



BOOK REVIEW:

*The Metamorphoses of Myth in Fiction  
since 1960*

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Hume, Kathryn. *The Metamorphoses of Myth in Fiction since 1960*.  
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The very first sentence of Kathryn Hume’s *The Metamorphoses of Myth in Fiction since 1960* – “Why should contemporary Anglophone writers use myths from ancient Greece and Rome, from Pharaonic Egypt, from the Viking north, from Africa’s west coast, and from Hebrew and Christian traditions?” (viii) – announces the focus of this book, and Hume delivers a challenging, almost 200-page study in which she examines this question in depth, drawing on a broad range of short stories, several plays, and a very wide variety of novels from over half a century of Anglophone fiction. But she does more than just announce her focus in the preface and describe her various chapters, she also sets the tone of the book and lets the readers know that she expects to engage them in a conversation of sorts by posing additional questions. Further down the same page, she asks, “What does myth permit writers of the contemporary era to do that they cannot achieve by other means?” (viii). Hume’s assumptions that “gods and immortals, certain kinds of heroes, mythological landscapes, and mythological situations seem to lend themselves in our culture to modeling certain kinds of problems” (x) orients the reader to consider, somewhat, authors as products of their cultural times. By the end of the preface, the reader knows that this book will not be just an account of authors who use myths in their fiction, though Hume does that as a matter of course along the way, but will examine and analyse writers in western culture – Anglophone culture for the most part – as they “use” mythic materials in their fiction. All of this and more Hume presents in these first five pages! Fasten your seatbelts.

In “Prolegomenon: Myth as a Tool in the Artist’s Toolbox”, Hume acknowledges the many ways “myth” has been defined, but she does not enter very far into that discussion; rather, she presents her overarching statement: “This study approaches *myth as an artistic tool*” (2, italics original). In this introduction, a chapter in and of itself, Hume does several things. She illustrates and defines “myth” using specific stories from the “Greco-Roman myths as examples”, and she then broadens the category to include Odysseus and the “Roman kings” whose stories “qualify as mythic during the European Middle Ages and later” (3). The term “Mythology” she defines as related stories that come together, and “Mythic Worlds” as a cosmology containing, usually, the realms of gods, men, and the dead (5). She includes Christianity here as an inherited myth because, while some people believe its stories true, others do not and feel free to use them in their fiction (5–6). This prolegomenon also includes “Invented Myth” and “Situational Myth”, categories that lack “religious roots and known gods” but have patterns similar to those in traditional myths, and both “Myth versus Fantasy” and “Mapping the Mythic” are categories that suggest various visual ways – concentric circles or points on a compass – to represent the relationship of the sub-genres Hume has previously identified. But anyone expecting a discussion of fantasy itself as a specific mythic genre will be disappointed as Hume shies away from generic approaches to centre on myth as an “artistic tool” in many if not all genres.

Six major chapters follow “Prolegomenon”, each of which has not only a specific title but a subheading listing the major authors on whom Hume will focus. In Chapter 1, “Multiple Selves in Egyptian Mythology”, she covers Norman Mailer, William S. Burroughs, Ishmael Reed, and Roger Zelazny, all authors who use myth to explore the possibilities of existence after death. For example, Mailer in *Ancient Evenings* (1983) and Burroughs in *The Western Lands* (1987) are drawn to the Egyptian concept of multiple souls or selves as ways of living on after death. In Chapter 2, “Mythological Worlds and Death”, Kathy Acker, William Gibson, Neil Gaiman, A. S. Byatt, William Kennedy, Thomas Pynchon, and James Morrow build their mythscapes, to some extent, on existing mythologies or comparable alternatives. For example, in *Neuromancer* (1984), Gibson presents cyberspace as a way of leaving this life while remaining aware and mobile, not unlike Mailer and Burroughs; and Byatt, in *Ragnarok: The End of the Gods* (2011), presents the Norse concept of Valholl (Valhalla) as the place where some people go after death – at least until Ragnarök. However, Morrow’s god is dead in the *Towing Jehovah* trilogy (1994–1999), and Hume asserts that its ending “pushes us to focus on life” (55). These first two chapters present various possibilities – perhaps to comfort of author and/or audience – for an individual’s continued existence after death.

In Chapter 3, “Orpheus and Eurydice: Variations on a Theme”, the main authors listed are Samuel R. Delany, Janette Turner Hospital, J. J. Phillips, Russell Hoban, Neil Gaiman, Richard Powers, “and others” [sic]. As the chapter title suggests, here Hume picks a single mythic story, that of Orpheus’s attempt to bring his wife back to the land of the living from the land of the dead, and illustrates the ways in which various authors have handled that story. In *The Einstein Intersection* (1967), Delany creates a future Earth populated by beings informed by the myths and legends of the past at the centre of which Lobey mourns his dead love, Friza, and searches for Kid Death to win her back. In *Orpheus Lost* (2007), Hospital reverses the story by having the Orpheus-figure

taken to an underworld and the Eurydice-figure be the one to try to free him, all set in a contemporary world. Hume finds the story a useful tool that can even appeal to zombie fans as well as those “angry at American intelligence operations abroad or at home” (76). In this chapter, death may be countered (reversed? rejected?) by an individual who has the talent or the power to attempt to bring back (a loved) someone from the place beyond death.

In Chapter 4, “Invented Myth: The Problem of Power”, Kathy Acker, Donald Barthelme, Russell Hoban, Alan Moore, Italo Calvino, and Neil Gaiman (again) invent their own myths as they examine the nature of power. Traditional myths and religions are all about power, usually the power of men over women that Acker so pointedly explores in *Blood and Guts in High School* (1978/1984) and many other pieces. Barthelme’s *Dead Father*, in the novel of the same name (1975), may be on his way to the grave, but he kills a number of his creations and performs other violent acts on the way. Hoban’s creation myth, in the far future of *Riddley Walker* (1980), resonates with Christian imagery and references the US and the atomic power that sent everyone who survived back to something like the Stone Age. Although the power that is important in Gaiman’s *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* (2013) is female, the eternal female, perhaps, there is also the need to own one’s actions no matter who one is. These authors, by and large, present a main character with a specific power over or attitude toward death and dying that frees him or her from conventional attitudes and actions.

In Chapter 5, “Situational Myth: Posthuman Metamorphoses”, Vonda McIntyre, Anne McCaffrey, Dan Simmons, Cory Doctorow, Marge Piercy, Charles Stross, Rudy Rucker, and Lavie Tidhar invent a kind of mythology in which advanced technologies in the future allow humans to be transformed into something else. The title of this chapter is very clear: to survive dying or thwart death will require a person to transform from something recognizably human into something “beyond human” or “other than human”. The fact that many of these disparate novels examine similar futures, futures of technological posthuman metamorphoses, allows Hume to see them as a “network of related stories” just as myths can be (111). In Vonda McIntyre’s *Superluminal* (1983), some humans use viruses to enable them to live like dolphins in the oceans while others have mechanical hearts implanted to enable them to survive space travel. There is a three-way clash in Dan Simmons’s *Hyperion* series (1989–1997) among humans, human-derived beings, and AIs. Charles Stross starts out *Accelerando* (2005) with the idea that minds are “uploadable and downloadable” (122), and things get more complicated from there.

In Chapter 6, “The Contemporary Functions of Myth as an Artistic Tool”, Thomas Pynchon, Arthurian stories, Michel Faber, Philip Pullman, James Morrow, Rikki Ducornet, Ben Marcus, Margaret Atwood, Kurt Vonnegut, Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison, Leslie Marmon Silko, Klas Östergren, Jeanette Winterson, David Grossman, and Rudy Rucker illustrate various ways in which authors can use mythology to comment on and criticise contemporary Western civilisation or Anglophone culture. Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *The Mists of Avalon* (1982) tells an Arthurian story from the viewpoint of women and uses Celtic references to create a matrifocal story that stands alone and comments upon the patrifocal stories that preceded it. Michel Faber, Philip Pullman, and James Morrow use biblical stories and the story of Christ to, perhaps, criticise current religions’ claims to be Christian. The possibility that technology could

replace religion is explored by Thomas Pynchon and Rudy Rucker, respectively, in *Bleeding Edge* (2013) and *Postsingular* (2007). This criticism of contemporary civilisation is not absent from the novels dealt with in previous chapters, but it seems to be the main focus of the authors and novels treated in this chapter.

In the conclusion, Hume summarises the four important points she made in the previous chapters and continues with three overall comments:

- (A) “myth can be said to amplify certain literary effects”; for example, when the “myth is a known tale with known names, it focuses [the reader’s] attention” and can rouse the reader’s “expectations”;
- (B) myth can sometimes use “science (or postsingularity projections of science) to produce alternate realities”; and
- (C) myth can give a “bit of extra weight to the story” for the reader “who values tradition and values knowing about the past” (162).

And she finishes with a most interesting point:

- (D) “Myth as an artistic tool is not under the obligation to demand belief that religion is. Instead, it gives those who are willing to respond *a feeling of meaning*, a sensation that delicately gives us release, gratification, and inner satisfaction” (163, italics added).

I added the italics to the previous sentence because I believe that this “feeling of meaning” is one of the primary functions of mythology in literature and, perhaps because it treads closely to mysticism, the most difficult features of myth to defend. I would argue that this “feeling of meaning” comes, in part, from the reader’s awareness, conscious or unconscious, of the content and form of the traditional myth, legend, folk tale, or even fairy tale, and that when the modern novel, story, or play uses one of these sources conscientiously, readers feel a sense of “rightness” about the new work as a whole or are forced to re-examine the ideas or attitudes with which they began that work.

In the “Prolegomenon”, Hume hoped to provide an “explanation of how myth can satisfy certain desires (at least for some readers) without assuming that readers have a doctorate in philosophy” (3) – and, I might add, a doctorate in post-1960s Anglophone literatures. On one hand, some of the 46 named authors appear more than once, but it is for a different novel each time. On the other hand, Hume mentions, more-or-less in passing, quite a few more authors than those named in the chapter titles above, authors from Jane Austen to C. S. Lewis to J.R.R. Tolkien. But, astonishingly, she has managed to summarise the cogent aspects of the fiction so well that the reader unfamiliar with the works will understand the points being made.

Given this number and range of authors and novels, the summaries and examples I have included above by no means do justice to Hume’s analyses, and I can only hope I have done no serious injustices. That a study of this scope and depth existing in 177 pages, including end notes, could succeed at all is amazing; that Kathryn Hume’s *The Metamorphoses of Myth in Fiction since 1960* succeeds so incredibly well makes it a book that every scholar of post-1960s literature should read and every academic library should have on its shelf.

*Biography:* Dr. C. W. Sullivan III is Emeritus Distinguished Professor of English, East Carolina University, and a Full Member of the Welsh Academy for his contributions to the study of medieval Welsh Celtic myth and legend. He is the author of *Welsh Celtic Myth in Modern Fantasy* (1989) and author or editor of several other volumes. Sullivan is a past president of the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts, and in 2008, he was a Fulbright scholar at Debrecen University, Hungary. Sullivan currently lives in Roanoke, VA, teaches occasionally in the Graduate Program at Hollins University, and lectures on board Viking Ocean Cruise ships.