

CHAPTER 21 THE PERSISTENCE OF MYTH

MAIN POINTS

1. Classical mythology has continued to provide a cultural resource, long after its connection to belief systems has ceased.
2. During the Dark Ages, much knowledge and interest in classical learning was lost, and the hero of classical mythology was considered inappropriate for a Christian focus on humility and otherworldliness.
3. In the late Middle Ages, classical mythology was rediscovered through the works of Virgil and Ovid and was made acceptable through a Christian reinterpretation.
4. Such reinterpretations include Virgil's prediction of the Coming of Christ and Dante's transformation of Virgil's description of the Underworld with borrowed elements from Greek mythology.
5. The Courtly Love tradition sparked a revived interest in Ovid's Art of Love, and it inspired Dante and Petrarch.
6. The popular uses of classical mythology in the modern world include mythic materials in psychology, sociology, television, and advertising.
7. Mythic material is most frequently transmitted in four basic ways: (1) making ancient plays or poems accessible to modern readers through modern translations and performances; (2) updating ancient stories to make them relevant to contemporary audiences; (3) borrowing familiar mythic themes and images to create a double vision, ancient and modern; (4) using a mythic figure as an emblem or a symbol.
8. The study of Greek was revived in the Renaissance after having been unpopular during the Middle Ages; English translators include George Chapman and Alexander Pope.
9. Revisionist versions of the classics existed even in classical Greece, with Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Ovid continued the revisionist tradition.
10. When classical drama was revived in the Renaissance, playwrights began revising classical plays. European playwrights such as Shakespeare, Racine, Gide, Giraudoux, Sartre, and Anouilh have revised classical drama.
11. Anouilh wrote a version of Antigone (1944) intended as a criticism of the Vichy government during World War II.
12. Opera may have its origin in a desire to revive Greek drama in its supposed original form of a singing stage performance.
13. Opera composers incorporating Greek mythology in their works are Monteverdi, Purcell, Richard Strauss, and Stravinsky.
14. Writers of fiction using material from Greek mythology include Shakespeare, John Barth, James Joyce, and Derek Walcott.
15. Frequently, writers, artists, and composers have employed mythic images or mythic themes; some of these include Botticelli, Jean Cousin the Elder, Claude Lorrain, Lord Tennyson, Cavafy, Yeats, Dali, Auden, and Picasso.
16. The following novels include extended uses of mythic themes: Updike's *The Centaur*, Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and Malamud's *The Natural*.
17. In these cases, the mythic material provides a deeper understanding of the experiences of the human condition.

18. Some writers use specific mythic figures as a symbol of an idea, such as Freud's use of Oedipus, Camus's use of Sisyphus, ecologists' use of Gaea, and feminist psychologists' use of Athene, Artemis, and Aphrodite.
19. Psychologists have even used mythic figures for such purposes as exploring gendered patterns of communication or illuminating emotional disorders such as posttraumatic stress syndrome.
20. Myths can provide information about cultural changes, for example, through the study of revisions. The story of Orpheus and Eurydice has been interpreted as a grand but tragic passion, as a descent into the depths of the human psyche, and as a descent into existential despair. Artists revising the story include Monteverdi, Gluck, Haydn, Anouilh, Cocteau, Williams, Lumet, H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), and Abdoh.
21. Two seventeenth-century painters, Rubens and Poussin, each portrayed the rape of the Sabine women, one a violent and the other a more detached version. The differences mark the shift from baroque to neoclassical styles and corresponding worldviews.
22. Dali comments ironically on Ingres's painting *The Apotheosis of Homer* in his own painting of the same name.
23. Interpretations of Venus throughout the centuries reveal much about these eras, with the images ranging from a calm depiction of divine beauty, an idealization, and a sensuous portrayal to a modern parody.
24. A whole generation may latch on to a particular mythic figure as a cultural icon. Examples are Icarus in the Renaissance and Prometheus in the Romantic period.
25. The Renaissance included a revival of Greek classical mythology, and Christian humanists utilized classical mythic images without any sense of blasphemy.
26. For example, Sir Philip Sidney's sonnets deal with the conflict between Ovidian images and Christian belief, promoting a balance between the impulses of the heart and the journey of the soul to heaven.
27. During the Renaissance, biblical figures were portrayed as Greek gods while mythological stories were depicted in Renaissance costumes and settings.
28. For the Greeks, Icarus represented a lesson in the necessity of the Golden Mean of moderation; during the Renaissance, he became a symbol of the audacious spirit breaking through the limits of conventions and paying a high price.
29. Icarus becomes the mythic model for Doctor Faustus, the Renaissance man who, doomed to fail, must follow his ambition to exceed the preset limits.
30. The Baroque painter Breughel the Elder uses the figure of Icarus to signal a shift in cultural values from the human-centered world of the Renaissance to the asymmetrical Baroque perspective of a world in which the individual has no intrinsic significance.
31. In the Romantic period, Prometheus became the symbol of a generation of artists, composers, novelists, and poets, such as Byron and Shelley.
32. Shelley compares Prometheus with Satan but sees him as the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature in his rebellion against tyranny.
33. The Prometheus myth also affected the way people saw historical events. Napoleon was compared to Prometheus until he declared himself emperor; Beethoven removed the dedication to Napoleon from his Third Symphony for this reason.
34. The image of Satan-as-hero prompted a revival of interest in Milton and his *Paradise Lost*, and Shelley's wife, Mary Shelley, entitled her novel *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*.

35. During the Renaissance, such pursuit was identified with Faustus, symbolized by Icarus; in the Romantic period, the character of Faustus was revived by Goethe and others, but now symbolized by Prometheus.

NOTE: In the character of Doctor Faustus we witness the mythopoeic (myth-making) cultural force in modern times; the character was based on a scientist in Württemberg, Germany, in the sixteenth century, Johann Faust; Faust was an astrologer and an alchemist who had hopes of turning base metals into gold. Marlowe wrote his story of Faust some fifty years after Faust's death; since then, Faust himself has become a modern myth, an image of the person who is willing to give up everything most other people consider sacred for the sake of pure knowledge (or, in some cases, for profit) and who will pay dearly for this bargain. Although Faust himself was compared to Icarus in the Renaissance and Prometheus in the Romantic period, the mythologized figure of the doctor has emerged in modern times as an icon in its own right, used as a mythic theme in novels and films. Whereas Mary Shelley compared her Doctor Frankenstein to Prometheus, later film versions of the story tend explicitly or implicitly to compare Frankenstein to the single-minded, success-obsessed Doctor Faust instead.

36. Classical myths have retained their capacity to convey meaning to us and will undoubtedly continue to express the continuity of the human spirit.

PRIMARY TEXT SELECTIONS: Dante, *The Inferno*; Sir Philip Sidney, Sonnet 5 from *Astrophel and Stella*; John Lyly, Song from *Alexander and Campaspe*; John Donne, "Love's Deity"; John Milton, *Paradise Lost*; George Gordon, Lord Byron, *Prometheus*; Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Ulysses"; William Butler Yeats, "Leda and the Swan"; W. H. Auden, "The Shield of Achilles" and "Musée des Beaux Arts"; Eavan Boland, "The Pomegranate."

KEY NAMES OF MYTHOLOGICAL CHARACTERS MENTIONED:

Narcissus

Oedipus

Sisyphus

Gaea

Athene

Artemis

Aphrodite

Orpheus

Eurydice

Icarus

Prometheus

Doctor Faustus, semihistorical character; sold his soul to the devil for knowledge

KEY NAMES ASSOCIATED WITH THE TELLING/CRITICISM OF MYTHS:

Virgil (70–19 B.C.)

Ovid (43 B.C.– A.D. 17)
Dante Alighieri, Italian poet (1265–1321)
Petrarch, Italian scholar and poet (1304–1374)
George Chapman, English translator of Homer (1557–1643)
Alexander Pope, English poet (1688–1744)
Aeschylus (c. 525–456 B.C.)
Sophocles (c. 495–406 B.C.)
Euripides (c. 485–406 B.C.)
Seneca, Roman dramatist (c. 3 B.C.– A.D. 65)
William Shakespeare, American dramatist (1564–1616)
Jean Racine, French dramatist (1639–1699)
Eugene O’Neill, American dramatist (1888–1953)
Andre Gide, French novelist (1869–1951)
Jean Giraudoux, French novelist (1882–1944)
Jean Paul Sartre, French philosopher and dramatist (1905–1980)
Jean Anouilh, French dramatist (1910–1987)
Claudio Monteverdi, Italian composer (1567–1643)
Henry Purcell, English composer (c. 1658–1695)
Richard Strauss, German composer (1864–1949)
Igor Stravinsky, Russian composer (1882–1971)
James Joyce, Irish novelist (1882–1941)
Sandro Botticelli, Italian painter (c. 1445–1510)
Jean Cousin the Elder (died c. 1560)
Claude Gellée, called Lorrain, French painter (1600–1682)
Alfred, Lord Tennyson, English poet (1809–1892)
William Butler Yeats, Irish poet (1865–1939)
Salvador Dali, Spanish painter (1904–1989)
W. H. Auden, American poet (1907–1973)
Pablo Picasso, Spanish painter (1881–1973)
John Updike, American writer (1932–)
Bernard Malamud, American writer (1914–1986)
Sigmund Freud, Austrian psychoanalyst (1856–1939)
Albert Camus, French philosopher and novelist (1913–1960)
Christoph Willibald Gluck, German composer (1714–1787)

Franz Joseph Haydn, German composer (1732–1809)
Jean Cocteau, French dramatist and film director (1891–1963)
Sidney Lumet, American film director (1924–)
Tennessee Williams, American dramatist (1914–1983)
Peter Paul Rubens, Flemish painter (1577–1640)
Nicolas Poussin, French painter (c. 1593–1665)
Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, French painter (1780–1867)
Tiziano Vecellio, called Titian, Italian painter (c. 1490–1576)
Sir Philip Sidney, English poet (1554–1586)
Christopher Marlowe, English dramatist (1564–1593)
Pieter Breughel the Elder, Dutch painter (1525–1569)
George Gordon, Lord Byron, English poet (1788–1824)
Percy Bysshe Shelley, English poet (1792–1822)
Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, English novelist (1797–1851)
John Milton, English poet (1608–1674)
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, German scholar, poet, and novelist (1749–1832)
Eugene Delacroix, French painter (1798–1863)
Charles-François Gounod, French composer (1818–1893)
Hector Berlioz, French composer (1803–1869)
Constantin Cavafy, modern Greek poet
H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), American poet (1886–1961)