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***The Modern Myths: Adventures in the Machinery of the Popular Imagination* by Phillip Ball**

Janet Brennan Croft
University of Northern Iowa

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The Modern Myths: Adventures in the Machinery of the Popular Imagination by
Phillip Ball

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THE MODERN MYTHS: ADVENTURES IN THE MACHINERY OF THE POPULAR IMAGINATION. Phillip Ball. University of Chicago Press, 2021. 978-0-226-71926-9. \$30.00 hardcover or Kindle.

HOW DO STORIES BECOME MYTHS? Particularly modern stories, initially fixed and published in a specific text by an individual author—how do they come to be our common property, timeless, recognizable in all of their mutations, just like the classic myths of our ancestors? And what was it about the Victorian era in particular which proved such fertile ground for this process? Of course we need myths, and we need myths that can help us face the modern world; this is the rich vein which Neil Gaiman worked in *American Gods*, for example. But why these myths in particular?

In *The Modern Myths* (winner of the 2022 Mythopoeic Scholarship Award in Myth and Fantasy Studies), Phillip Ball examines this question through the examples of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), *Frankenstein* (1818), *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), *Dracula* (1897), *The War of the Worlds* (1897), the Sherlock Holmes stories (1887-1927), and the multi-platform Batman mythos (1939-). Though technically, all of these sources should be considered multi-platform, as one characteristic they share was nearly instant translation into whatever other media were current at the time of their writing, and continuing transformation in new media over the decades since. And as Ball points out, it is these translations and transformations that have much to do with turning them into myths: "They are stories that lend themselves to many reworkings, some barely recognizable as versions of the original form" (15).

Ball also characterizes them as "not consciously invented, merely crystallized—often unwittingly and messily, though sometimes with a degree of genius—by their first teller" (15). He expands on this in his chapter on *The*

War of the Worlds, searching out the source of whatever societal “psychic upheaval” (225) might have spawned this work during a time of relative stability:

Myths are not made in times of conflict and revolution. They come from the stress and unease that precedes or follows a seismic shock, not from the shock itself. Neither are they responses to new discoveries; rather, they are an accompaniment, possibly even a contributory factor, to discovery. [...] [T]he ennui of the *fin de siècle* was created not by a sense of dislocation but by a perception that it was imminent. [Wells] responded to that anticipation by writing the first compelling vision of the quotidian shattered by apocalypse. (226)

Ball also finds it essential that the writing be “rather prosaic” (15)—stories that are too well written, characters too precisely drawn, morals too clearly delineated, are resistant to mythologizing. There has to be some room for interpretation and re-shaping. Batman, that “alienated citizen” in contrast to Superman’s “assimilated alien” (324), mutates from avenger to camp hero to vigilante and back because “we all know the story but can’t agree on what it’s about” (313). *Pride and Prejudice*, in Ball’s opinion, cannot truly become one of these polysemic modern myths because it is too dependent on unalterable “messages and characters”; it is “too fixed, too lacking in ambiguity” (16). (One might argue the same of *The Lord of the Rings*; like *Pride and Prejudice*, though there is plenty of room for fanfic, the main characters are recognizable individuals, not just archetypes.) “‘Artistic quality’ is no measure of the mythic significance of a retelling” (216) and in fact a certain clumsiness in both the original and its revampings (pun intended) gives both the reader and the reteller room to work with the myth.

Ball pulls no punches about the “artistic quality” of these sources: Robinson Crusoe lacks any emotional depth, *Dracula* is “even by the standards of most mythopoeic source texts, a mess” (166), Sherlock Holmes is “a credulous person’s vision of what a hard-nosed rational thinker is like” (296). This isn’t deathless literature *per se*, though it may deal with deathlessness. “If you come to these works in search of the humanity of a Hardy, Lawrence, or Woolf,” Ball opines, “you’ll be disappointed. If you think, however, that literature has nothing else to offer than that, you’re missing out on the powerful cultural force of myth” (247).

It’s at this meeting point of popular culture and mythmaking that we find the power of these modern myths and their endless adaptability and applicability to our lives. “The mythic mode is challenging and unsettling because that is the nature of the questions with which it grapples” (372); it “[provides] us with *tools for living*” and “offers stories that are *good for thinking*”

with." "These tales," as Ball continues, "help us deal with the irresolvable dilemmas of being human" (379, italics in original). For those of us who care about mythopoeic fiction, this is a ringing endorsement of the significance of what we study.

—Janet Brennan Croft



TOLKIEN AS A LITERARY ARTIST: EXPLORING RHETORIC, LANGUAGE AND STYLE IN THE LORD OF THE RINGS. Thomas Kullmann and Dirk Siepmann. Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. 319 p. 9783030692988. \$149.99.

DRS. KULLMANN AND SIEPMANN APPROACH THE TOPIC of literary artistry in the works of Tolkien from the point of view of both linguistics and the history of literature, in which the author of *The Lord of the Rings* was so deeply educated. Given that Tolkien was foremost a philologist, analyzing his vocabulary and syntax makes sense. This approach forms a "corpus stylistic" treatment combined with discourse theory and intertextuality. The co-authors relate Tolkien's writing techniques to a wide-ranging corpus of English fiction as well as poetics; style and rhetoric, while traditional approaches, receive fresh treatment in this work as the authors bring out the role of languages in the world building that takes place through speeches, storytelling, descriptions of mythic landscapes, and the many poems and songs inserted into the narrative. Each type receives its own chapter. With a combination of a corpus-based linguistic analysis and a more traditional literary dissection of the text, they bring a nuanced and detailed study to the body of scholarly criticism surrounding Tolkien's work.

As the initiating premise, the authors portray Tolkien as caught between the Charybdis and Scylla of disdainful literary critics who ignore him and overly enthusiastic fans who idolize him. This dichotomy has kept him out of the mainstream of literary tradition and sidelined his writing, especially *The Lord of the Rings*, from receiving its due consideration. To rectify this situation the authors propose to examine the "rhetoric, story-telling, description and the malleability of English prose" (3) employed by Tolkien. Kullmann and Siepmann desire to place Tolkien, not on a pedestal, but rather on a shelf alongside other literary greats, and simply accord him the same critical consideration of linguistic and literary study.

They propose to undertake a standard, two-fold approach of qualitative and quantitative measures. This affords a heuristic that permits comparison with other similar works from normative literary canons: apples to