



Classical Mythology: A Very Short Introduction

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From Zeus and Europa, to Diana, Pan, and Prometheus, the myths of ancient Greece and Rome seem to exert a timeless power over us. But what do those myths represent, and why are they so enduringly fascinating? Why do they seem to be such a potent way of talking about our selves, our origins, and our desires? This imaginative and stimulating *Very Short Introduction* goes beyond a simple retelling of the stories to explore the rich history and diverse interpretations of classical mythology. It is a wide-ranging account, examining how classical myths are used and understood in both high art and popular culture, taking the reader from the temples of Crete to skyscrapers in New York, and finding classical myths in a variety of unexpected places: from Arabic poetry and Hollywood films, to psychoanalysis, the Bible, and New Age spiritualism.

Classical Mythology: A Very Short Introduction Details

Date : Published November 1st 2007 by Oxford University Press, USA (first published August 23rd 2007)

ISBN : 9780192804761

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Format : Paperback 144 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Fantasy, Mythology, History, Classics, Religion

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Colin Cox says

When I have taught mythology in the past (specifically Greek mythology), too often students asked the wrong questions. Regrettably, they were preoccupied with notions of accuracy and validity. That is to say, they adhered too closely to notions of rightness and wrongness, and they could not move beyond thinking of mythology as not historical. All of this is to say, they could not fully conceptualize mythology as mythology. To be fair, this may not reflect a lack of imagination on their part. It seems history has supplanted mythology as the predominant mode of understanding the past, and deriding an adaptation for not "being like the original" has become a fashionable way of engaging with adaptations. This is precisely why Helen Morales' *Classical Mythology: A Very Short Introduction* is so interesting. She pivots from two essential characteristics of mythology--the fact that myth is a "slippery term" and that myths help us understand "our selves, our liberties, and our lies"--and builds a compelling case that explores why myths matter (2; 4). The idea that ties this book together is simple but profound: what myths do is more interesting than what myths are. Morales writes, "This book will discuss various definitions of myth...but it is interested in myth as a *process* as much as a *thing*...the best way to answer the question of what classical mythology *is* is to look at what classical mythology *does*" (2).

Chapters 5 and 6 will be attractive to any reader interested in learning how myths shape two aspects of contemporary thought: psychology and sexuality. In Chapter 5, Morales challenges psychoanalysis while also affirming it. She suggests that psychoanalysis would be a fundamentally different discipline if Freud had selected another myth from classic mythology, but her larger point hangs on the notion that Freud's choice established a set of ideological expectations and prejudices that psychoanalysis had to grapple with, and to some degree, continues to grapple with today. However, Morales confirms psychoanalysis by suggesting that it facilitates in "Connecting people to classical myths, and the ideas within them that can give life meaning, [which] is one way of anchoring them to their common lost culture" (80-81).

Chapter 6 explores the ubiquity of rape and sexual assault in mythology and argues that mythology's malleability renders those moments less problematic when they are subjected to cultural reappropriations, such as the queering of certain myths.

Too often entries in the *A Very Short Introduction* series are dry and clinical. Morales is a welcomed change. She writes with enthusiasm, conviction, and erudition, but at no point is she impenetrable.

Matt says

This is a charming, insightful little book. It's full of color pictures to illustrate its discussion of movies and art, and it covers a broad range of approaches to mythology. (I read the little hardcover Sterling Publishing edition, not the Oxford VSI. The latter imprint is probably different, since the paper is thinner and rarely has pictures.) Morales is a major thinker in this field and offers both an overview of the main strands of myth interpretation as well as her own pithy additions. Since I've met her in real life a few times, I also got to read this in her strident alto, an added bonus. This might be worth sharing excerpts with an introductory myth class simply because it covers the bases so well, although photocopying it will make a lot of the pictures harder to discern.

Manon says

I really enjoyed this short introduction to the study of classical mythology. Right away you realize it's gonna be just a retelling of the myths in a list form but a much more interesting and fascinating study of the ways myths have always been studied, used and retold. The author makes very compelling analyses of the ways myths have been retold and reused again and again for different purposes and what impact they've had. I highly recommend for anyone interested in classical mythology or even in literary expression and studies. Maybe even in communication and politics I'd say. It covers such a wide range of cultural knowledge in such a short and entertaining way.

Darwin8u says

"Classical mythology only happens when the stories become active agents; when people use them."
- Helen Morales, VSI Classical Mythology

An interesting take on Classical Mythology. Just like Mary Beard begins and ultimately frames her examination of *the Classics* for VSI by exploring the British Museum's Bassae room and the Temple of Bassae in Greece, Helen Morales uses Europa on the Bull (on the Euro and on a 3rd Century Roman coin) to BEGIN to examine how myth is used and transformed by cultures, governments, etc., as emblems and powerful statements. While she travels beyond the myth of Zeus (as Bull) and Europa (and beyond governments), she will often return again and again to this myth to explain and illuminate other aspects of classical myths.

In the book Morales looks at the context of Classical myths, Gods and heroes, the metaphorphoses of mythology (muthos to logos), she looks at Freud's role in our modern view of Classical Myths (how myth impacted analysis and analysis impacted Classical myths), the sexual politics of myth, and myths and the New Age.

I liked it. I'm always interested how scholars will attempt to tackle the distillation process of VSI. Some cram, some thin, some find creative ways to obliquely tackle and introduce their subjects to amateurs. It is a venture that is (for many subjects) a challenge worthy of a mental Hercules (Heracles).

Ahmad Sharabiani says

Classical Mythology: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions #167), Helen Morales

From Zeus and Europa, to Diana, Pan, and Prometheus, the myths of ancient Greece and Rome seem to exert a timeless power over us. But what do those myths represent, and why are they so enduringly fascinating? Why do they seem to be such a potent way of talking about our selves, our origins, and our desires?

Tõnu Vahtra says

Not quite the book that I expected from the title (author already needed to explain in intro that what this book is not about, maybe the title should have been changed to avoid confusion). There was no overview of classical mythology, primary focus was on defining what is considered classical mythology, how the term has evolved over time and how it has impacted culture today. Probably I should read much more actual classical mythology before I could truly appreciate this book. Interesting part for me was describing what role classical mythology had in the life and work of Sigmund Freud and how his theories relate to mythology.

“If ‘myth’ is a slippery term, so is ‘classical’. It is common shorthand for ‘ancient Greek and Roman’. But this shorthand has a history, and a bias.”

“This book aims to capture, and explore, the outrageousness, inventiveness, and sheer fun that characterize classical mythology. But it is also born of the conviction that myth matters. It mattered for the ancient Greeks and Romans, and it matters for us in understanding who we are: our selves, our liberties, and our lies.”

“Psychoanalysis and Greek mythology are two sides of the same medallion. To put it differently: without classical mythology, there would be no psychoanalysis. If that seems like too bold a statement, this chapter aims to show that it is not. It will look at the dynamic relationship forged between psychoanalysis and classical myth, and the impacts, positive and negative, that each has made upon the other. There are numerous psychoanalytic theorists, but Freud necessarily takes centre stage. Like many in 19th-century Germany, Freud was passionate about ancient Greece and its myths. He was both an analyst of the psyche, or mind (using Greek myth) and of Greek myth (using the psyche). As a result, he initiated a radical new method of enquiry, psychoanalysis, and wrote a momentous chapter in the history of classical mythology.”

“What makes someone mythic is not whether or not he lived, or lived well, but whether or not he was larger than life. Mythic heroes were – and are – outrageous and outstanding. They are phenomenal. They distil some collective ideal or fantasy. That’s why we can speak of ‘the myth of John Lennon’, but not ‘the myth of John Major’. And it’s also why Theseus made it and Lycurgus didn’t.”

Sarah says

This book should be re-titled 'to 'Interpretation of classical mythology: a very short introduction'. This VSI is about how mythology of Ancient Greece and Rome has been interpreted over the last 2,000+ years (which I did not find interesting at all). If you're after an introduction to the stories and characters of ancient mythology, this is not the book you want.

Sarah u says

This book wasn't exactly what I was expecting, but as it turns out, was the better for it.

Rather than paraphrasing the myths themselves, in this book Morales instead introduces the reader to Greek and Roman mythology by discussing how myths have been used throughout history. Covering many subjects, including art, literature, psychoanalysis and Freud, allegory, the European Union, and even advertising, the reader is introduced to mythology as a living, breathing subject in its own right, rather than a series of ancient tales that are set in stone.

I'm not a newcomer to classical mythology, and I found this book an incredibly interesting and rewarding read. Highly recommended.

LiChin says

Expected an enthralling read, considering my love for mythology, but even that could not prevent this book from boring me. I like forming my own opinions about things, not having the author's dictated to me (I found it inexpressibly annoying.)

Not so much 'Classical Mythology' after all.

Benedict says

This book, while starting on a wholly interesting foot, managed to transcend into the boring literary pit that is feminist rewriting of history. It raises many interesting points about myth in modern culture, but feels as if it glosses over the most important part of the subject: CLASSICAL mythology and its role in the CLASSICAL world.

I do recommend this book for any one who is merely looking for a very short introduction to modern “goddess cults”, but not for anyone interested in classical mythology itself.

Daniel Wright says

This book is not quite the book it looks like it might be, that is, a description of the stories of classical mythology. Since such a book would be exceptionally dull and pointless - why not read the myths themselves? - this is not a bad thing. Neither is it an account of the themes and motifs of classical literature - such a book would come under the title 'classical literature', not 'classical mythology'. It is instead, something of a history of the reception of the stories that get grouped together under that title, and to that extent is quite interesting, if not altogether illuminating.

Ioana Hodor says

A very useful insight on classic mythology that tries and succeeds to put into question not only the survival of classic mythology throughout the ages, but also its relation with psychology as well as other disciplines, its interpretation by different cultures and the impact of the New Age current referring to this.

It's a really good book for someone keen on knowing what's behind all the mythological stories because it gives you the key to a different, much wider perspective.

Katherine says

A brief and interesting look at how Classical Myth has affected society across the ages. It didn't just retell the stories (which personally I'm glad for) so it's not worth a read if that is what you're after. Instead it discusses myth's dominance and importance to Western society, and it made an interesting and thought-provoking read.

Bronwyn says

Full review at <https://bronzelock619.blogspot.com/2018/09/classical-mythology-very-short.html>.

In this introduction to classical mythology, readers were shown that classical mythology is much more than an archive of fantastical tales from the ancient world. Throughout history, it has been used as an ideological tool. Mythic narratives exploited for political purposes, such as the way Greek and Roman cities, as well as their emperors, had claimed mythical ancestors. Different versions of the same myth were also created to tell different messages and suit different political agendas.

It also showed how analyzing mythology should go hand-in-hand with the culture and religion at the time, as the cultural and religious practices at any one place and time give meaning to mythology. The use of mythology in a society also had its downsides too, as shown in the way it promotes the rape of women and also queering sexuality during the Greek and Roman times.

While an intriguing and informative read, it was not what I had expected. It was an introduction to the INTERPRETATION of classical mythology, and not classical mythology itself. The tone was a bit dry, but you will gain a lot of insights on the use of mythology by the people in the past with a little patience.

Elysia says

I'd recommend this book if you want to learn more about how classical mythology has evolved in meaning and application throughout history, and how it has been interpreted by academics and pop culture alike. I liked the section on classical mythology and new age religion.

This was interesting enough to dip in and out of while travelling to Uni on the train, and it gets points for being small enough to fit in my coat pocket, but I'm not completely enamoured with the writing style and some of the topics discussed.
