Myth and Philosophy in Plato’s *Phaedrus*

Plato’s dialogues frequently criticize traditional Greek myth, yet Plato also integrates myth with his writing. Daniel S. Werner confronts this paradox through an in-depth analysis of the *Phaedrus*, Plato’s most mythical dialogue. Werner argues that the myths of the *Phaedrus* serve several complex functions: they bring nonphilosophers into the philosophical life; they offer a starting point for philosophical inquiry; they unify the dialogue as a literary and dramatic whole; they draw attention to the limits of language and the limits of knowledge; and they allow Plato to co-opt cultural authority as a way of defining and legitimating the practice of philosophy. Platonic myth, as a species of traditional tale, is thus both distinct from philosophical dialectic and similar to it. Ultimately, the most powerful effect of Platonic myth is the way in which it leads readers to participate in Plato’s dialogues and to engage in a process of self-examination.

Daniel S. Werner is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the State University of New York at New Paltz. His articles have appeared in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, *Greece and Rome, Ancient Philosophy*, and *International Philosophical Quarterly*. 
Myth and Philosophy in Plato’s *Phaedrus*

DANIEL S. WERNER

*State University of New York at New Paltz*
Contents

1 Introduction

1.1 The Question of Myth 1
1.2 The Historical and Cultural Context of Platonic Myth 3
1.3 The Varieties of Myth in the Dialogues 7
1.4 The Philosophical Questions Surrounding Myth 9
1.5 Structure and Scope of This Book 13
1.6 Methodological Considerations 15

2 Boreas, Typhon, and the Allegorization of Myth 19

2.1 The Opening Scene 19
2.2 The Myth of Boreas and Oreithuia 23
2.3 Allegorical Interpretation 27
2.4 The Critique of Allegorical Interpretation 39
2.5 The Importance of Self-Knowledge 35
2.6 “Saying Goodbye” to Myth 38
2.7 The Philosophical Use of Myth 41

3 The Palinode: Soul and Eros 44

3.1 Context 45
3.2 Proof 47
3.3 The Limits of Psychological Discourse 54
3.4 The Nature of the Soul 59
3.5 Intrapersonal Communication 65
3.6 Myth and Thumos 68
3.7 Myth as a Model 73
3.8 Eros and Muthos 75
3.9 Eschatology 77

4 The Palinode: Forms and Knowledge 88

4.1 The Divine Banquet 88
4.2 Forms as the Objects of Knowledge 90
4.3 The Nature and Attainability of Knowledge 91
vi

Contents

4.4 Myth and the Limits of Knowledge 95
4.5 Myth and the Limits of Language 98
4.6 The Yogic View of Platonic Myth 100
4.7 Myth and Recollection 102

5 The Palinode: Tradition and Philosophy 108
5.1 The Platonic Appropriation of Tradition 108
5.2 The Construction of Philosophy 118
5.3 Turning toward Philosophy 122
5.4 Myth for Whom? 127

6 The Cicadas 133
6.1 Context 134
6.2 The Danger of the Cicada Song 138
6.3 The History of the Cicadas 144
6.4 The Role of the Cicada Myth 147

7 Rhetoric and Dialectic 153
7.1 The Nature of Rhetoric 154
7.2 The True Art of Rhetoric 162
7.3 Dialectic 171

8 Theuth, Thamus, and the Critique of Writing 181
8.1 Orality and the Rise of Writing in Plato’s Athens 182
8.2 Theuth and Thamus 185
8.3 The Critique of Writing 193
8.4 The Gardens of Adonis and Legitimate Discourse 198
8.5 Writing and Platonic Myth 203
8.6 Writing and Platonic Dialogue 209
8.7 The Limits of Discourse and Discursive Thought 215
8.8 Play and Seriousness 218
8.9 A Concluding Prayer 227

9 The Phaedrus as a Whole 236
9.1 The Phaedrus and the Problem of Unity 236
9.2 Myth and Thematic Unity 239
9.3 Myth and Structural Unity 243
9.4 The Strategic Approach to Unity 254

10 Conclusion 259
10.1 The Functions of Platonic Myth 259
10.2 The Nature and Value of Myth 263
10.3 The Nature of Platonic Writing 267
10.4 In Search of the Swan 268

Bibliography 273
Index of Passages from Plato 295
General Index 299