



The Uses of Mythology in Elizabethan Prose Romance

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INTRODUCTION

It has long been recognized that classical mythology as it appears in Renaissance art, philosophy and literature is a valuable key to understanding the thought and creativity of the period. Panofsky, Wind, Sez nec, and Gombrich have in their works studied mythological iconography in terms of representational types as well as textual traditions and as a result, have permitted the twentieth century a dazzling view of the complexities of Renaissance art and its accompanying philosophies.¹ Mythographical sources (manuals, encyclopaediae, dictionaries, emblem books, books of imprese, the Greek and Roman classics and their commentaries) have also proven most useful to scholars of Renaissance literature who have studied the Christian and Neoplatonic bases of mythological imagery and their analogies in the visual arts. That the mythology and

¹ Ernst Gombrich, Symbolic Images: Studies in the art of the Renaissance (London: Phaidon Press, 1972); Erwin Panofsky, Meaning in the Visual Arts (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Peregrine Books, 1970) and Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance (1939; rpt. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1967); Jean Sez nec, The Survival of the Pagan Gods (1940; rpt. New York, 1953); Edgar Wind, Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance (1958; rev. & rpt. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1967).

iconography of Renaissance Italy was also inherited by the writers of Elizabethan and Jacobean England is now a recognized fact. In 1930, in Mythology and the Renaissance Tradition in English Poetry, Douglas Bush showed how widespread the use of myth in Renaissance literature was; while in articles of 1943 and 1945, D. J. Gordon proved that the iconography of Jonson's masques could only be completely appreciated when the viewer realized the extensive and direct use the playwright made of Italian mythographical manuals and Neoplatonic treatises for the creation of his dramatic figures.² The importance of analyzing mythological figures in Elizabethan literature was also demonstrated by Frances Yates' article, "Queen Elizabeth as Astraea," in which the various classical and iconographical significances of Astraea are shown to have inspired the use of the figure for practical and political purposes, as well as artistic ones, in sixteenth century art, plays, pageants, fiction and non-fiction.³

²Douglas Bush, Mythology and the Renaissance Tradition in English Poetry (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1930); D. J. Gordon, "The Imagery of Ben Jonson's The Masque of Blacknesse and The Masque of Beautie," JWCI, 6 (1943), 122-141 and "Hymenaei: Ben Jonson's Masque of Union," JWCI, 8 (1945), 107-145. See also Harriet Manning Blake, Classic Myth in the Poetic Drama of the Age of Elizabeth, University of Pennsylvania thesis (1912?).

³Frances A. Yates, "Queen Elizabeth as Astraea," JWCI, 10 (1947), 27-82.

Bringing mythological analysis to bear on one work, in 1959 in "The Myth of Mars's Hot Minion in Venus and Adonis," Robert P. Miller suggested that in the mythology of his poem Shakespeare had deliberately summoned the traditional mythography of his characters to provide the work with possible points of view and stances for judgment.⁴ Similarly, the mythology and iconography of Sidney's Arcadia was clarified by Walter Davis in "Acteon in Arcadia" (1962) and Mark Rose in "Sidney's Womanish Man" (1964); both of these studies established Sidney's position in the mainstream of moral, allegorical Renaissance writing.⁵ Elizabeth Dipple has added to mythological studies of Sidney by showing in part of her article, "Metamorphosis in Sidney's Arcadias," the usefulness for understanding themes of detailed analysis of a mythological simile.⁶ In Spenser studies, interpretations of mythology based on Spenser's knowledge of Renaissance source books and commentaries are included in the Christian and Neoplatonic explications of

⁴ Robert P. Miller, "The Myth of Mars's Hot Minion in Venus and Adonis," ELH, 26 (1959), 470-481.

⁵ Walter R. Davis, "Acteon in Arcadia," SEL, 2 (1962), 95-110; Mark Rose, "Sidney's Womanish Man," RES, n.s. 15 (1964), 353-363.

⁶ Elizabeth Dipple, "Metamorphosis in Sidney's Arcadias," PQ, 50 (1971), 47-62.

The Faerie Queene by Merritt Y. Hughes in Virgil and Spenser (1929) and by Thomas P. Roche in The Kindly Flame (1964).⁷

Mythology in the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama has also attracted attention for its embodiment of the playwright's themes and the creation of a dramatic structure. Following Gordon's work, John C. Meagher devotes several sections of Method and Meaning in Jonson's Masques (1966) to explications in terms of mythographical tradition of many more of the mythological figures and the parts they play in Jonson's erudite didacticism.⁸ Similarly, Henry G. Lesnick's article, "The Structural Significance of Myth and Flattery in Peele's Arraignment of Paris" (1968), opens up new interpretations of the form of this play.⁹ And Peter Saccio's book on the allegories in Lyly's plays, The Court Comedies of John Lyly (1969) reveals among other ideas, the continuation of traditional mythography in English drama

⁷Merritt Y. Hughes, Virgil and Spenser, University of California Publications in English, 2, #3 (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1929), 263-418; Thomas P. Roche, The Kindly Flame: A Study of the Third and Fourth Books of Spenser's Faerie Queene (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964).

⁸John C. Meagher, Method and Meaning in Jonson's Masques (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966). See Chapters Two and Six in particular.

⁹Henry G. Lesnick, "The Structural Significance of Myth and Flattery in Peele's Arraignment of Paris," SP, 65 (1968), 163-170.

and the use a skilled playwright makes of it to elicit desired responses from an intelligent and observant audience.¹⁰

These are some of the studies which have demonstrated the importance of mythology in Elizabethan literature, but beyond the studies of Sidney mentioned above, there is apparently little scholarship of a similar kind on the uses of mythology in the general run of prose romances. When these works surface at all in literary criticism, it is often only for the purpose of designating them and their mythological allusions as derivative or as plagiarised from other works or as prophetic of Lyly. If they can be proven to belong to any or all of these three categories, there seems to be no further desire to take them for themselves as works written for a serious purpose and to an audience which also read The Faerie Queene and Arcadia. Elizabethan prose romances are too easily dismissed by literary critics as devoid of intellectual content; if like Jonson an author saved his deepest meanings for the understanding of the learned at court, the universities, or Gray's Inn and let the surface of his tale reflect whatever his other readers wished, it is nevertheless a debt we owe

¹⁰ Peter Saccio, The Court Comedies of John Lyly: A Study in Allegorical Dramaturgy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969).

him now to search out the complexities.¹¹

There are a number of prose romances which are evidence of their authors' intelligent understanding of allegorical writing and of their expectation of a subtle and informed response from their readers. These authors' knowledge of moralized myth and mythological iconography is occasionally stated, but more often must be inferred from the clearly allegorical roles the mythological figures and events play in the romances. This thesis is a detailed study of some romances of 1577-1600 which are successful in using mythological traditions for the presentation of themes or the creation of a structure which gives meaning and pattern to the elements of the work. It is hoped that these analyses will prove the romances to be more serious and interesting works than is generally credited, and that they will prompt a closer look at other prose fiction to find how it too may belong to the main currents of allegory.

¹¹In his 1943 article, Gordon quotes Jonson as saying about his devices for a triumphal arch at Fenchurch for James' procession that "as upon view, they might, without cloud, or obscuritie, declare themselves to the sharpe and learned: And for the multitude, no doubt that their grounded iudgements did gaze, said it was fine, and were satisfied." Works, ed. C. H. Herford and P. Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), VII, p. 91, ll. 263-267. The tendency of critics of the prose romances has been to list borrowings from sources; few have been prompted to take the further step of discovering what the romance is about. A major exception is Walter Davis' book, Idea and Act in Elizabethan Fiction (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969).

and iconography of the Renaissance in England.

Without the internal evidence of detailed authorial footnotes such as Jonson provided for his masques, the inference that the romancers possessed a knowledge of the traditions of moralized myth must in part be gathered from the judicious alignment of certain sources. In very few places is it possible to point out a direct source, but when it seems apparent that a myth in a particular romance is to be considered allegorically or derives meanings from its traditional connotations, there should be an attempt to assemble those relevant mythographical interpretations in order to consider whether the romance is clarified by such meanings. This is basically the method of Miller, Davis, Rose, Saccio, and in part, Meagher. Meagher goes on to point out that a true understanding of the symbolic figures and their allegories must come primarily from their particular contexts in the works themselves, and this belief, to which the other scholars have generally subscribed, will be a basic guideline for the interpretations which follow here.¹²

¹²In her article, "Venus and Diana: Some Uses of Myth in The Faerie Queene," ELH, 28 (1961), 101-120, Kathleen Williams says that while myth can define meanings, it is itself defined by the "precision of its context" (p. 102). This is also Gombrich's lesson when he says that each myth has a whole range of meanings, but that context must determine the particular meaning. Symbolic Images (London: Phaidon Press, 1972), Chapter One.

This attempt to establish Renaissance moral or Neoplatonic meanings of various myths and mythological figures is based on research into the works of some thirty mythographers from the late antique writings of Fulgentius to the medieval Berchorius to the numerous writers of Renaissance Italian emblem books and mythological encyclopaediae such as Alciati, Cartari, Conti, Giraldi, Ripa and Valeriano. The analogous English tradition has been examined in the works of such scholars as Batman, Cooper, Golding, Peacham, Whitney, and Sandys. In addition, use has been made of modern collections and handbooks as well as the gatherings of Douglas Bush in Mythology and the Renaissance Tradition in English Poetry, of Starnes and Talbert in Classical Myth and Legend in Renaissance Dictionaries and of Samuel Chew in The Pilgrimage of Life. Certain classics which were read and annotated in the Renaissance have also been consulted, most important of which is Ovid's Metamorphoses, as well as Apuleius' The Golden Ass, Hesiod's Theogony and Lucretius' De Rerum Natura.

Of thirty-eight prose romances considered, seventeen have been chosen for discussion and interpretation in this thesis. Because almost all contained mythological allusion of some sort, the selection is based on the judgment that in these seventeen, mythology plays an important part in the expression of the author's themes, philosophy, or didactic purpose, and that the works seemed to convey a deliberate

attempt by the author to use mythology for its allegorical possibilities. Five dramatic romances are also included to demonstrate how the iconography of myths common to prose and plays may be exploited in the theatre to further elucidate their meanings.

Understanding how and why mythology is used in this literature also leads to the comprehension that the sixteenth century romancer wrote to satisfy other demands than those the twentieth century makes on its novels. For the sixteenth century, plot events that progress with explicit causative links are less important or interesting than the presentation of ideas in a sequence that is clever, witty and conducive to thinking on the part of the reader. Nearly every title page or preface contains advice on how the work may improve moral character and by its wisdom, serve as a lesson to youth and age.¹³ By exploring the meanings and context of myth in the romances, supplying the relevant gloss that would probably spring to the Elizabethan mind, and seeing how this process elucidates and enriches the themes of the work, the modern reader can better understand some methods of Elizabethan allegorical prose writing.

There are several practical ways of establishing

¹³In The Defence of Poesie, Philip Sidney says that men reading even Amadis de gaule "have found their hearts moved to the exercise of courtesie, liberalitie, and especially courage."

the importance of moralized myth and its iconography for these prose and dramatic romances. One way is to analyze a single romance with considerable mythological content, the meaning of which is not at first apparent. This approach is taken in Chapter One which discusses John Grange's The Golden Aphroditis, a little-noticed work, puzzling to the modern reader. Second, there is the process of choosing a single myth and interpreting and comparing its presence in several romances: this is effected in Chapter Two where The Judgment of Paris is considered directly and metaphorically in Melbancke's Philotimus, Greene's Menaphon and Ciceronis Amor and Peele's Araygnement of Paris. Third, there is the method of selecting certain prominent mythological figures to see how they and their traditions appear in a number of works. Venus, the most frequently mentioned mythological figure, is discussed in Chapter Three in seven prose works by Greene, Robert Parry's Moderatus and three plays, Greene's Orlando Furioso, Wilson's The Coblers Prophecie and the anonymous The Rare Triumphs of Love and Fortune. Continuing with Venus, Chapter Four considers her in relation to Diana in Riche's Don Simonides, Chettle's Piers Plainnes, and Lodge's Rosalynde and A Margarite of America. Fourth is the approach of choosing a romance which excels in content, wit and artistry, to see how a very good author deals with the traditions of myth, and for this, a discussion of aspects of Sidney's Arcadia comprises

Chapter Five. Even Thomas Nashe thought that there was "none more vertuous, witty, or learned" among his contemporaries than Sidney and the Arcadia reveals a subtle interweaving of mythological themes for the delight and edification of the attentive reader; and for later times, a key to the meanings of the Arcadia.

CHAPTER ONE: THE GOLDEN APHRODITIS

In 1577, the year in which Sidney probably began to write the first draft of his Arcadia, there was published what is probably one of the first Elizabethan mythological prose romances, John Grange's The Golden Aphroditis.¹ Although in low esteem with modern critics who see it as merely a conglomeration of borrowings;² or of interest only as an anticipation of Lyly's euphuism;³ or as "basically a manual of amorous approaches,"⁴ this book nevertheless presents intriguing possibilities for new interpretation.

On first sight, The Golden Aphroditis is a puzzling work for the twentieth-century reader because it will not

¹ John Grange, The Golden Aphroditis (London, 1577). All future references are to this edition. In this work and in other Elizabethan English or Latin texts, abbreviations have been expanded.

² This attitude is found in two articles: H. E. Rollins, "John Grange's The Golden Aphroditis," Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature, 16 (1934), 177-198; M. P. Tilley, "Borrowings in Grange's Golden Aphroditis," MLN, 53, 407-412.

³ P. W. Long, "From Troilus to Euphues," Anniversary Papers by Colleagues and Pupils of G. L. Kittredge (Boston, 1913), pp. 367-376.

⁴ Walter R. Davis, Idea and Act in Elizabethan Fiction (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), p. 122.