli (2001) 83–4). Nicolai (1997) 151–5 provides a useful survey of previous approaches to this fragment and to the issue of Hecataeus' rationalism.

[9] For attempts to precisely categorize Hecataeus' objections, see, e.g., Nenci (1964) 278–80 on the proliferation of different and mutually incompatible versions, and Bertelli (2001) 82–3 on the tendency for poets to integrate mythical details rather than select a preferred account.

we find the speaking ram of Phrixus (fr. 17 Fowler), and the story of Orestheus' bitch, which give birth to a log (fr. 15 Fowler).

One of the ways in which Hecataeus *did* follow through on his rejection of myth was by showing how small manipulations could create passably 'true' accounts out of unlikely material. Pausanias records that Hecataeus 'discovered a likely explanation' (*λόγον εὗρεν εἰκότα*) to account for stories about Cerberus, the guard dog of the underworld. In doing so, he presents us with a paradigmatic example of rationalistic interpretation (Paus. 3.25.5 = Hecataeus fr. 27a Fowler):

> He said that a terrible snake lived on Taenarum, and that it was called the 'Hound of Hades' because anyone bitten by it would be killed straightaway by its venom. It was this snake, he said, which Heracles brought to Eurystheus.

Hecataeus' solution preserves the narrative form of the myth: even in his rationalized account, Heracles delivers the 'Hound of Hades' to Eurystheus. What these words mean, however, has changed. Hecataeus' creature is no longer the multi-headed canine of the myth, but a snake notorious for its lethal—but hardly supernatural—bite. 'Hound of Hades' becomes a metaphorical epithet rather than an actual description of the monster Heracles is sent to retrieve. Hecataeus' manipulations seem strikingly revisionist. And yet, this metamorphosis of Cerberus from dog to snake is not unprecedented: Apollodorus, among others, describes Cerberus with snakes bristling from his back (2.5.12); indeed, the earliest pictorial representation of him, on a sixth-century Corinthian cotyle, shows a single-headed canine form sprouting snakes, and similar hybrid depictions were popular in Greek art.[10] Hecataeus' rationalization is, then, inspired by the prior existence of a 'snaky Cerberus'. As we will see in the course of this book, rationalistic interpretations, despite their unconventionality, are seldom created *ex nihilo*; rather, they draw on existing elements of the mythical tradition.

A more complex example of how figurative language acts as a fulcrum for rationalistic interpretation occurs in Herodotus' *Histories*. Describing the origins of the oracle at Dodona, Herodotus contrasts the account given by the priestesses themselves—that the oracle was established on the command of a black dove from Egyptian Thebes—with an Egyptian account which has an abducted priestess

[10] See Woodford and Spier (1992) esp. 24, 31.

of Theban Zeus as its founder (2.54–5). As is so often the case in book 2, Herodotus favours the Egyptian account.[11] He explains how the Greek founding myth arose as a misunderstanding of the same event (2.57.1–2):

> I imagine that the women were called 'doves' by the people of Dodona because they were foreign and seemed to them to twitter like birds. They say that after a while the dove spoke with a human voice since the woman said things intelligible to them. But as long as she spoke in her native tongue, they thought she twittered like a bird; for how could a *dove* speak with a human voice? The fact that they say the dove was black indicates that the woman was Egyptian.

Herodotus' solution recognizes that descriptions often function figuratively via pertinent analogies and that their meaning is radically changed if, in the course of time, they come to be taken 'literally'. Thus, a creature described as a 'dove' might merely *resemble* this bird in crucial respects. Underlying this is not merely the very practical observation that foreigners might be said 'to twitter like birds' (*ὁμοίως ὄρνισι φθέγγεσθαι*)—bearing in mind that the basic sense of barbarism in Greek culture is related to unintelligible language—but also the habitual logic of a wider set of associations between bird calls and the babbling of women and barbarians.[12]

This passage makes both versions of the founding of the oracle at Dodona authentic records—in their own ways—of the same series of events, and reconciles those elements of them which are ostensibly at odds with each other. In rejecting the literal significance of the Greek account, Herodotus is guided ultimately by his adherence to a particular standard of empirical plausibility—the founder of the oracle *must* be a woman, for how *could* a dove speak? The solution that he works out is designed to bolster confidence in the validity of his account and to emphasize the judicious care of its author. Its success is apparent within its generic context: these manipulations allow the historian to create a clever account suited to his narrative vision.

[11] For Herodotus' trust in the validity of Egyptian sources, see Hunter (1982) 96–8. Thomas (2000) 175–212 examines Herodotus' styles of argumentation in book 2.

[12] Note the analogy of Cassandra in Aesch. *Ag*., a foreign *prophetic* woman whose articulations are compared in turn to those of a swallow (1050–2), a nightingale (1140–5), and a swan (1444–6). For the relationship between bird-like twittering and the speech of women and barbarians, see Heath (2005) 186, 200–1. For the 'tonguelessness' of barbarians more generally, see Munson (2005) 1–3.

This sense of generic suitability is innate in rationalization. Greek writers shared a mythological tradition, but this body of stories was malleable enough to serve as a battleground for rival claims about their truth-value. In some ways this situation represents a fundamental breach in Greek storytelling traditions as two inherently incompatible modes—the poetic and the historical—laid claim to the same basic mythic material. Rationalistic interpretation did not make myth 'historical' in an absolute sense, for myths had always been understood to contain knowledge about the past. Rather, it created strategies for adapting stories shaped by their use in poetic and dramatic traditions to the demands of *historia*. In this way, rationalistic interpretations are not so much historically accurate as historiographically plausible. Part of this sense of plausibility is wrapped up in their rejection of the kinds of mythic truth implicit in poetry. Strabo would later describe the stories of Dodona and its doves as excessively 'poetic', but nonetheless appropriate for inclusion in a geographical account (*τὰ μὲν ποιητικωτέρας ἐστὶ διατριβῆς τὰ δ' οἰκεῖα τῆς νῦν περιοδείας*—7.7.10). He, like Herodotus, gives the story of the origins of the oracle, and he likewise suggests that the myth popularized by the poets had sprung from misunderstood local conventions which compared women to birds (7.7.11–12). The simple act of criticizing this founding myth and suggesting an alternative to it is not, then, just a correction offered in response to a particular myth. Rather, it is part of an ongoing rivalry between poetry and *historia* over the correct way of telling stories about the past. Such rationalizations, then, capture the spirit of defiance through which early historians sought to carve out a place for themselves and their emerging genre.

Such defiance of traditional authority did not, however, coalesce simply into a single way of approaching myth. One of the aims of this book is to highlight the distinctive inconsistency of attitudes towards mythic stories. In part, this is a natural product of the diversity apparent in Greek storytelling. The absence of any fixed conception of 'myth' in antiquity restricted the emergence of dogmatic or systematic approaches. In practice, different attitudes towards myth suggested themselves naturally by a complex series of—implicit and unstated—considerations. The success of a particular interpretation was not contingent on objective judgements as to its formal coherency, but on its efficacy in its specific context.

Herodotus' *Histories* provides a prime example of the differentiated nature of Greek myth and its indigenous taxonomies. Robert

Fowler has pointed to the dangers of assuming that Herodotus' understanding of myth would accord with a modern definition of the term. He notes that such etic approaches conflate into a single object a large number of stories whose infinite variety a Greek writer would intuitively grasp.[13] Herodotus' shifting attitudes to narrating, critiquing, and choosing not to narrate different stories are conditioned by a subtle—and largely implicit—system of narrative typologies. In particular, one such distinction in the *Histories* relates to the 'religious' context of many of Herodotus' stories. Fowler shows that, for Herodotus, only particular stories could be contested. Dispute about these stories was permissible because their cultic resonances had weakened and their narrative forms had come unhitched from cultic sanctions. In this sense, myths are recognized as such only when conceptual distance allows for disputes to arise over their validity.

The great eclecticism of ancient approaches to myth is evident in the work of Herodorus of Heraclea (*fl. c.*400).[14] The fragments of his massive work on Heracles, which originally ran to 17 books, reveal a myriad of philosophical and scientific interests for which the life of the hero presumably supplied a unifying thread. Thus the story of Heracles' retrieval of Cerberus, set near Herodorus' native Heraclea, is used to explain a local botanical oddity: a potent plant grew from the bile of the hell-hound (fr. 31 Fowler); Heracles' supposed fear of vultures prompts a discussion of the nature of these birds and their rarity (fr. 22 a, b Fowler); the fifth book seemingly included a description of the plant *alimos* (fr. 1 Fowler) and the tenth a discussion of the subgroups of the Iberian tribe (fr. 2 Fowler). Herodorus' exploration of these narrative details was apparently tempered by a desire to resolve logical inconsistencies in Heracles' mythology—if indeed this was his intention in arguing for eight separate heroes of the same name (fr. 14 Fowler).[15]

Herodorus' reading of Heracles is infused with philosophical influences. He maintained, probably influenced by Pythagoreanism, that the Nemean lion came down to earth from the upper air (fr. 4 Fowler).[16] He interpreted Heracles' shouldering of the pillars of

[13] Fowler (2009) esp. 31.

[14] Scholarship on Herodorus is not vast: Jacoby (1912), Jacoby (1957) 502–9, Desideri (1991) 8–13, Borin (1995), Blakely (2011), and Fowler (2013) 696–8. For his place in the rationalizing tradition, see Wipprecht (1902) 38–43 and Nestle (1942) 146–8.

[15] For these multiple Heracleis, see Fowler (2013) 328–9.

[16] That the lion came from the moon was apparently a relatively common claim, perhaps connected to Pythagoreanism (see Borin (1995) 152–3 and Blakely (2011) *ad*

the world as a riddling reference (*αἰνιττομένου τοῦ μύθου*) to Atlas, a philosopher, gifting to the hero knowledge of the cosmos (fr. 13 Fowler). Indeed, Herodorus apparently depicted the hero pursuing philosophical wisdom right up to the time of his death (*φιλοσοφήσας μέχρι θανάτου*—fr. 14 Fowler).[17] Herodorus' philosopher-hero is also a master of more practical skills: a scholion describes Herodorus as narrating the rescue of Prometheus 'strangely' (*ξένως*) (fr. 30 Fowler):

> Prometheus was king of the Scythians. He was unable to provide his subjects with what they needed to live because a river named Eagle flooded the plains, and so the Scythians chained him up. But Heracles arrived and diverted the river into the sea. For this reason, the story was told that Heracles had defeated the eagle and released Prometheus from his chains.

The canonical myth of Prometheus has him tormented by an eagle sent by Zeus to feed daily on his ever-rejuvenating liver. Herodorus converts it into a rationalized story of regional politics on the banks of a strangely named river.[18] In a similar vein, he rationalized the story of the building of the walls of Troy, traditionally said to be the work of Poseidon and Apollo: he suggested that in fact Laomedon spent money dedicated to these gods on the defence of his city (fr. 28 Fowler).

These fragments speak to the easy eclecticism of ancient myth interpretation. The episodic character of Heracles' mythology shows up the piecemeal nature of many approaches to myth: a solution designed to explain one Labour might not be so successful in relation to another. Thus, the rationalized tone of Heracles' rescue of Prometheus and Laomedon's building of the walls of Troy is balanced by Herodorus' mystical speculations on the origins of the Nemean lion

loc., with references). Herodorus' interest in lunar life is also apparent in fr. 21 Fowler. For other possible Pythagorean and Orphic influences in Herodorus, see Detienne (1960) 25–9 and Borin (1995) 148–9.

[17] Fr. 14 contains a substantial allegorical reading of Heracles' iconography: for example, his club is the weapon of philosophy (*τοῦ ῥοπάλου τῆς φιλοσοφίας*), his lion's skin conveys nobility of spirit (*γενναῖον φρόνημα*), and with these, he overcame the serpent and obtained the virtues (*ἀρετάς*) represented by the apples of the Hesperides. It is difficult to judge whether pseudo-John intends to attribute this allegorical material also to Herodorus, or indeed the accuracy of such an attribution. For the sceptical view, see Detienne (1960) 30–2.

[18] Further examples of this rationalizing motif are discussed in ch. 2, pp. 128–31.

and his ready acceptance of Heracles' underworld quest to capture Cerberus. This variety of viewpoints may seem odd—certainly it throws up any number of logical incoherencies—but it is in fact a conventional element of the Greek tradition. Indeed, as we shall see through the course of this book, few authors adopt an entirely consistent attitude towards myths. Further, the very process of rationalization, which is concerned with finding explanations for particular elements of the mythical tradition, tends to atomize mythology in that it encourages single stories to be considered and interpreted in isolation. Rationalization is not so much a theory for explaining myth as a method of explaining *away* discrepancies within myths; in this way, it often produces short-sighted solutions satisfactory only within the immediate context.

We can no longer reconstruct the kind of narrative logic which led Herodorus to treat the various facets of the mythology of Heracles in the ways that he did. We cannot determine, for example, what factors led him to downplay the supernatural aspect in the story of the building of the walls of Troy, but exaggerate it in the story of the Nemean lion. The eclecticism evident in his fragments may be conventional, but we can say little more about his interpretative habits without a fuller understanding of how these passages functioned within the original work. This, then, is the advantage of studying the rationalizing tradition in later works: these extant texts demonstrate more precisely the relationship between rationalizing interpretations and their narrative contexts. With these later authors, we can not only determine *how* they used rationalistic interpretations, but also start to understand *why* they did so.

. . . AND ITS LIMITS

As we have seen, rationalistic interpretation has a natural affinity with *historia*. The passages from Hecataeus and Herodotus in particular demonstrate its utility as a tool for creating plausible narratives in historical accounts. But it does not travel well: outside of this context its flaws quickly become apparent. A narrow concern with just one type of mythical truth left it blinkered to the fuller resonances of these stories. Two passages—from Euripides and Plato—are worth a closer look in this regard. They suggest that, by the Classical period at least, rationalistic interpretation was so recognizable that its use could be subjected to critical analysis, or indeed satirized. In both of

these passages, the search for historical verisimilitude in myth seems irrelevant, and the dogmatic 'certainty' established by rationalistic interpretation produces an oddly dissonant effect.

The first episode of Euripides' *Bacchae* dramatizes the question of appropriate reverence. Teiresias and Cadmus attempt to persuade Pentheus to recognize Dionysus' divinity by assembling an arsenal of arguments from various perspectives, all of which fail to dent Pentheus' resolve. Pentheus dismisses the claims of Dionysus' recently arrived cult, which link his divinity to his miraculous birth from Zeus' thigh (242–5). Teiresias' reply explicitly addresses this point (286–97):

> And do you laugh at him because he was sewn up in Zeus' thigh (*μηρῷ*)? Let me explain to you how this story makes sense: When Zeus snatched Dionysus away from the lightning bolt's fire, he took the baby—a god—up to Olympus. Hera wanted to cast him out of heaven, but Zeus devised a plan to foil hers, just as a god would do. He broke off a portion (*μέρος*) of the ether that encircles the earth and deposited it as a hostage (*ὅμηρον*), thus delivering Dionysus from Hera's jealousy. But as time went on, mortals came to say that he was sewn into Zeus' thigh (*μηρῷ*) on account of the fact that the god was a hostage (*ὡμήρευσε*) to the goddess Hera—and so, having changed the word, they created the myth.

Once again, a sensitivity to word-play (the Greek for 'thigh', 'portion', and 'hostage'—*μηρός*, *μέρος*, and *ὅμηρος*—sound similar) effects a radical rolling-back of past misunderstanding.[19] But how are we to take this? Teiresias' measured and polished rhetorical display seems designed to provoke comparisons with the superficiality of sophistry.[20] A number of scholars have pointed to the irony inherent in a divinely inspired prophet, famous for his innate wisdom and accurate insight, using these kinds of intellectual arguments; this paradox must surely cast a subversive veil of parody over the exchange.[21]

[19] A similar play on these close homophones underlies two ancient explanations for Homer's name: that he was at one point held hostage (Lucian, *Ver. Hist*. 2.20) and that he had a mark on his thigh (Heliodorus, 3.14.4). In both of these passages, as Anderson (1979) points out, the puns hark back playfully to the Euripidean passage.

[20] See Roth (1984) 59 n.1 for bibliography; also Oranje (1984) 44 and Seaford (2001) 174.

[21] For Teiresias' relationship to sophistry in the *Bacchae*, see Oranje (1984) 47 and Segal (1997) 280, with the caveat of Roth (1984) that such an association was not unprecedented.

There is indeed something satirical about Teiresias' rationalization of Dionysus' birth.[22] This mode of explanation may provide a clever interpretation, but it does not seem well suited to offering true insight into matters of divine wisdom. Notably, the rationalizing solution is no less fantastic than the account it replaces. Nor should it be: Dionysus' supreme status requires a divine birth and childhood amongst the gods. The necessary mystery of his origin is beyond the clever innovations of rationalization.[23] Given that the symbolism of Dionysus' emergence from the 'male womb' (*ἄρσηv νηδύς*—526–7) of Zeus remains a myth of primary value for his followers (88–103, 519–29), the 'historicization' of this story offers no tangible benefit to those devoted to the god, for whom such myths of the divine exist beyond intellectual speculation or sophistic argument. Conversely, rationalization cannot offer a more 'plausible' version of these events which might convince the sceptics, as belief in the divine requires a concomitant acceptance of the underlying cultic significance of these myths.

The connection between rationalistic interpretation and spurious intellectualism is highlighted explicitly in Plato's *Phaedrus*. This dialogue is infused with the conflict between an attractive, but ultimately vacuous, argument and the insightful investigations proper to philosophy. A first introduction to this idea appears as Socrates and Phaedrus make small talk, discussing the story of Boreas and Oreithyia as they walk beside the Ilissus (229c–30a):[24]

> PHAEDRUS [...] But tell me, by Zeus, do you believe this myth is true, Socrates?
> SOCRATES If I disbelieved, as the experts do, I would not be unusual. In that case, arguing like a sophist, I might say that a gust of wind from the north pushed Oreithyia down from the nearby rocks while she was playing together with Pharmacea and, having died in this way, she was said to have been snatched by Boreas—or perhaps from the Areopagus, there's also a story that she was snatched from there and not from here. But I, Phaedrus, think differently: these explanations are elegant, but they belong to a very clever, very patient and not entirely fortunate man, if for no other reason than this: after this explanation, he must

[22] See Oranje (1984) 47–9, Feeney (1991) 21 n.66, and Segal (1997) 294.
[23] On this theme more generally, see Segal (1997) 292–309.
[24] For the ways in which this passage foreshadows the themes of the dialogue as a whole, see esp. Griswold (1986) 36–43, Rowe (1986) 139–41, Ferrari (1987) 11–12, Benardete (1991) 111–14, Morgan (2000) 214–15, and Egan (2004a) 146–8.