

Jennifer Lobo Meeks, *Allegory in Early Greek Philosophy, Studies in Historical Philosophy*, no. 3, Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2020, 150 pp., ISBN: 978-3-8382-1425-2

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In *Allegory in Early Greek Philosophy* Jennifer Lobo Meeks traces the history and role of allegory from the Presocratics to Plato. Throughout her explorations, she considers the role that allegory played in early Greek thought while simultaneously aiming to explore how such a figure of speech – saying one thing but meaning another – could be seen as integral to philosophy *in toto*. Furthermore, Meeks illuminates allegory’s interpretive and compositional technique and traditions, arguing that it “allows philosophy to render myth self-conscious,”⁵⁷ thus fulfilling philosophy’s speculative task of depicting reality via both reason and imagination.

The first chapter is titled “Speaking Wisdom Otherwise” and provides the reader with an insightful and comprehensive overview of the historical and conceptual dimensions of allegory, myth and philosophy’s speculative task, as well as the shift from *muthos* to *logos*. In its structure, it could even be said to have a genealogical character as the chapter lays out the historical-conceptual dimension, before the subsequent chapters deal with the “giants of allegory,” for instance Homer and Plato, in more detail. Meeks initially defines allegory in classical thought, as signifying “what lies behind and beyond the language it employs.”⁵⁸ As allegory is at this point synonymous with *symbolon*, the concept of the symbol, its immediate and remote truth must be decoded for its “under-meaning” (*hyponoia*), so that its inherent enigma can be solved. This characteristic gives allegory a uniquely philoso-

⁵⁷ Jennifer Lobo Meeks, *Allegory in Early Greek Philosophy* (Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2020), 9.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 22.

phical dimension as a method of interpretation and means of composition.⁵⁹

In addition, Meeks draws from mythopoeic thought the insight that the wisdom of the myth lies “in its ability to recognize the unity that underlies the many guises in which phenomena present themselves.”⁶⁰ Here, empirical-scientific world views clash with mythical ones due to differences in modality (mode or manner) and quality (properties applying to things taken singly, rather than relatively) and this constitutes the distinction between these perspectives. Furthermore, speculative philosophy is described as identifying the True with the whole and attempting to both grasp it in thought and to narrate it in language. Generally, Meeks’ explorations of the conceptual dimensions of allegory, myth, and speculative philosophy lead her to the insight that both the allegorical traditions of interpretation and composition have a teleological nature. This is in contrast to the modern perspective which attempts to reconcile experience and understanding, through both reason and imagination. Primitive man’s pure experience of living has been replaced with an indirect, rationalized perspective, leading modern man to elucidate the collective representation of the mythical tradition.

To close this chapter, Meeks discusses the shift from *muthos* to *logos* with the aim of characterizing the process through which allegory emerged out of the mythic tradition, and how the first philosophers utilized it as a tool for rational speculation. This process began with the Presocratics, but evolved through Plato, the Hellenistic philosophers, and the Neoplatonists. *Muthos* means “word” or “speech” and also denotes the unspoken or thoughts. By the fifth century BC, *logos* had various meanings, ranging from “account” or “narrative” to “speech.” Interestingly, Meeks here argues that the distinction between the two notions derives from our need to differentiate between the roles of myth and reason,⁶¹ rather than from any semantic antagonism, as the words are only really opposed in their secondary senses. This leads her to state that “the earliest thinkers utilized both allegorical interpretation and composition to bridge any real or apparent gap between *muthos* and *logos*.”⁶² There-

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 29.

⁶¹ Ibid, 34.

⁶² Ibid, 38.

fore, allegory's attempt to render myth self-conscious is elevated to being an essential component "of philosophy, its history, and its speculative project."⁶³

The next chapter takes a more detailed look at the Presocratics' role in the beginnings of allegory. The main contention here is that the Presocratics' separation from the poetic world view of the mythical age, although undoubtedly true, has nevertheless been overstated. Meeks argues that the Presocratics' break with this tradition lay in their recovery of "the origins and nature of the world primarily through the lens of reason."⁶⁴ She states that this significant break in the birth of philosophy, from myth as being the only source of wisdom towards more naturalistic explanations and deductive reasoning, is nevertheless significant. Likewise, Meeks finds agreement with Henri Frankfort, who she quotes, as this break signals "a shift of the problems of man in nature from the realm of faith and poetic institution to the intellectual sphere."⁶⁵ Meeks recaps these considerations in a section on philosophical anticipations in ancient poetry before, in a subsequent one, on the three senses of Presocratic "poetics," turning to the different characteristics of poetics in Glenn Most's framework. According to Most, poetics can be explicit or conscious.

Firstly, both Meek and Most, following Karl Popper, crucially maintain a dedication to critical discussion as regards Presocratic reflections on poetics, except in the case of the Sophists. Here, allegorical interpretation was key, e.g. in Xenophanes' and Heraclitus' rejection of the poets and their spurious methods. The second aspect of Presocratic poetics is its implicit character, which means the unconscious influence of the poetry of Homer and Hesiod. Here, Meeks and Most identify five "poetic goals" that play a significant role: truthfulness, essentiality, comprehensiveness, narrative temporality, and macroscopic form. Meeks highlights the last pillar in Most's framework – immanence – and states crucially that its special significance stems from the possibility of expressing a philosophical myth via the language of allegory.

Closing this key second chapter, Meeks describes specific instances of allegorical interpretation and composition among early Greek

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 46.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

thinkers (or “Presocratic allegorical practices”⁶⁶) in four conceptual stages. In the first stage, Ionian thinkers such as Anaximander subtly reflect on the poets’ works. Then, in the second stage, there is an explicit rejection on the grounds of their irrational basis, e.g. Xenophanes and Heraclitus. The third stage describes the explicit introduction of allegories by “fringe” thinkers, such as Pherecydes of Syros. Finally, Parmenides’ and Empedocles’ employment of allegorical language – an early version of the philosophical myth – rounds off the Presocratic role in the beginnings of allegory.

The final chapter, titled “Plato on Poetry, Myth, and Allegory,” examines Plato’s writings and initially turns to the operation of philosophical myth that can be found in his Dialogues. Meeks highlights that the presence of *muthos* seems confusing as it can only produce opinion (*doxa*), rather than reason (*logos*) which leads to knowledge (*episteme*), but, at the same time, allegory can “supply the imaginative dimension that philosophical discourse, taken by itself, seems to lack.”⁶⁷ She points out that allegory always acts in a teleological manner in the sense that it points to something that lies beyond it. The tension that arises requires that speculative philosophy “must capture in language the dynamic of both the imaginary and the rational.”⁶⁸ Moving on to the “ancient quarrel with the poets,” Meeks turns to Aristotle’s *Poetics* and Plato’s *Republic*, the former depicting the poet as an imitator (1451a), and the latter characterizing poetry as both problematic in content and imitative in nature. The “quarrel” emerges in Book X of Plato’s *Republic*, as his conception of *poiesis* precludes it from having the universal character attributed to it in Aristotle’s account.⁶⁹ Moreover, mimetic poetry is problematic from both a Platonic metaphysical and epistemic perspective. The “quarrel” is arguably resolved by Plato’s conception of memory, and its relationship to the imagination, as memory “rescues poetry from being considered as a strictly mimetic, and thus inferior, kind of *poiesis*.”⁷⁰ These insights lead Meeks to summarize that, for Plato, philosophy includes a kind of higher form of *poiesis*, thus supplementing reason’s superior role in speculative

⁶⁶ Ibid, 68.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 80.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 84.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 90.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 100.

philosophy with the aid of the imagination. Following Meeks' line of thought, allegorical interpretation is problematic in Plato's thought due to his undermining of the notion of the mythical, yet allegory certainly had a place in his philosophy. This very distinction – not conflation – between allegory and myth is key.

To conclude, Meeks's *Allegory in Early Greek Philosophy* shows the important role that allegory played in the emergence and structure of early Greek philosophy, from the Presocratics to Plato, as well as its relation to myth, fulfilling philosophy's speculative task by utilizing both reason and imagination.