



Myths of Love: Echoes of Ancient Mythology in the Modern Romantic Imagination

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Love, sex, and the minotaur meet in a fascinating collection of essays.

In what ways do the themes of classical mythology and folklore inform people, both in the modern world and antiquity, of the nature of love and sex? What began as a conversation between friends at the Metropolitan Museum of Art blossomed into *Myths of Love: Echoes of Ancient Mythology in the Modern Romantic Imagination*. The authors are heavily credentialed intellectuals: celebrated sex therapist Dr. Ruth Westheimer and her friend Jerome E. Singerman, a noted art expert who holds a doctorate in comparative literature from Harvard.

Each of the short essays has three principle features: a retelling of a myth, commentary on how it illustrates the classical views on love and sex, and how the modern view reflects or differs from the ancient Greek and Roman perspectives. The primary source is the great Roman poet Ovid, a fitting choice, given that he seldom shies away from deeply sexual themes, and the symbology of his *Metamorphosis* flows easily into a discussion on the fluidity of sexuality.

Myths of Love covers a lot of ground. There are discussions of numerous sexual taboos (incest, bestiality, etc.) and the intellectual and emotional aspects of love. For the majority of cases, the modern and ancient views are not terribly different. For example, the authors point out that in being completely devoted to the virgin goddess Artemis (a personification of asexuality), the Greek god Hippolytus cut himself off from both the erotic and romantic aspects of love (personified by Aphrodite). The authors note the double standard held in the classical times regarding homosexuality, lauded between men and vilified between women. In that sense, perhaps, the modern reader is a little more egalitarian.

The authors write with a calm authority and a conversational tone, occasionally humorous, often reflective, and thankfully distant from a purely academic voice. For the reader, a general familiarity with Ovid is helpful but not crucial. Some of the stories are famous while others are not, but all are clearly presented. Also, while the subject of the book is sex, there's nothing pornographic or cheap about it. The authors respect all aspects of their subject.

There's neither a glossary nor footnotes, either of which would help. Fortunately, the authors cover the topics well enough that the absence of annotation is not too keenly felt.

Myths of Love provides lively, informative essays, each excellent food for thought. To a casual reader on human sexuality, folklore or history, or to a serious student of any or all, it should be a fascinating study.

JASON HENNINGER (Fall 2014)

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