

Don't Take Orpheus without the Lyre:  
The Intricacies of Using Pagan Myths for Christian Purposes in *The Divine Comedy* and  
*Paradise Lost*

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## Introduction

The classical myths—stories of great heroes, immortal gods, and horrific monsters—have been the sources of many books, movies, plays, and art. Today myriads of books, both academic and mainstream, discuss the myths—their histories, possible origins, and influences on some of the greatest authors of all time, including Dante Alighieri and John Milton. These two poets—giants in their own times—wrote two of the greatest works in history. Almost every aspect of *The Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost* has been analyzed, from the purposes, to the plots, to the word choices, to the philosophical and theological meanings. Their use of classical mythology has been catalogued and discussed,<sup>1</sup> and yet most scholars have overlooked the implications resulting from the intriguing paradox of the fact that these two devout religious men used pagan myths prevalently throughout their overtly Christian works.<sup>2</sup> Even though classical mythology in Christian works has been discussed and analyzed by many scholars, the paradox between the pagan and the Christian has not been sufficiently explored.

Most commonly, analysis of the myths within *The Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost* either focuses on the artistic qualities the myths add to the poems,<sup>3</sup> homes in on the implications of one or two specific myths,<sup>4</sup> or discusses the influences of the classical poets themselves—both

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<sup>1</sup> Charles G. Osgood's *The Classical Mythology of Milton's English Poems* (1964) provides an encyclopedic glossary of myths used in Milton's works, complete with brief overviews of each myth and where they can be found in Milton's works.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Bush's chapter "Allegory and Anti-Pagan Sentiment in the Seventeenth Century" in *Mythology and the Renaissance Tradition in English Poetry* (1963) highlights the main arguments between Christians about reading and using the myths, but he does not really discuss the religious significance when using the myths in Christian works. Likewise, Osgood expounds on the artistic and moral significance of the myths, but he comes short of analyzing the possible tension between the myths and Milton's Christian material, along with the possible cultural ramifications. Davis P. Harding, on the other hand, does delve into the implications involved with Milton's use of Ovid in *Milton and the Renaissance Ovid* (1946).

<sup>3</sup> Such as Jonathan H. Collett's "Milton's Use of Classical Mythology in 'Paradise Lost.'" (1970).

<sup>4</sup> Some examples are Bruce Thomas Boehrer's "Milton, Homer, and Hyacinthus: Classical Iconography and Literary Allusion in *Paradise Lost* 4.300-303" (2006), Kevin Brownlee's "Dante and Narcissus (*Purg.* XXX, 76-99)" (1978), and David Thompson's "Ulysses and the Allegorical Journey" (1967).

culturally and on Dante and Milton.<sup>5</sup> But in order to fully value and recognize what Dante and Milton do in their poems, we must not only understand the cultural reactions to the myths and those who used them, but elucidate what methods Dante and Milton utilize within the *Comedy* and *Paradise Lost* that ultimately strengthen their Christian values. After all, their use of myths, due to the central position each poet occupies within his era, is distinctive.

The term *myth* has been used to describe a wide-range of concepts and has numerous definitions, ranging from an entire mode of thought to describing particular tales. In this context, I am referring to *myth* to refer to the body of traditional tales from ancient Greece and Rome: the sources of Homer, Virgil, Hesiod, and Ovid. However, even that distinction does not answer the question of what precisely about the myths has prompted their enduring influence throughout history, especially in the humanities.<sup>6</sup> According to D. W. Robertson, Jr., “What Christian humanists sought in pagan literature may be summed up under two headings: eloquence, and wisdom” (343). And yet that does not adequately convey the pull within the myths. Northrop Frye refers to the classical myths as “abstract fictional designs in which gods and other such beings do whatever they like, which in practice means whatever the story-teller likes” (*Anatomy* 135), which could account for Plato’s criticism of Homer’s depiction of the gods. Still, limiting the myths to mere stories about larger-than-life figures (which Frye does not) fails to explain their survival. Richmond Y. Hathorn notes that myths are mainly “stories that symbolize man’s mysterious position in the universe” (28), and this idea does characterize many of the classical myths. He continues to clarify that the purpose of the myths was to bring men “back to a clearer

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<sup>5</sup> See Craig Kallendorf’s *Virgil and the Myth of Venice: Books and Readers in the Italian Renaissance* (1999), Edward Rand’s *Ovid and His Influence* (1925), Jeremy Dimmick’s “Ovid in the Middle Ages” (2002), or Bush’s *Mythology and the Renaissance Tradition in English Poetry* (1963) and *Pagan Myth and Christian Tradition in English Poetry* (1968).

<sup>6</sup> Jean Seznec’s *The Survival of the Pagan Gods* (1953) discusses the evolution and resilience of the myths throughout history, beginning with a brief overview of the start of euhemerism and allegory and ending with the reception and treatment of the myths during the seventeenth century.

understanding of the human condition, to make them perceive through the medium of art what it is almost impossible to bring home to them through discursive logic: that a human being stands as a finitude in the midst of an infinite cosmos and that with this infinity he has simultaneous relations of conjunction and discontinuity” (29). Often the classical myths relate the feats of a superhuman man (frequently a demi-god) or the interactions of mortal men with the immortal gods; sometimes they depicted a noble man or woman battling against fate, such as in the famous tragic tale of Oedipus. Additionally, according to Charles G. Osgood, the “power of classical myths to survive is explained principally by two facts: first, they were the embodiment of the moral, religious, and artistic ideals of the Greeks and Romans; secondly, morality, religion, and art were serious and fundamental realities in ancient life” (ix). Far from being mere tales passed through the ages, the classical myths encompassed more than one aspect of life, making them applicable to even the most abstract areas of existence.

Still, identifying what constitutes a myth is difficult, particularly because *myth* encompasses a wide range of topics, especially within literary criticism.<sup>7</sup> C.S. Lewis has one of the best articulations of the essence and function of *myth*, particularly in the context which I will be using it. According to Lewis’s definition, true myths exist outside of literature, do not require traditional narrative techniques to make them interesting, achieve relevance to our lives without having us “project ourselves . . . into the characters,” involves “impossible and preternaturals,” and are grave and awe-inspiring (*Experiment* 43-4). A person does not have to articulate a true myth well to convey the beauty within the story; the tale itself carries within it a resonance that cries out to the person, which also means that, especially in this context, *myth* does not include base, vulgar stories, but those that relate the highest levels of life. Lewis also explains why myths enrapture us: “In the enjoyment of a great myth we come nearest to experiencing as a concrete

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<sup>7</sup> I am not referring to *mythos*—generic narrative—or the theory of archetypes.

what can otherwise be understood only as an abstraction . . . . What flows into you from the myth is not truth but reality (truth is always *about* something, but reality is that *about which* truth is), and, therefore, every myth becomes the father of innumerable truths on the abstract level” (*Dock* 66). We experience the concrete, not the abstract; it is not an idea, but a lived moment that resonates universally and conveys abstract concepts. Ultimately, the myths Dante and Milton use come from the classical tradition, but part of the reason those myths endured was because of their ability to articulate abstract truths that resonated within a person’s soul, and both poets took advantage of the myths for that reason.

Inevitably, a distinction must be made between classical myth and what many literary scholars, particularly Frye, consider the Christian myth; after all, if Dante and Milton held the same regard for their Christian beliefs as they did for the classical myths, no tension would exist because of their combination of the two. As will be discussed later, the paradox between the pagan myths and Christian works exists because of the devout faith of both poets, not only in the existence of one true God, but the historicity of the Bible. To them, God’s omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience far surpassed the dealings of Jove and the other Olympians. Although the Greeks and Romans embedded within their myths universal truths, to Dante and Milton their God was the source of all Truth. Frye’s description of Christianity as “an imported myth and a devourer of rival ones” (*Anatomy* 34) does not apply to Dante and Milton, whose Christian beliefs were founded on a true God and a true Savior, not mere stories.

Nevertheless, biblical stories contain mythic elements, as the myths, particularly those of the Titan rebellion and Deucalion, parallel the biblical accounts. If we compare biblical stories, particularly those in the Old Testament, with Lewis’s definition of myth, many of them would fit in that category. For example, the story of Moses is extra-literary in the sense that when people

hear it they share a “mythical experience” (*Experiment* 43), it can be told well outside of a literary work, is fantastic in the sense that God uses him to perform miracles and bring the plagues, and is grave, awe-inspiring, and “fantastic” (*Experiment* 44). Discussing the significance of Dante’s and Milton’s use of myth within their Christian works would be a moot point if Christianity were just another “imported myth”: the poets would merely be renaming old myths, similar to the way the Romans took the Greek gods and, for instance, turned Zeus into Jove.<sup>8</sup>

And yet some of Frye’s interpretations of *myth* touch on a difficulty Dante and Milton encountered while using the myths: “[W]hile myths themselves are seldom historical, they seem to provide a kind of containing form of tradition, one result of which is the obliterating of boundaries separating legend, historical reminiscence, and actual history that we find in Homer and in the Old Testament” (*Fables* 31). Because of the parallels between some myths and biblical stories, both medieval and Renaissance cultures took the similarities to mean that the pagans were using shadowy versions of biblical accounts and thus may have, through natural revelation, known some form of Christian truths. While Dante and Milton both believed in the inherent moral truths within the myths, their consistent distinction between Christian and pagan truths makes these poets distinct from some of their contemporaries who attempted to either ignore the myths or merge the pagan and Christian through allegorical interpretations.

Understanding the cultural perceptions of the myths and subsequent popular interaction with the myths allows us to see how successfully Dante and Milton integrate the myths throughout the *Comedy* and *Paradise Lost*. Although during the Middle Ages and English

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<sup>8</sup> Frye’s grouping of classical and Christian with their archetypes also detracts from the significance of what Dante and Milton accomplish with the myths. If the poets used the myths simply because they matched the desired archetype, without consideration for the implications behind using the pagan myth in a Christian setting, then, instead of the significance of believing the classical myths were capable of conveying truths in an exceptional way, the choice of classical over biblical imagery becomes a matter of taste rather than what works best.

Renaissance the myths were not condemned as adamantly as during the time of the early Church, some religious men argued against using the myths at all. Indeed, because of the inherent pagan nature of the myths, although they no longer represented worship of pagan deities, they still contained stories of men and women, even deities, who did not always adhere to a Christian moral code. While the Christian God is perfect, unchanging, and ultimately the source of all truth, the father of the classical gods, Jove, was sometimes petty, moody, and at times subject to the machinations of the other gods. Nevertheless, because many poets, even clergymen, still appreciated the myths, they attempted to mine the depths of possible Christian truths through allegorical interpretations. Unfortunately, the convention of imposing Christian doctrine on the myths caused the myths to lose part of their luster: they became mere shells of their former glory. In such environments we find the pearls of *The Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost*—poems that use the best of the myths carefully to support their Christian material instead of merely forcing Christian dogma onto the myths.

Because of their universal and artistic nature, the myths<sup>9</sup> lend themselves well to use in literature, especially poetry. Frye explains, “Poetry seeks the image rather than the idea, and even when it deals with ideas it tends to seek the latent basis of concrete imagery in the idea” (*Fables* 57). Likewise, the myths have the ability to present the concrete depiction of a concept. When used properly, as by Dante and Milton, the myths have the ability to enhance the work; when used poorly, they become gaudy ornamentation. It was, and is, this ability to enhance both the artistry and function of literature that pulled so many poets to the myths, despite the difficulties that could arise when the pagan myths did not quite match the Christian setting.

And yet the question remains: why focus on Dante and Milton—particularly since they

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<sup>9</sup> According to Lewis’s definition of true *myth*, myths are “extra-literary”—they exist outside of a work of literature, and so their use in poetry extends beyond imitating the work of another poet, such as Hesiod or Ovid. Instead, their use comes from the essence of the myths—the stories themselves, not just how they are told.

lived in such different times. Apart from the fact that both men were the greatest poets of their respective ages, were extremely religious and intellectual, had political careers, and held the ancients in such high regard, Dante and Milton do not necessarily fall into the same category. Their commonalities place them in intriguing positions; more specifically, their integration of classical mythological imagery into their explicitly Christian works justifies analyzing them together. Additionally, they serve as types of bookends: Dante wrote toward the beginning of humanism and the rise of mythical allegory while Milton wrote during the decline in popularity of both myth and allegory. But perhaps one of the greatest reasons to analyze Dante's and Milton's use of classical mythological imagery is because of the superb and diverse ways they interweave the myths throughout such overtly Christian works to ultimately enhance the Christian themes. Despite the three-hundred year gap between the two poets, they find some of the same material useful and use it in different ways without completely following cultural precedent.

My purpose is not to explicate every use of myth within *The Divine Comedy* or *Paradise Lost*; it is rather to bring greater appreciation to the complexity behind Dante's and Milton's integration of pagan myths within explicitly Christian works, particularly as they use the myths to strengthen the Christian aspects of the poems. But, as modern readers not as closely tuned into the cultural context or the religious tension between the myths and Christian themes, we do not understand the complexity of appropriately adapting pagan myths to Christian works through which both poets had to navigate, nor may we grasp the ingenuity in the methods used. Thus, before we analyze either poem, we must first know the cultures that produced them.

## Chapter 1: God and gods: The Tension between the Christian and Pagan

From a literary standpoint, the myths are mere stories that, despite their original religious purposes, became fictional tales that could be used to embellish a work of prose or poetry. But the pull for using the myths did not only result from their beauty; it also came from the belief that the myths contain innate truths and have the ability to convey abstract truths in a concrete manner. Inevitably, the intertwined nature of theology and philosophy within *The Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost*, along with the perceived didactic characteristics of the myths, prevented Christian intellectuals from viewing the myths solely as tools for ornamentation. During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the debate arose (or, as some would say, continued, as the controversy about using pagan poetry and myths was not a new one) about whether or not the study and use of the myths was proper for Christians; some religious men (including, but not limited to, poets, clergymen, and theologians) spoke against the use of pagan sources because of their heathen roots and heretical nature, while other religious men defended their use on grounds of the wisdom of the ancients found within the myths.

Out of these time periods we find Dante and Milton—poets who were also well-versed theologians and philosophizers and integrated their views into their works. Even though many influential and well-respected men utilized and enjoyed the myths, some going as far as to translate them, several believed that they needed to defend their passion and enjoyment of the myths, which demonstrates that they either recognized an inherent tension between their Christian beliefs and the myths or they knew that other men condemned the myths and would hence condemn any use of them. It seems likely that Dante and Milton would have been aware of these arguments, and also would have recognized the difficulties that came with using pagan myths in poems that were overtly Christian. By analyzing the controversy between proponents

and condemners of the myths, along with the possible inherent tensions between the pagan myths and Christian beliefs, we can better understand the cultural climates that may have influenced the methods Dante and Milton use in order to adjust the myths so that they illustrate the Christian themes within their poems and ultimately make them stronger works.

During the Middle Ages, Dante encountered not only arguments against the myths, but against all ancient poetry. The three most common arguments against using the classical myths were that they were immoral distractions, those who enjoyed and used them were in essence venerating the pagan, and that they were lascivious. Additionally, the fact that poetry was increasingly becoming a vehicle for philosophy and theology clashed with the pagan roots of the myths. After all, if a poem, such as the *Comedy*, presented theological concepts, then pagan materials did not belong, even if they no longer served the purpose of heretical worship. They still contained stories of pagan gods, and there was also the possibility that inspired by demons. Any author who studied the ancients and the classical myths would have been familiar with these arguments.

Some well-known men argued against any use of the pagan myths, and their arguments became potential obstacles for Dante while he wrote the *Comedy*. One such example is Giovannino da Mantova, a Dominican friar who preached against the use of pagan poetry and spoke out directly against Albertino Mussato (1261-1329). Mussato was awarded the laurel in 1315, which is when Giovannino condemned him. According to Ronald G. Witt,

Even more telling are four metric letters, written between the first coronation of Mussato as poet in December 1315 and a second in 1316 . . . In those letters, he

defended ancient poetry<sup>10</sup> against critics who considered it inimical to Christianity. Of the four letters, the most detailed one (18) was addressed to Fra Giovannino da Mantova, who late in 1315 or early in 1316 preached against Mussato and attacked poetry along with other secular arts not only as valueless for Christians but even dangerous. (157)<sup>11</sup>

At the time of his award, Mussato was not a devout Christian,<sup>12</sup> and yet he defended the use of classical poetry and its seeming contradictory nature to Christian beliefs when Giovannino spoke out against it. In response to Giovannino's attack, Mussato, according to Witt, argued that "the best ancient poetry was the product of divine inspiration" (159), because, he writes, "[t]he work of art deals with nothing less than divine beings. This science was sent down from high Heaven and has its place next to God on high"<sup>13</sup> (qtd. in Witt 158).<sup>14</sup> Ernst Robert Curtius specifies that "[i]n the controversy, he represents traditions—or, if anyone prefers, reaction. The Dominican [Giovannino], on the other hand, represents the thinking which at that time was modern" (220). And although the debate between Mussato and Giovannino encompassed more than just the use of myths in poetry, it made enough of an impact to make their arguments relevant to the *Comedy*.

But later in life, once Mussato became a more pious Christian, he rejected the myths, especially in his *Soliloquium*. Witt notes that the "*Soliloquia*, Mussato's last surviving poems,

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<sup>10</sup> Most arguments against the classical poets include all classical poetry and not just the myths. However, since most of these arguments apply for both poetry and the myths, they will be used to demonstrate the complications found with studying and using the myths.

<sup>11</sup> In a footnote, Craig Kallendorf notes, "In 1316 Mussato engaged in a debate with the Dominican Fra Giovannino da Mantova over these issues [nine reasons to consider poetry divine]. Mussato's letter to Fra Giovannino does not survive, but in good scholastic fashion his opponent summarizes his arguments before responding to them" (97 n 13).

<sup>12</sup> Witt discusses how he came to this conclusion in *In the Footsteps of the Ancients* (157-58), but since Mussato's spiritual health is not a focus here, it will not be elaborated upon.

<sup>13</sup> The idea that poetry—especially poetry from the ancients—came from the God was a common concept for some Christian men who studied classical poetry. This concept stems partially from the similarities between the stories of Creation and Flood in the Bible and Ovid's depiction of the Golden Age and Deucalion and the flood, along with other myths that seem to parallel biblical accounts.

<sup>14</sup> Witt provides his own translations for Mussato's works.

demonstrate the extent to which a Christian focus had come to dominate the elderly humanist's life by 1328-29" (159). Within these poems, Mussato openly denounces the myths. In a poem about the Virgin Mary, Mussato declares, "Not Jove nor his sister and wife, Juno, are spoken of here. The vain fable departs from my mind and I pass over the gods worshipped in error, who lie dead with their despised posterity" (qtd. in Witt 160). Despite his earlier defense of ancient poetry and the myths, Mussato now "rejected the notion of compatibility between pagan and Christian cultures that had facilitated [his] literary and scholarly achievements . . . Mussato's new Christianity was pre-emptive and uncompromising" (Witt 160). Where he had once claimed that "[o]ur whole faith is predicted by holy Maro' [Virgil]" (qtd. in Witt 158) and argued that "the [ancient] poets adumbrated truths that were subsequently enunciated with greater clarity in the Gospels" (Witt 159), he now wrote, "I will not treat false poetry in metric and I will resound on the harp with praises of the Cross" (qtd. in Witt 160). Witt observes, "Perhaps for the first time, he clearly saw the problematic character of his youthful efforts to integrate his literary and scholarly interests with Christian beliefs. Like his earlier critic, Giovannino, he had come to consider his former devotion to ancient poetry indefensible within the context of medieval piety" (161). No matter if Mussato's rejection of the myths stemmed from a fear of judgment after death or a genuine revelation about the syncretism involved in attempting to reconcile the pagan with the Christian, his transformation from a defender to condemner of ancient poetry demonstrates a recognition of the tension between the two. Although Mussato and Giovannino were just two men,<sup>15</sup> Dante would have been aware of such arguments and disdain toward the myths, which might have influenced the way he uses and portrays the myths in *Inferno*.

There were men, however, who defended using the myths; these arguments demonstrate a

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<sup>15</sup> Curtius discusses the controversy between Mussato and Giovannino and remarks that it made a great enough impact in literary history to have been studied frequently (216), noting that "it was not only 'monkish zealots' who provoked Mussato to defend poetry" (220).

recognition of the arguments against and a possible discord between Christianity and the classical myths. As Mussato once defended ancient poetry and the myths, Petrarch (1304-1374) and Boccaccio (1313-1375), as proponents of Christian humanism,<sup>16</sup> also defended them because they believed that the myths contain some form of truth. In his discussion on humanist views in the early Italian Renaissance, David Robey specifies that the attack against studying ancient poetry

came from the theologians, monks and the clergy, as well as from members of the established professions of law and medicine. Its main substance was the argument that the classical poetry distracted men's minds from better things with stories that were not only pagan and therefore mendacious, but also lascivious and immoral. Moreover, they had been condemned both by classical figures such as Plato and Boethius and by Fathers of the church. (626)

Robey continues to outline the defense of Petrarch and Boccaccio, which in essence states that the ancient poets, instead of writing literally, wrote in allegory to “tell us how we should live our lives, or describe phenomena in the natural world, or commemorate the deeds of great men in the past . . . . Thus the seeming immorality and paganism of much of the material of classical poetry is an appearance that should not deceive us. In reality the poets were the first theologians of the ancients” (627). Not only their response, but the attacks themselves points to an uneasiness about the works of the ancients and beliefs of fourteenth century Christians—an uneasiness Dante

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<sup>16</sup> I will be using Nicholas Mann's definition that “[h]umanism is that concern with the legacy of antiquity—and in particular, but not exclusively, with its literary legacy—which characterizes the work of scholars from at least the ninth century onwards. It involves above all the rediscovery and study of ancient Greek and Roman texts, the restoration and interpretation of them and the assimilation of the ideas and values that they contain. It ranges from an archaeological interest in the remains of written records—from inscriptions to epic poems—but comes to pervade . . . almost all areas of post-medieval culture, including theology, philosophy, political thought, jurisprudence, medicine, mathematics and the creative arts” (2). Although humanism goes beyond the study of ancient texts, for my purpose of demonstrating that some Christians condemn while others defend using the myths, the aspect of humanism that defends the myths will be the focus.

would have been aware of.<sup>17</sup>

Interestingly, Petrarch at one point of time may have struggled with reconciling the pagan myths with his Christian beliefs, pointing to a possible divided conscience concerning using the myths. Witt notes that “Petrarch . . . became aware of the tension between the two cultures early in his career” and that “[m]uch of Petrarch’s insistent searching for bridges between the ancients and moderns derived from his own deep ambivalence. By the 1350s, having identified the problems and reconciled himself to persistent incongruities, Petrarch appears to have reassured himself that his humanism was compatible with his Christian faith”<sup>18</sup> (161). Although Witt does not identify what specific problems and “persistent incongruities” Petrarch struggles with, he discusses Petrarch’s balance in the midst of analyzing Mussato’s inability to reconcile the fact that the pagans, whose poetry Petrarch formerly studied, did not believe in the true God. However, Witt’s mention of Petrarch brings to the forefront the fact that even Petrarch, a devout Christian who is considered by many scholars to be the father of humanism, had to assure himself of the compatibility of ancient poetry and his Christian beliefs. Even if Dante did not doubt the usefulness of the myths, he also would have had to ensure compatibility between his Christian themes and the messages within the myths, which he accomplishes through corrective measures.

Additionally, within his *De Genealogia Deorum* (1360), Boccaccio devotes the fourteenth chapter to defending his decision to compile a genealogy of the pagan gods. Elizabeth

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<sup>17</sup> Even though both Petrarch and Boccaccio would not have been writing while Dante composed the *Divine Comedy*, these arguments still existed before them. Their defenses merely serve as examples of the general defense during the early to mid-fourteenth century.

<sup>18</sup> Rocco Montano argues that “Petrarch’s poems too, which are always presented as the expression of a mind divided between the newly discovered world of paganism and the medieval system of Christian faith, are, in reality, only the consistent and fascinating manifestation of the only possibly Christian attitude towards love, that is of the unsuppressable scruples, of the alternation of moments of repentance of surrender, oblivion of God and hope, which are inseparable from the Christian experience of love and constitute its profoundest aspect” (219). Nevertheless, Petrarch’s inability to completely combine the pagan and Christian reinforces the understanding that the irreconcilable differences between the two could not be ignored.

Woodbridge<sup>19</sup> comments that his defense stems from a need to justify his work “against the accusations which he foresees it must encounter” (333). Boccaccio even foresees who will speak out against his work: “He opens his defense by describing his accusers—the jurists, the doctors, the theologians” (Woodbridge 333). While Boccaccio does not list any specific poets, any poet of the fourteenth century would have to navigate the waters of pagan mythology and Christian beliefs—both because of his audience and because of his own personal faith. Woodbridge does question whether or not Boccaccio’s foresight about the opposition was accurate and comes to the conclusion that the “opposition was real enough, though its bitter aggressiveness had been slowly dying down as the Christian church grew more and more sure of its power” (345). However, at the beginning of the fourteenth century, Dante would have experienced a stronger resistance to the study of ancient poetry and so would have had to reconcile where pagan poetry—especially mythology—did not align with his Catholic faith.

More than three centuries after the *Divine Comedy*, Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* during the English Renaissance and still encountered arguments against classical mythology. Even though most people of the Renaissance accepted myths—especially in the area of literature and the arts—just as during the time of Dante, some religious men did not condone the use of myths, even more so when they were integrated with Christian material, as Milton does with *Paradise Lost*. Douglas Bush remarks that “[i]n the sixteenth century, as in the fourteenth or the fourth, there were those who appreciated Ovid as a poet, those who compounded for enjoying his tales by attaching a moral, and those who regarded his pantheon as the devil’s chapel” (*Mythology* 256-57). Even though he only mentions the sixteenth century, Bush’s comment comes in the midst of his explanation of the Puritan reaction to poetry during both the sixteenth and

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<sup>19</sup> For a more thorough overview of Boccaccio’s defense of poetry within his work, Woodbridge’s “Boccaccio’s Defence of Poetry; as Contained in the Fourteenth Book of the *De Genealogia Deorum*” provides a useful analysis of Boccaccio’s fourteenth chapter.

seventeenth centuries. The argument against using the myths waxed and waned throughout the centuries; during Milton's lifetime the attacks waxed, particularly concerning the integration of the pagan with Christian works.

As with Dante, these arguments provided potential obstacles through which Milton would have had to maneuver while writing *Paradise Lost*. And while some men did appreciate Ovid for his artistic and literary value, others believed they either had to justify their enjoyment or condemn the myths altogether. One such man, William Dell (1607-1669), an English clergyman and Master of Gonville and Caius, writes specifically against the use of myths in his *The Right Reformation of Learning, Schools, and Universities* (1653). Within his list of what should be changed to ensure the best possible learning for Christian children, Dell specifies that, even though the children should learn Greek and Latin, they should not be taught from classical authors: “[S]uch heathenish authors [should] be most carefully avoided, . . . whose writings are full of the fables, vanities, filthiness, lasciviousness, idolatries, and wickedness of the heathen” (571). Dell's concern resulted from his belief that the classical poets were “the devil's prophets, and delivered forth their writings in his spirit; and who, through the smoothness, quaintness, and sweetness of their language, do insensibly instill the poison of lust and wickedness into the hearts of the youth” (572). The danger of the pagan myths stems from the fact that they are beautiful and appealing. And even though Dell does not directly discuss using the myths as Christian allegory or integrating them into Christian works, his insistence of keeping the works away from the young marks a belief that the myths (and all other Greek and Latin pagan works) should not be used. He even suggests that all Christians “should forget the names of their gods and muses, which were but devils and damned creatures, and all their mythology and fabulous inventions, and let them all go to Satan, from whence they came” (572), which implies that Christians should

stay away from all myths as if they were satanic. Dell does not recognize a use for the myths; he sees them only as Satan's way of luring Christians away from God.

Not only did some men disagree with even teaching classical poetry, especially the myths, but some argued expressly for only writing religious poetry—without any pagan influences; *Paradise Lost* does not fulfill that criteria. A few years after Dell's *Reformation of Learning*, Abraham Cowley (1618-1667), a contemporary of Milton's, tried to convince poets to use only biblical materials for their poetry. He published his  *Davideis* (1656)—a poem that centers on the life and relationships of King David while purposefully omitting any classical allusions—as an example. Even though earlier in his life Cowley, similarly to Mussato, appreciated the myths and integrated them into his own writing, by the time he wrote  *Davideis* he has come to reject the myths and urged other poets to turn their focus from lies and vulgar topics (in which he includes myths) and shift their poetry to biblical themes and stories—the only topics worthy of poetry:

[I]t is not without grief and indignation that I behold that divine science employing all her inexhaustible riches of wit and eloquence, either in the wicked and beggarly flattery of great persons, or the unmanly idolizing of foolish women, or the wretched affectation of scurrile laughter, or at best on the confused antiquated dreams of senseless fables and metamorphoses. (20)

Cowley holds such high regard for the beauty of poetry that he finds that it should not be used for anything less than divine. Similarly to Dell, Cowley sees poetry as being used by Satan: “Amongst all holy and consecrated things, which the devil ever stole and alienated from the service of the Deity. . . there is none that he so universally, and so long, usurped, as poetry” (20-1). Poetry itself is not evil; the devil has corrupted it throughout the ages. One form of corruption

comes in the form of classical poetry and so none should use it, not even if the poet attempts to use the myths to strengthen Christian themes, as Milton does.

Yet as a poet of devout faith, Cowley recognizes the holy potential of poetry—but only if it focuses on the proper, divine material. Divine themes, while not only providing the ultimate subject for poetry’s beauty, supply truth, which Cowley sees as essential and what the myths lack:

There is not so great a lye to be found in any poet, as the vulgar conceit of men, that lying is essential to good poetry. Were there never so wholesome nourishment to be had (but, alas! it breeds nothing but diseases) out of these boasted feasts of love and fables; yet, methinks, the unalterable continuance of the diet should make us nauseate it: for it is almost impossible to serve up any new dish of that kind. They are all but cold-meats of the ancients, new-heated, and new set forth. (21)

Bush notes that “Cowley is far from desiring mere versified Scripture; he remains, whatever be thought of his own effort, an artist. It is partly as an artist too that he feels the exhaustion of the classical themes, though a greater poet might not have had the feeling” (*Mythology* 259). Even though part of Cowley’s rejection of the myths stems from his opinion that they have been overused, he also balks at the realization that they lie, which is why poets should turn to the Bible for material. Cowley not only recommends the shift in focus from myth to biblical themes and stories, but he uses his own work as a dual example and place to elaborate on his ideas. In the first book he states,

Too long the *Muses-Land* hath *Heathen* been;  
Their *Gods* too long were *Dev’ils*, and *Virtues Sin*;

But *Thou, Eternal Word*, haft call'd forth *me*  
 Th' *Apostle*, to convert the *World* to thee;  
 T'unbind the Charms that in flight *Fables* lye,  
 And teach that *Truth* is *truest Poesie*. (lms 5-<sup>20</sup> )

After this explanation about his purpose, Cowley continues his poem about David, which is meant to serve the double purpose of providing an example of using biblical stories for poetry while glorifying God.

In the preface to the 1656 edition of *Davideis*, Cowley not only reiterates his explanation about why to reject myth and other vulgar topics, but he also provides his readers with examples of biblical stories that demonstrate the same themes as certain classical myths. The feats of Samson would work just as well as Hercules' labors; Noah's survival is more "proper for ornaments of wit or learning" (22) than that of Deucalion; Joshua and the Old Testament judges are ultimately more heroic than the heroes of the battles of Troy and Thebes. Thus Cowley claims that "[a]ll the books of the Bible are either already most admirable and exalted pieces of poesy, or are the best materials in the world for it" (23). Cowley does not claim that the myths do not illustrate universal themes or truths—he just believes that biblical stories can have the same effect, and since they come from God, they provide the stronger material. Nevertheless, all of his reasons point toward a criticism that Cowley sees between what Christian poets should and should not write—a criticism Milton would have been aware of.<sup>21</sup> By integrating the myths with biblical material, Milton goes against this argument, seemingly pointing out that the myths provide some element that biblical stories alone cannot provide, although he does clarify

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<sup>20</sup> The text puts a few lines of text per number, so lines 4-6 is actually fourteen lines.

<sup>21</sup> Bush notes that Cowley "was one of Milton's favorite English poets" (*Mythology* 259), which most likely means that Milton would have been aware of his views against classical mythology. Additionally, Bush remarks that Cowley's outspoken condemnation of mythologizing was well-known by the time Milton began writing *Paradise Lost* (*Mythology* 285).

throughout *Paradise Lost* that the myths are fictional, unlike his biblical sources.

In contrast with those who condemned the use of classical mythology in poetry (especially religious poetry), some religious men, such as poets, clergymen and mythographers, defended the myths. While some current scholars may believe that there was no need to defend the myths because they were so prominent during the Renaissance, the fact that some men did points to a recognition of the proverbial war between Athens and Jerusalem. George Sandys (1577-1644), an English colonist, poet, and mythographer, deems it necessary to defend why he translated Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; he puts this defense in the preface of his *Ovids Metamorphosis, Englished, Mythologized, and Represented in Figures* (1632):

For the Poet not onely renders things as they are; but what are not, as if they were, or rather as they should bee; agreeable to the high affections of the Soule, and more conducing to magnanimitie: juster then either men or Fortune, in the exalting of Vertue and suppressing of Vice, by shewing the beautie of the one and deformitie of the other, pursued by the diving Vengeance, by inbred terrors, and infernall torments. For apparent it is, that They among the Heathen preserved that truth of the immortalitie of the Soule. (8)

But aside from his defense of poetry in general, Sandys explains to his readers that he had “attempted . . . to collect out of sundrie Authors the Philosophicall sense of these fables of *Ovid*, if I may call them his, when most of them are more antient then any extant Author, or perhaps then Letters themselves; before which, as they expressed their Conceptions in Hieroglyphickes, so did they their Philosophie and Divinitie under Fables and Parables” (8). Although Sandys does not directly refer to argument against the immorality of the myths, his explanation for why he chose to translate Ovid's *Metamorphoses* rings of an apologetics for the distinctly pagan

myths and their seeming inability to fit with the Christian, a conflict that Milton may have also needed to alleviate within *Paradise Lost*, particularly because the poem depicts historical biblical accounts.

Another proponent of using the myths, Peter Sterry (1613-1672), chaplain to Oliver Cromwell and friend of Milton, integrates into several of his works, especially the posthumous compilation *The Discourse of the Freedom of the Will*<sup>22</sup> (1675), reasons why myth should be allowed within poetry—specifically Christian works. Most of his defenses stem from the belief that “the Wisdom of the *Heathen*, and of the *Scripture*, both instructeth us” (*Discourse* 165).<sup>23</sup> Sterry believed that truth could come from any venue, especially from poetry. N.I. Matar remarks that “Sterry felt the prevalent oppositions to a Christian use of ‘Heathen’ literature and philosophy. He, however, did not see any disparity between them . . . .He believed that the inspiration of ‘divinity,’ both pagan and Puritan, Roman and English, derived from the Christian *fons* and therefore justified parallel investigation and interpretation” (118). As a chaplain, Sterry continued to allegorize myths and use them as examples to clarify his points in his letters and sermons. Sterry continuously stresses that “Truth is a Spiritual Thing, and Divine: The Opinions and Notions, in which we see it, are all Earthly Things, and Natural Things: And therefore it’s impossible for any one Notion or Opinion to give you the full Truth” (*A.G.M.* 202); hence we must look at everything we can to find the Truth. Later in the same passage he specifies, “This is the Glory of Spiritual Things, that they can cloth themselves with all manner of Earthly Shapes” (*A.G.M.* 202). His discussion here illuminates the concept that some people may disagree on how

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<sup>22</sup> From this point on, the following abbreviations for Sterry’s works will be used:

*D.F.W.*- *A Discourse of the Freedom of the Will* (1675)

*R.R.R.*- *The Rise, Race, and Royalty of the Kingdom of God in the Soul of Man* (1683)

*A.G.M.*- *The Appearance of God to Man in the Gospel* (1710)

<sup>23</sup> All quotes from Peter Sterry’s works come from Vivian de Sola Pinto’s *Peter Sterry: Platonist and Puritan: A Biographical and Critical Study with passages Selected from His Writings*.

something is presented, but they should not disregard ideas that seem contrary to their beliefs because “the same Truth may appear under contrary Notions, and in contrary Opinions” (*A.G.M.* 202).

In other works, Sterry not only defends using the myths, but he also demonstrates how they align with Christian truths. In *The Appearance of God to Man in the Gospel* (1710), he describes how some myths are the “confus’d Dreams of Christ” (181) because “their Goddess of Wisdom was Born in the Brain of her Father, without a Mother” and that “their God of War and Power, was born of a Mother by the smell of a flower, without a Father” (181). Other myths “darkly pointed at Jesus Christ” (*A.G.M.* 181), such as the myth of Orpheus, the poet who “could draw the Wild Beasts, Senseless Plants, massy Stones into Dances, round about him” (181). Akin to Orpheus, Christ drew all creation to him, which, for Sterry, is a sufficient link to prove him as a prefiguring of Jesus. But at other times, Sterry allegorizes the myths to teach Christian truths and morals, such as when he uses the tale of Semele:

The *Heathens* have a Fable of *Semele*, a Lady, who had the chief God for her Lover. She desired that she might see him in the Form, and Majesty of a God. She had her desire, and Dyed, *opprest* by the weight of Glory. In the manner, if you should shew the mysteries of God, and the Gospel to low, and legal Spirits by *their own Light*, without the *Shadowings* of *Fleshly* Similitudes, and parables; you would undo their Religion, confound their understandings, drive them to *despair*, *deadness*, or *profaneness*. (*R.R.R.* 163)

Sterry’s integration of the myths and persistent defense for using the myths both point to a need to prove why the myths could—should—be used by Christians. Matar comments that “in Restoration England, [Sterry] could not have been unaware of the attacks on the Christianized

interpretations of *Metamorphoses* from the theological and literary ‘moderns’” (117-18). Despite Sterry’s reiteration that truth can come from both the myths and the Bible—that they both ultimately stem from God’s divinity—his distinction between “heathen” and “Christian” suggests that he recognizes that his audience will most likely view the classical myths as heathen and that, despite the divine truths emanating from their myths and philosophy, the ancients were not saved. He “reminded his Restoration community of the intellectual and religious force in the classics” (Matar 120). By integrating the myths into his works, especially because they are non-fiction and not poetry, Sterry defies the stigma while also proving that they hold divine truths when not taken literally, a method Milton also uses within *Paradise Lost*.

The stances of all of these men, whether for or against the classics, point to a dissonance with using the classical myths, and these arguments would most likely have influenced the way Dante and Milton both viewed and used the myths. This tension not only stems from using the myths with Christian works, but also the conflict that Christians had with using the myths because of the possible contradictions between Christian beliefs and pagan stories. As prominent men both within politics and literature, and strong men of faith, Dante and Milton had to navigate the line between integrating the myths appropriately in Christian-themed works and having the myths as gaudy additions or contradictory elements. Even though many—possibly most—of their audiences were not against the myths, especially for artistic and allegorical reasons, Dante and Milton still had to reconcile where the pagan message did not coincide with the Christian. In these instances, both poets take corrective measures, demonstrating that they too understood that, while the myths have their strengths, they are still pagan—and thus imperfect—and do not always align with God’s perfect truths.

Dante alters mythological characters from their traditional roles, seemingly pointing to

the fact that the myths cannot completely attain a status that accurately portrays Christian values. In the *Inferno*, he uses altered characters as one corrective strategy.<sup>24</sup> Kevin Brownlee states that “Dante selectively misreads the Ovidian prophet Tiresias . . . in a way which denies the *Metamorphoses*’ capacity to incarnate (or even represent) true prophecy on its own (necessarily limited) pagan terms” (“Classical Poets” 113), which supports the fact that Dante recognizes that the myths cannot completely attain a status to accurately portray Christian values. While Dante does not expressly state that the myths do not completely reconcile with Christian values, in *Il Convivio* he discusses the “Intelligences” –“universal forms and natures” (II.iv.5)—and the pagan conception of them: “The pagans call them Gods and Goddesses, although they did not think of them in a philosophical sense as did Plato, and they venerated images of them and built great temples to them” (II.iv.6). The pagans, according to Dante, do not confuse the Intelligences with gods because of malice, but because “of both a deficiency of reason and a lack of instruction” (II.iv.8). Thus the pagans, because they lack Christian instruction and revelation, are unable to completely comprehend or portray perfect truths.

Another instance of corrective measures is when pilgrim Dante encounters Ulysses in the eighth circle. Whereas some poets portray Ulysses (or Odysseus) as a hero—the genius behind the Trojan horse and man who, against all odds, continued his trek to return to his faithful wife—Dante places Ulysses in the eighth circle of Hell. Montano remarks, “We cannot doubt that if Ulysses is here, in one of the chasms of the eighth circle, it is precisely for this reason, for his

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<sup>24</sup> If Dante only used the myths as an attempt to create a work worthy of the ancients and not for their combination of the moral and aesthetic uses, he could have kept the traditional depictions of the characters. Curtius points out that frequently during the Middle Ages “[p]hilosophy, theology, and poetry are fused into one” (216). As a philosopher, theologian, and poet, Dante would not—could not—add superfluous material in the *Comedy*. Additionally, Curtius makes that point that, even though Aristotle (and consequently medieval poets) recognized that the ancient poets were indeed philosophers, “since they were treating of false gods, they could not have transmitted the true theology” (216). Because of the integrated nature of philosophy, theology, and poetry, any changes to mythological elements that would not be necessary in order to make a great work point to a need to alter the myths for philosophical or theological reasons.

wrong use of intellect” (209). Montano explains that “[i]n accordance with all the great theologians of the Middle Ages, Dante knew that there are two ways and two forms of knowledge. One is identical with philosophy and the search of divine truth. The other is the knowledge of the external world: it is motivated by pride and is of no benefit to the soul. The first is rewarded by God; the second for the Middle Ages was curiosity, a sin” (209). Even though the traditional Ulysses (not to be combined with Homer’s Odysseus, with whom Dante would not have been familiar) does not actively search for knowledge, Dante’s Ulysses does. According to Montano,

The poet could have placed him in Limbo or in the *Antepurgatorio* or even in Paradise had he seen in Ulysses the hero of a true science. But this Ulysses is undoubtedly not. Nor has he been punished by God for going beyond the pillars of Hercules, as many believe. There are no tabus in the Christian world: true knowledge is always good . . . Ulysses’ sin is only that of having forsaken his beloved ones, his people, for a foolish purpose. (209)

However, Ulysses’ placement with the false counselors points to another reason for why he does not reside in Limbo or Paradise—a reason other than Montano’s explanation about Ulysses’ abandonment of his family and people. Instead, if we look at Dante’s placement, Ulysses belongs with others who gave erroneous advice. And even though Ulysses, along with Diomed, “mourn[s] the stratagem / of the horse that made a gateway / through which the noble seed of Rome came forth” (XXVI.58-60), he provides more detail about his final odyssey to find the land of the gods. This doomed journey seems to be the more corrective measure taken by Dante to change Ulysses’ traditional role as hero. In this journey, Ulysses searches not only for “the world where no one lives” (XXVI.117), but he also risks both his life and theirs because “you

[the men] were not made to live like brutes or beasts, / but to pursue virtue and knowledge” (XXVI.119-20). This Ulysses urges his men to forsake their families because they should not “deny [themselves] the chance to know” (XXVI.116). Similarly, the Serpent in the Garden of Eden urges Eve to eat of the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, hence making her more like God.<sup>25</sup> By altering the heroic Ulysses and placing him in one of the lower levels of Hell, Dante uses Ulysses as a warning against misplaced guidance and aspirations. Instead, pilgrim Dante becomes a new Ulysses—a Christian Ulysses who serves as an example of what Ulysses could have become with proper guidance and goals.<sup>26</sup>

Dante’s corrective measures do not always encompass complete characters; at times he alludes to mythological characters and uses pilgrim Dante as an example of what would have happened with the appropriate focus and guidance. The nature of Dante’s references to Icarus and Phaeton points to another instance of corrective measures that demonstrate the necessity to alter the myths in order to make them fit Christian themes. Instead of using an altered character (such as Ulysses or Tiresias), Dante compares himself to classical mythological characters, but in this case he becomes the Christian version—i.e. the successful version. Brownlee notes that these comparisons “involv[e] a corrective Christian rewriting of both failed and successful Ovidian heroes in the person of Dante-protagonist, or Dante-poet, or both” (“Classical Poets” 113). When descending from the seventh to eighth circle while on Geryon’s back, Dante compares his fear to that of Phaeton’s “when he released the reins and the whole sky / was scorched” (XVII.107-8) and Icarus’ “when he felt the melting wax / unfeathering the wings along his back” (XVII.109-10). With this fear comes the recognition, both for pilgrim Dante and the reader, that both men

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Hollander credits Alessandra Colangeli, a student at the University of Rome, with this observation (492).

<sup>26</sup> For more about Ulysses as “one aspect of [Dante’s] pre-conversion self” (35), refer to Thompson’s “Dante’s Ulysses and the Allegorical Journey.” *Dante Studies* 85 (1967): 33-58. He provides insight into the changes poet Dante makes to Ulysses and the possible connections between Dante’s Ulysses and pilgrim Dante.

failed in their attempts to go beyond their mortal roles, and pilgrim Dante's fate may be the same. But, Brownlee notes, "[i]n both cases, it is the difference between the pagan Ovidian model and the Christian Dantean protagonist that is stressed: Dante is both a Phaeton made good and an Icarus *in bono*. Unlike them, he has a guide whom he obeys; where they descend to death, he ascends to life" ("Classical Poets" 113). Whereas the traditional Phaeton and Icarus serve as warnings to those who would try to ascend beyond their mortal places, Dante subtly revises their stories to demonstrate how, with the correct guide and motivation, a Christian can ascend to Christ without fear of death. Dante legitimizes the myth by making it new.

Milton's corrective measures take a different mode than Dante's. Instead of altering characters or providing classical allusions where his characters demonstrate how a Christian version would succeed, Milton integrates reminders that these myths are not true and thus cannot be taken as historical or completely mirroring scriptural concepts, such as Christ, the soul, or salvation. Bush notes that Milton "does also often remind us that such tales are fiction" (*Mythology* 286) and that he "contrasts pagan fancy with scriptural truth" (*Mythology* 286). One such example is when Milton describes when Mulciber is thrown from the heavens:

. . . and how he fell  
 From Heav'n, they fabl'd, thrown by angry *Jove*  
 Sheer o'er the Crystal Battlements: from Morn  
 To Noon he fell, from Noon to dewy Eve,  
 A Summer's day; and with the setting Sun  
 Dropt from the Zenith like a falling Star,  
 On *Lemnos* th' *Ægean* Isle: thus they relate,  
 Erring[.] (I.740-47)

Bush remarks, “[T]here seems to be a momentary divorce between the Christian and the imaginative artist in this transmutation of Homeric comedy into romantic vision” (*Mythology* 287), but he also notes that Milton “conclude[s this section] with expressions of hostile disbelief” (*Mythology* 287). Even though Milton incorporates Mulciber (also known as Vulcan) into a historical account, he also clarifies that these myths have been confused with history. Another example is when Satan watches Eve among her flowers:

Spot more delicious than those Gardens feign'd  
 Or of reviv'd *Adonis*, or renown'd  
*Alcinoüs*, host of old *Laertes*' Son.  
 Or that, not Mystic, where the Sapiient King  
 Held dalliance with his fair *Egyptian* Spouse. (IX.439-43)

Milton's distinction between Solomon's (the Sapiient King) historical gardens and those of Adonis and Alcinoüs becomes a reminder that the latter are mythical and not to be taken as historical.

Consequently, the classical myths provided both a source of inspiration and artistic material while also posing the dilemma that they were pagan. And although Dante and Milton ultimately utilize the myths to fit their purposes, they had to navigate the line between pagan and Christian, a feat especially difficult because of the overtly Christian nature of the *Comedy* and *Paradise Lost*. However, their corrective measures help to establish that the un-Christian status of the myths prevents them from providing perfect examples. Dante exposes that without Christ the mythological characters fail in their endeavors; Milton constantly reminds his readers of the fictional status of the myths. Both poets recognized that using the myths in their works required more than just adding the myths—they had to be integrated in a way that both utilized their

lasting beauty and resonating truth while not forgetting that the myths did not always fit with the Christian.

## Chapter 2: Allegory and Myth: The Imposition of Christian Allegorical Interpretations onto Pagan Myths

Along with navigating through the arguments for and against the classical myths, Dante and Milton had to figure out the best way to use the myths in order to both retain the beauty and resonance of the myths while also allowing them to strengthen the Christian ideals carried within *The Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost*. With the justification and defense of the myths came a method that would both alleviate the tension between Christian morals and the sometimes lascivious nature of the myths: allegorical interpretation.<sup>27</sup> At the time allegorical interpretation was the most common method of using the myths to teach Christian ideals; many religious men—both poets and otherwise—found that they could study the myths through Christian lenses and seemingly enhance that usefulness for teaching Christian lessons. Problems arose when these men took allegorical interpretations a step too far and, instead of finding hidden meanings within the texts, they imposed Christian doctrine on the myths in an attempt to make the myths more Christian. Although the perception and prevalence of allegorical interpretations shifted between the Middle Ages and the English Renaissance, using the myths still posed problems: the popular tradition of turning entire myths into Christian allegories would not fit the poems,<sup>28</sup> nor did it always match the Christian doctrines imposed on the myths themselves. The exceptional approaches Dante and Milton take in using specific myths to strengthen their Christian works can

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<sup>27</sup> Rosamund Tuve argues that Christian allegory was not “motivated by the desire to excuse a work or make it palatable to the pious-minded” (236), but that “[t]he motivation is probably much closer to the modern analogue: spotting meanings that just might be there, for the fun of the thing” (236). She does not, however, address the fact that the prevalent use of allegory coincided with the recognition that the myths did not always align with Christian beliefs. She notes, “Perhaps we should rather more frequently be skeptical of the ascribed motive of making things acceptable to the pious; notable extremes of this ascription in ‘moralized Ovid-researches’ (especially in other countries than England, like Spain) have only made allegory seem foolish” (236, n 6). Nevertheless, I do not argue that all Christian allegory stems from pure desire to reconcile the pagan and Christian, but that the drastic imposition of Christian doctrine does seem to come from an innate desire to find Christian ideals in everything, especially what people enjoy.

<sup>28</sup> For example, as will be discussed later, the common practice would be to take a whole myth, such as Pyramus and Thisbe, and make every character and element representative of some Christian doctrine.

only be truly appreciated through understanding the nature of Christian allegory and the more common contemporary attempts to allegorize myth.

The recognition that allegory could resolve the conflict between the heathen myths and Christian morals began when the Church emerged as the dominant ecclesiastical institution and realized that, while the pagan ideologies found in the myths did not align with Christian values, the myths were becoming more prevalent in culture. Bush recalls,

In its beginnings Christianity itself assimilated elements of pagan religion and thought, and, after the first clashes between the new and the old faiths, Christian civilization recognized that in all its secular activities, and even in its moral life, it had much to learn from the ancients. . . . But the supreme and all-embracing motive, at its height during the Renaissance, was the universal reverence felt for the ancients as a superior race and for the moral wisdom, of almost Christian elevation . . . Along with that, of course, went emulous admiration for the classical poets as imaginative masters of art and style. (*Pagan Myth 2*)

Even though allegorical interpretations of classical myths began long before the Middle Ages, by the time the Italian Renaissance began and humanism had found a strong foothold, the renewed popularity of the myths required, yet again, a way to reconcile the pagan elements with Christian ideals, thus justifying not only reading the myths, but enjoying them. For every argument against the myths came an argument for them, and most of the apologetics stemmed from the belief that the ancients hid within the myths material that had the capability of aiding Christians in living moral lives and understanding complex theological doctrines. After all, according to both Bacon and Sandys, the myths were like hieroglyphics—just as the Egyptians used hieroglyphics to teach difficult philosophical concepts, so the ancients used myths to do the same.

Allegorical interpretations seemingly had the ability to bridge the gap between the pagan and Christian and alleviate the tension between the two diverse worldviews. At its most fundamental level, allegory is the use of concrete characters and plots to represent abstract concepts in an understandable manner.<sup>29</sup> But within that broad definition allegory can be used to represent any number of meanings, from physical to moral. Joshua McClennan specifies that “[i]n almost all cases the allegory which was thought to convey the wisdom of the ancients is moral allegory; that is, the nature of such abstractions as Sensuality, Pleasure or Art is described by presenting them in human or animal form” (19). In the allegorical interpretations of the myths, characters embody morals—Penelope becomes steadfast love and loyalty. Unlike other allegorical interpretations, moral interpretations do not always impose specific doctrines on the myths, but can find what the figures and story represent and embody. Because, despite her many suitors, Penelope does wait for her husband, so she can logically be viewed as a concrete example of the abstract concept. The difficulty came when people imposed allegorical interpretations on the myths by forcing meanings that could not logically exist, such as claiming the story of Pyramus and Thisbe represents the Gospel.

One problem with using the myths, allegorically or otherwise, was that the mythographers and poets had to take into account that the authors of these myths were pagan. According to Rita Copeland and Peter T. Struck, “Allegorical interpretation (allegoresis) is understood as explaining a work, or a figure in myth, or any created entity, as if there were another sense to which it referred, that is, presuming the work or figure to be encoded with meaning intended by the author or a higher spiritual authority” (2). For some interpreters, deeper truths within allegories were intentional. Fortunately for those who admitted that the ancients

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<sup>29</sup> C.S. Lewis’s chapter on allegory in *Allegory of Love* (1936) provides great insight and analysis into the nature of allegory.

were not Christians, the intentional meaning could be traced back to a higher power—God.

Consequently, according to the most common reasoning, the authors of the myths, by virtue of having written such truth-filled material, must have had natural revelations. Ovid himself, one main source of the myths, was seen by some to be a type of prophet or wise man. His stories of creation and a world-wide flood mirror biblical accounts, and Deucalion's survival sounds much like Noah's. As a result of the similarities, Ovid was painted as less a pagan poet and more an inspired, pre-Christian author.<sup>30</sup> Edward Rand, in his explication of Ovid's various adaptations during the Middle Ages, comments on Ovid's, as well as other classical authors', expansion *into* Christianity:

If Ovid can give instructions in morals, it is no long step thence to theology.

Again we find the starting-point for the excessive zeal of later interpreters in Ovid himself, in the unfeigned piety of the tale of Philemon and Baucis, in the apparent knowledge of the Old Testament displayed in the story of the Creating and the Flood, in the theistic modification of atomism likewise apparent in this story, in the philosophical competence of his Pythagorean solution presented in the last book of his cosmic epic. (134)

Ovid's works seemingly demonstrate divine inspiration, thus making him God's messenger. However, Dimmick notes that "[r]ather than convert the poet, . . . allegory converts the text by means of a consciously transformatory reading method" (278). If the author's personal beliefs did not match what was in the text, some readers chose to neglect the author. Because some myths demonstrate parallels with Christian stories, every myth became valid for allegorical

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<sup>30</sup> Some mythographers and religious men made the argument that some of the ancients, especially the more well-respected philosophers and poets, may have been Christians, even though some came before Christ. For those who recognized the improbability of the salvation of the ancients, such as Homer, Virgil, and Ovid, they claimed that these men could have at least been monotheists. For more specific arguments, refer to Dimmick, who discusses this approach more in "Ovid in the Middle Ages" (2002).

interpretation. The method of applying allegorical meaning to everything just served as even more a justification for reading the myths—particularly Ovid, whose work was available.<sup>31</sup> And even though the art of exuberant allegory had fallen into a decline by the time Milton wrote *Paradise Lost*, the concepts behind allegory still applied; hundreds of years of consistent allegorical interpretation made an impact that lasted past its popularity.

With the elimination of the problem of the pagan author, the removal of the myths from their historical context also allowed for more drastic allegorical interpretations. As Robey recognizes, the imposed interpretations dismiss the cultural importance behind the myths and force an acceptable Christian interpretation:

[I]t is equally important to acknowledge, in the continued dominance of allegorical interpretation, a major limiting factor on the classicism of these defences. Whatever their novelty, they still offered a reading of ancient poetry that was essentially recuperative and reductive, that suppressed in large part its real historical properties by projecting onto it the conventional knowledge of the time. (633)

Far from accepting the myths as they were, allegorical interpretations attempted to reconcile the pagan with the Christian by neglecting the fact that medieval ideals did not always coincide with those of the ancients. Even more damaging than conforming the myths to contemporary ideals is the forced alignment of the myths to concepts they do not fit, altering the entire myth and turning it into something drastically different from the original. Karl Vossler too points out the cost of completely allegorizing the myths:

Everything that cannot be grasped and assimilated in this amiable, soulful,

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<sup>31</sup> Although Homer, Virgil, Hesiod, and other ancient writers also had their works allegorized, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was the most well-known collection of myths (not just a few myths expanded) and has many allegorized versions; thus Ovid will be focused on more than other ancient poets.

mystical, and lyrical fashion—and that is the entire crude and forbidding historical reality of the ancient world—is left to the philologists, the grammarians, and the rhetoricians. . . [T]hese scholars rescued, by consciously allegorical interpretation, at least the beauty of the outer shell, at the cost of sacrificing the pagan inner substance. (133)

Although much was lost through this extreme method of allegorical interpretation, mythographers recognized that it was better to save at least part of the myths rather than nothing. And so, instead of being used completely, the myths became vehicles in which theologically enriched lessons could be wrapped—a compromise that would allow the myths to be read while alleviating any moral tension and providing spiritual enlightenment, even though the more drastic allegories of Christian may have made the myths irreconcilable with even their shells.

Unfortunately, the contradictory nature of the myths and their characters to Christian ideals detracts from some of the morals. For instance, Jove, the father of the gods, is frequently linked with God and yet many of the myths involve his infidelities, such as the myth of Io. And while those who enjoyed the myths did not have qualms with the discrepancies between the characters and their Christian counterparts, the result of imposed allegorical interpretation prevented not only a true reconciliation between the pagan and Christian but obscured beautiful works of art. Jean Seznec believes that “basically, allegory is often sheer imposture, used to reconcile the irreconcilable—just as we have seen it lending decency to the manifestly indecent. On both grounds, it is a dangerous fraud” (274). Seznec’s overgeneralization of all allegory, while a bit harsh and extreme, does accurately describe poor interpretations, particularly medieval Christian interpretations where the connections between the actual myth and the Christian doctrines become strained. Additionally, Rosamund Tuve comments that the

breakdown between a successful and an ill-fitted allegorical interpretation is in the details because, particularly in the *Ovide moralisé*, allegory is “weakened and made indecorous by attempts to subdivide anima and by eagerness to take care of every detail with an equivalent” (300). Not every detail in the myths aligned with a Christian parallel, and when they did not, the allegorists made contrived connections, which weakened the overall effect of the explication. The myths became mere shells of adornment while their deeper resonance got lost in the myriad Christian interpretations.

Another problem with the Christian bowdlerizing of the myths is that any interpretation within the limits of Christian theology could be made of the myths. Because the nature of allegory allows for multiple meanings, each of the more well-known and popular myths acquired several varied interpretations—some contradictory, others unrelated. Dimmick points out one such instance: “Where Orpheus detests heterosexual love and chooses the love of young boys—a preference which can be expected to call for moral condemnation—one of the allegorical readings makes him Christ, who loves the innocent and is disgusted at the ‘female’ weakness of sinners” (280). Not only do the various interpretations indiscriminately ravage certain myths, but the inappropriate pairing of pagan characters with Christian doctrines could subvert true moral lessons: any reader who recalled the sin of Orpheus might refuse to see him as Christ, thus ruining the allegorical interpretation, and along with it the integrity of the myth and purity of the Christian lesson. The methodology of imposing Christian doctrine through allegorical interpretation altered the myths in a way that did not truly reconcile the pagan with the Christian.

Nevertheless, finding hidden meanings within the myths was not the root of the problem with using the myths. After all, allegory in itself is not a bad method to convey difficult truths. Dante, Spenser, and other great poets utilize the practice to enhance the moral tone in their

works. In the *Convivio*, Dante spends enough time explaining allegory and its various forms to show that he finds it useful and important. In fact, he specifies famously that some of his works, not just *The Divine Comedy*, achieve various levels of meaning of which allegory is one of the most important: “For we perceive many things by the intellect for which language has no terms – a fact which Plato indicated plainly enough in his books by his employment of metaphors; for he perceived many things by the light of the intellect which his everyday language was inadequate to express” (*Can Grande* 84). Allegory, used properly, opens many doors in both art and teaching, and the myths sometimes lend themselves to moral allegorical interpretations—just not expressly Christian theology. Even if, as Dante and some other Christian poets believed, God’s truth pervades everything,<sup>32</sup> the pagans did not understand Christ, his salvation, or any explicit Christian doctrine. Thus, the application of Christian dogma to the myths through allegorical interpretation defaces the beauty of the stories and turns the deep myths from ancient stories that resonate within a person’s soul into mere vehicles to carry Christian ideals.

This is not to suggest that people could not learn some moral lessons and be taught abstract concepts via the myths; this merely means that the wholesale application of Christian allegorical interpretations to every myth<sup>33</sup> causes the interpretations to become forced and overused, like the difference between wearing stage make-up for everyday use instead of during the performance: the application (allegorical interpretation) must be appropriate to the situation (myth). Thus the myths became gaudy masks of what they once were—decorations used to adorn necessary beliefs so people could have the appeal with the message: the sugar with the medicine.

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<sup>32</sup> According to Dante, “[T]he first agent, namely God, instills his power into things by means of direct radiance or by means of reflected light. Thus the divine light rays forth into the Intelligences without mediation, and is reflected into the other things by these Intelligences which are first illuminated” (*Convivio* III.xiv.4).

<sup>33</sup> By “every myth” I do not mean every single myth known to the Greeks and Romans; I am referring to the propensity of mythographers and allegorists to apply Christian allegorical interpretations to Ovid’s entire *Metamorphoses*.

Unfortunately, with all the passion for the myths came the inability to use restraint and clear judgment in choosing which myths to interpret and what they Christian truths they could conceal. Robertson admits that “the increasing popularity of the *exemplum* during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries tended to stimulate what modern scholars regard as ‘outrageous’ interpretations of classical narratives” (355). The popularity of reading the myths allegorically burgeoned until almost any interpretation became valid, even though many of them were internally contradictory.

As outsiders looking in, we are faced with the difficulty of distinguishing between what Dante and Milton would have considered appropriate. Tuve’s principles in distinguishing between appropriate and abusive allegorical interpretations can aid us. First, she notes, “[I]f large portions of a work have to be covered with blotting paper while we read our meaning in what is left, we are abusing instead of using the images” (234). This problem is seen in the allegorized *Ars Amatoria*, a thirteenth-century allegorical compilation where excerpts from Ovid were whitewashed and presented to nuns as lessons of Christ’s love toward them. Tuve’s second principle also calls for keeping the core of the original:

[T]he principle drift *governs* the meanings attributable to the incidents borne upon the stream; the latter cannot take their own moral direction of flow, and embark on incidents which travel counter to or unrelated to it, arriving at special separable meanings for such incidents we shall presently drown farcically, amid the laughter of the characters, who sit on the bank well protected in the natures the author gave them, only waiting their chance to push us in. (235)

Instead of allowing preconceived notions and ideals to guide the original stories, in this case the myths, good allegorists found meanings within the text and allowed themselves to go where the

stories led naturally. Otherwise, the myths would become awkward, ill-fitting costumes.

Nonetheless, the perception of how and why to plunder the myths for moral values shifted from the time of Dante to that of Milton, and that evolution also changed the ingenuity and success of the use of the myths within the *Comedy* and *Paradise Lost*.<sup>34</sup>

The persistent use of allegorical interpretation during the Middle Ages was not a sudden occurrence; the solution to reconciling contrary beliefs with the myths started when the Church Fathers realized that they could not truly eradicate pagan literature from society. Even before the Church Fathers, allegorical interpretations had been applied to Homer in order to alleviate his impious and almost heretical depictions of the gods, and the same method appeared to work for the myths when Christians wanted to enjoy them. The popularity of the myths waxed and waned, but they, along with allegorical interpretations, revived in the twelfth century: “beginning with the twelfth century, when allegory became the universal vehicle of all pious expression, mythological exegesis in this sense grew to astonishing proportions” (Seznec 90). Again, the *Ars Amatoria* serves as an example of the pervasive acceptance of this practice. Despite the immorality of some myths, their stories of love became allegorically representative of nuns and their relationship with God and did not cease to be a recognized acceptable form of allegorical interpretations for hundreds of years.

By Dante’s time, even though Italy was not producing much vernacular literature,<sup>35</sup> he would have been familiar with the practice of allegorizing the myths in other parts of Europe.

One such example of superfluous and overwrought allegorical interpretations can be seen in the

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<sup>34</sup> Dante lived in a time where allegory, especially in religion and the myths, abounded, so he had to devise a method of using the myths without destroying them through forced Christian doctrine. Milton lived in a time when both allegory and the myths were not viewed favorably, particularly in conjunction with biblical material; he had to find a way to use the myths to enhance his poem without letting them taint the biblical story. How exactly they achieve this is discussed in chapters three and four.

<sup>35</sup> Karl Vossler’s two-book, detailed analysis of Dante’s culture, *Mediaeval Culture: An Introduction to Dante and His Times* (1970) looks into the lack of influential Italian literature before Dante, as well as his familiarity with French texts and other European practices.

fourteenth-century<sup>36</sup> French compilation of Christianized Ovidian myths by an anonymous author—the *Ovide moralisé*. This 72,000-line poem elaborates on each myth from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and integrates verbose allegorical interpretations. The formula for each tale generally begins with a translated version of the myth, followed with a phrase meaning, “Here now is the allegorical meaning of this myth,” an allegorical interpretation of the myth, and sometimes ending with a phrase reminding the reader to take the lesson to heart and so be protected from the devil. Within the *Ovide moralisé*, the stories themselves become secondary—a crossing of the boundary Tuve gives for appropriate allegorical interpretations—and the moral lessons are brought to the forefront for the sake of the reader’s moral education.

Additionally, even if the overall moral of the myth fit the Christian interpretation, a problem with imposing Christian doctrine on the myths comes when every aspect of the myth—whether it fits or not—has to conform to the interpretation. For instance, in the *Ovide moralisé* the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, while on the surface relates the tale of two star-crossed lovers, hides within itself the story of the Gospel (IV.940-1267); Phaeton, in his attempt to achieve glory and his subsequent fall becomes Lucifer (I.4245-4260). One of the most detailed and overtly Christian allegories is the story of Philomena and Progne. The king of Athens (God) marries his daughter Progne (the soul) to Tereus (the body), and they sail away to the land of good things in an attempt to defeat the barbarians (demons). When Progne longs for her sister, Philomena (deceivable love and folly), she sends Tereus to get her. But he succumbs to temptation and ravishes her, leaving her in the care of an old lady (avarice). When Philomena escapes and finds her sister, Progne changes her golden dress for a black dress (forsakes good for evil), kills her

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<sup>36</sup> The exact date of the *Ovide moralisé* is unknown. Bush claims that the work was finished at the end of the thirteenth century (*Mythology* 14), but Rita Copeland, Dimmick, and C. de Boer place the date of publication between 1316 and 1328. Part of the confusion may stem from the fact that another *Ovide moralisé* (known in Latin as *Ovidius moralizatus*) was written by Pierre Bersuire (Berchorius) in the early fourteenth century. For more discussion about the confusion between the two works, refer to Dimmick’s “Ovid in the Middle Ages” (2002).

son, Itys (the fruit of good life), and gives herself over to Pluto (hell) (VI.3685-3840). Thus the author of the *Ovide moralisé* ensures that each myth embodies moral and theological lessons from which the Christian reader can gain understanding.<sup>37</sup>

Following the cultural trend, the author of the *Ovide moralisé*, as well as other passionate Christian allegorists, neglect the author and his historical context. As Bush recognizes, “The religious and moral and other lessons embodied in the *Ovide moralisé* and kindred works would of course have made Ovid stare and gasp” (*Mythology* 15). According to Rand, however, Ovid’s reaction would have been irrelevant: “The author in his posthumous existence is simply adjusting himself to his new environment; he is a chameleon, exercising the art of protective clothing” (137). For the medieval Christian poet, Ovid’s intentions were secondary to what could be found within the texts. Copeland reminds us that “[t]he poet never implies that Ovid himself was a Christian. Rather, he exploits the Pauline doctrine that ‘all that is written is for our instruction.’” He suggests that it is God who puts divine meaning in all writing, that Ovid told the stories, and that a good and inspired exegete like himself can discover the moral and spiritual profit that these stories contain” (688). Because the author does not claim Ovid’s salvation or imply that the meanings he finds within the myths were intentional, he bypasses any possible argument against Christian use of the myths because of Ovid’s status as a heathen. The *Ovide moralisé*, while only a single, albeit very large, work, does embody the cultural tendencies of the Middle Ages to force meanings on the myths. Fortunately, Dante uses them on his own terms with respect to

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<sup>37</sup> The *Ovide moralisé*, while being a single work, draws from other, older works that Dante and other poets would have been familiar with. Copeland lists some possible sources: “The Bible, biblical commentary of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries (e.g. the allegorical commentary by Arnulf of Orléans, the *Integumenta Ovidii* by Jean de Garlande, and many anonymous glosses), Ovid’s other works (*Heroides*, *Fastes*), the tradition of mythography from late antiquity and the earlier Middle Ages (Servius, Fulgentius, Hyginus, Vatican mythographers), as well as medieval Homeric lore (*Ilias Latina*, *De excidio Trojae historia*). The *Ovide moralisé* also incorporates French material: for the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe, the poet inserts a version of Norman French, which he acknowledges as the work of another; and for the tale of Philomena, he uses a version that he attributes to a ‘Chrestiens li Gois,’ whom some scholars identify as Chrétien de Troyes” (687-88). De Boer also provides a detailed discussion of possible sources in the preface of his edition of the *Ovide moralisé*.

certain formal relationships, but he changes them to suit his specific purpose.

The time gap between Dante and Milton was a time of enlightenment in some areas and darkness in others. With the increasing understanding of science came a decline in the mysterious and a preference for the literal. Between the fourteenth and early eighteenth centuries, allegory, while still used frequently, sustained attacks, but not just because of its application to the myths. With the Reformation came the rejection of allegorical interpretation as an appropriate tool with which to find meaning within the Bible and other texts. Don Cameron Allen remarks that “[i]t can be assumed that when the mystical interpretations of the Bible were increasingly held in doubt, similar readings of Homer, Virgil, Ovid, and the Greco-Roman mythologies were in the same state” (244). Yet even before the Reformation men had reasons for not using allegorical interpretation. In the sixteenth century, William Tyndale (1492-1536) and Francois Rabelais (1494-1553) questioned the validity of allegory. In his *Doctrinal Treatises*, Tyndale warns,

[B]eware of allegories; for there is not a more handsome or apt thing to beguile withal than an allegory; nor a more subtle and pestilent thing in the world to persuade a false matter than an allegory. And, contrariwise, there is not a better, vehementer, or mightier thing to make a man quick witted and print wisdom in him, and make it to abide, where bare words go but in at the one ear and out the other. (qtd. in Allen 242)

Tyndale recognized the strength of good allegory and therefore also understood the danger an improper allegory and subsequent interpretations can present. His warning comes at the end of his prologue to Leviticus so that the readers would not neglect the literal meanings of the book in order to find possible allegorical meanings. His interpolation demonstrates a leaning away from

allegorical interpretations altogether, not just in mythological stories. Part of this leaning results from an understanding that allegorical interpretations can too easily become outrageous and be made to mean anything the allegorist desires.

In the sixteenth-century work *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Rabelais questions not only the validity of allegorical interpretations of the myths, but also the intelligence of those who believe in them. Rabelais asks his readers,

Do you believe, upon your conscience, that Homer, whilst he was a-couching his Iliads and Odysseys, had any thought upon those allegories, which Plutarch, Heraclides Ponticus, Eustathius, Comutus squeezed out of him, and which Politian filched again from them? If you trust it, with neither hand nor foot do you come near to my opinion, which judgeth them to have been as little dreamed of by Homer, as the Gospel sacraments were by Ovid in his Metamorphoses, though a certain gulligut friar and true bacon-picker would have undertaken to prove it, if perhaps he had met with as very fools as himself (and as the proverb says) a lid worthy of such a kettle. (11)<sup>38</sup>

Even though Rabelais refers to some mythology within his story, he refuses to view Christian allegorical interpretations as an appropriate treatment of the myths; if the myths were not originally intended to represent theological or moral concepts, then they should not be read as such. Allen notes that the Reformed Church shared Rabelais's views toward allegorical interpretations, although its opinion extended to include undue allegorical interpretations of the Bible, much as Tyndale argued.

By this time, although allegorical exegesis still flourished and men still provided their own interpretations of the myths, widespread acceptance of allegorical interpretations began to

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<sup>38</sup> According to Allen, "Friar Lubin, the bacon-picker, is assumed to be Thomas Walleys" (239).

decline; instead, more focus went on literal readings and analogies. Nevertheless, Francis Bacon (1561- 1626) suggested a more conservative method for garnering moral truth from the myths. He disputed the popular action of applying specifically Christian allegorical interpretations to the myths, but also believed that Christians would be remiss if they did not find the hidden truths within the myths; he saw the myths and their truths as a link between the Christian and the divine: “never may it happen that the weaknesses and licentiousness of some writers should detract from the credit of parables in general: for this would savour of profanity and audacity, seeing that religion so much delights in these obscure and shadowy representations, that he who would reject them, almost dissolves the communion between things divine and human” (230-31). Yet he did not agree with the method of forcing Christian doctrine and remarks that “[f]or many writers, wishing to attach the veneration of antiquity to their own inventions and fancies, have attempted to turn the fables of the poets to their own object. A folly which of old standing and frequent use; not lately invented, or seldom fallen into” (230). And although Bacon mentions Stoics and “chymists,” not Christians, he appears to recognize that the myths should not have extraneous meanings forced upon them. Thus he clarifies his opinions about allegorical interpretations in the preface to his *De sapientia veterum* (1609)—a collection of thirty-one myths and their possible lessons—so that his readers would notice the difference between his work and other interpretations.

Bacon, however, toes the fine line between appropriate and imposed interpretation. He continues to profess that he is “inclined to the opinion, that not a few of the fables [myths] of the ancient poets contained from their very origin a hidden mystery and allegory” (231). But despite Bacon’s attraction to the idea that the myths were fables—sometimes parables—that contained more ancient truth than even the first writers (such as Homer, Hesiod, Ovid, etc.) knew, he does

not connect the myths with specifically Christian doctrine (e.g. soul, Christ, salvation). Instead, he finds sympathetic truths within the stories. Bacon does differentiate between *fable*—a myth: “probably of itself, maybe invented merely for pleasure, and an imitation of history” (232)—and *parable*—a story that is meant to teach a moral. Sometimes a myth may be both, but not always. The ability to distinguish between the two is not always clear, and Bacon does confess that he may be

led astray by [his] admiration of that early age, or because [he] find[s] in some of the fables [myths] so great a conformity with the interpretation, so apt and manifest both in the texture of the fable itself, and in the signification of the names with which the characters or actors of the fable are designed and entitled: that no one could consistently deny that such meaning was from the beginning proposed and imagined intentionally by the author, and shadowed forth. (*Wisdom* 231)

Bacon’s recognition that he appreciates the myths because of his admiration for the ancient civilizations does not deter his search for truth, but instead prompts further inquiry and research, even though his assumption of the authors’ intentional incorporation of truths teeters on imposing beliefs. Nevertheless, Bacon does not claim the authors were saved, nor that their truths are explicitly Christian, just that the ancients were both wise enough in their own rights to hide universal morals within their texts and adept enough to articulate traditional myths that already contained the truths.

By the end of his research Bacon is able to provide a few ways to distinguish between a mere myth and a parable. First, some of the myths mirror biblical history, such as the parallels between Ovid’s tale of Deucalion and the Bible’s story of Noah. Additionally, “that some of the

fables [myths] are so absurd and senseless in their outward narration, that they seem to show their nature at first sight, and cry for exposition by means of a parable” (*Wisdom* 232). And thus, the tale of Pallas’ birth from Jupiter’s head must carry hidden meaning, for how could any man invent that story himself? Along with the inconceivable concepts within the myths, Bacon argues that the myths which have no clear origin, that “appear by no means to have been invented by those who relate them” (233), generally contain hidden meanings: “And this it is which had increased their estimation in my eyes, as being neither discovered by the poets themselves, nor belonging to their age, but a kind of sacred relics, the light airs of better ages, which, passing through the traditions of earlier nations, have been breathed into the trumpets and pipes of the Grecians” (234). Consequently, if these fables contain any of these characteristics, then they, according to Bacon, must harbor deeper truths for men to extract. Bacon’s sentiments mirrored those of many, and his overall belief in the inherent moral truths of the myths can be found in *Paradise Lost*, albeit sometimes in more subtle forms.

In *De sapientia veterum* Bacon demonstrates his own method of explication; he attempts to find hidden meanings in the myths without imposing overtly Christian concepts onto them. For example, after Bacon reiterates the tale of Narcissus—including the note that the narcissus flower “is sacred to the infernal gods, Pluto, Proserpine, and Furies” (244)—he provides what he views as the hidden meaning within the myth: “The fable seems to represent the character and fortune of those, who, whether on account of their personal beauty, or of other possessions, with which nature alone, unaided by their proper industry, has decked and signalized them, fall desperately in love with themselves, and as it were languish away in self-love” (244). After continuing to describe the social ramifications of such a person’s actions—“[t]hus they generally lead a solitary, private, and obscure life, with a small company of friends, composed of such as

appear peculiarly to honour and admire them, and assent to all their remarks with the voice of echo” (244-45)—Bacon turns his focus to the special implications of the flower: “The spring flower is an elegant emblem of such spirits as these, spirits which flourish and are admired in their early season, but disappoint and frustrate the hopes conceived of them, when they arrive at full age. With the same meaning, it is said that this flower is sacred to the infernal gods, because men of this stamp are entirely useless for every purpose” (245). His wording stays away from forcing Christian terminology into his interpretations; he tempers his explanation of the myth with qualifiers such as “seems to” and “it is said,” although he firmly believes in his interpretations of the possible morals found within the myth. McClennan makes the observation that “as in almost all of his interpretations, the connections are arbitrary rather than ‘close’ and ‘evident’; so much so that it seems unlikely that anyone but Bacon ever took them seriously” (19). Despite McClennan’s opinion, *De sapientia veterum* gained enough popularity to not only be translated into English and republished more than once, but also continuously used as a source for other poets (such as Sandys) for several decades. Evidently, some men of letters found Bacon’s opinions on the subject persuasive.

Decades later, Sandys reiterates similar sentiments regarding the usefulness of the myths. In his “Preface to the Reader” (1632), Sandys states the belief that “as they expressed their then Letters in Heiroglyphickes, so did they their Philosophie and Divinitie under Fables and Parable” (8). Again, the distinction is made between fable and parable, and yet Sandys includes them both as sources for philosophical and moral lessons. Matar notes that Sandys “indicat[es] that his interpretation of Ovid would explore the moral and religious truths in the myths, but not necessarily their Christian applications” (114-15) when he compares early biblical stories with the heathen myths. Unlike the earlier Christian allegories, these interpretations find moral value

without requiring explicit Christian language.

Nevertheless, despite the shift in allegorical interpretations, some men still attacked the practice and so, by the end of the seventeenth century, allegorical interpretations—especially applied to the classical myths—declined, influencing how men perceived the myths and, consequently, Milton’s integration of the myths in *Paradise Lost*. The rise of Puritanism and the call for more biblical poetry, such as Cowley’s argument in *Davideis*, aided in the decreasing use of the myths in poetry, although the myths continued to be used in the study of Latin grammar in Jesuit schools. Allen remarks, “There is no question that the allegorical technique which enabled the proper interpreters to find so much Christian, moral, or physical wisdom in classical literature, in Homer, Virgil, and Ovid, in the mythographers, or even in the unreadable Egyptian hieroglyphics, was very seriously in trouble by the end of the seventeenth century” (247). By the time Marius d’Assigny (1642-1717) translated and expanded and expanded Pierre Gautruche’s *L’Histoire poétique* in 1672, it was unheard of to read a classical myth as the author of the *Ovide moralisé* had done. d’Assigny’s sentiments were common:

For I look upon such Expositions as have been already given to the Fables of the Heathen Gods, as silly productions and groundless fancies of Religious Minds, who have labored to find in the ignorance of Paganism, the knowledge of the Gospel. In the contrivances and inspirations of the Devil, the sublimest Mysteries of Christianity. Such interpreters of the Poets, are near related to the wise Expositor of the Revelations, who would need declare the meaning of the Visions of St. John, by certain Characters found upon the back of some Fishes taken near the North Pole. The wit of Man may stretch out a comparison between Light and Darkness, between Virtue and Vice, between Christianity and Gentilism; but I see

no reason to believe the latter was a favourer of the former” (qtd. in Allen 234-35).

D’Assigny recognizes the possible use of allegorical application to the myths, but he refuses to condone the practice of using the myths because they lacked a true connection with Christianity. D’Assigny’s argument is valid, but his argument points more to the problems with imposed Christian doctrines.<sup>39</sup>

Whereas during the Middle Ages Dante had to navigate through the unabashed overapplication of allegorical interpretations to the myths, Milton saw the nadir of allegorical interpretations and rise of criticism adverse to any literary material other than the Bible. *Paradise Lost*, even with the tradition of allegorized myths and classical influence behind it, came at a time when pure allegorized myths were even less acceptable than before and allegory itself was waning. But instead of using only biblical material, as Puritans encouraged, Milton, like Dante, interweaves classical mythological imagery throughout his poem—not to impose Christian doctrine upon the myths, but to utilize their artistic merit, resonance, and popularity. In the right hands, the myths become supplements to great works; they accentuate and strengthen what Dante and Milton create with their poems in ways that possibly could not have been achieved in other ways, all while retaining their internal and external beauty. Dante and Milton, unlike many of their contemporaries, use the myths for what they contain, not what could be forced upon them.

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<sup>39</sup> He probably believed that any passion for the myths detracted from passion for God and thus the myths should be avoided.

Chapter 3: Christian Journey, Pagan Guide: Dante's Use of Classical Mythology in *The Divine Comedy*

We have already established the common appearance of the myths throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance. And just as Dante and Milton did not use the same corrective strategies with the myths, their methods of integrating the myths into their poems differed. As a poet in Italy during the Middle Ages, Dante wrote to an audience that not only had very little fiction written in the vernacular, but that also loved the myths for their outward beauty and allegorical significance (albeit sometimes forced allegorical interpretations). According to Dante, “the aim of the whole [*Comedy*] and of the part is to remove those living in this life from a state of misery, and to bring them to a state of happiness” (*Can Grande* 40). Presumably, the state of misery is that of a soul apart from the glory of God through salvation and redemption—happiness being the reconciliation of man with God. Because of the allegorical nature of the *Comedy*, coupled with the popularity of imposing Christian doctrine via allegorical interpretations on the myths, Dante could have merely affixed some Christian doctrine onto the most popular myths, as was the common trend in medieval Europe. Instead, he utilized the myths on a variety of levels, which ultimately strengthens his Christian theme of a soul's ascent to God and other motifs throughout, such as the problem with pride. On the literal level, Dante's integration of the myths aids in the artistry of the poem; on the allegorical level, they reinforce his Christian lessons.

Dante, with his penchant for explaining why he does things and clarifying what he means, provides insight into how he wants the *Comedy* read, allowing the audience to know what he attempts to do with the poem. First of all, Dante admits that his poem “may be described as ‘polysemous’, that is, having several meanings” (*Can Grande* 20). However, he clarifies that the literal must be understood first—both while reading his *Comedy* and while reading other works:

“In this kind of explication, the literal should always come first, as being the sense in whose meaning the others are enclosed, and without which it would be impossible and illogical to attend to the other sense, and especially the allegorical” (*Convivio* II.i.8). Before any work can be fully appreciated, the reader has to understand and appreciate the story—the surface that covers the inner meaning.

With the popularity of allegorical interpretations came the neglect of the literal; often the myths became hollow shells because they were gutted for their pretty exteriors. But so Dante finds the concept of complete comprehension of the literal before moving on to the abstract so important that he reiterates the notion four times in the *Convivio* before discussing anything beyond the literal: “It [understanding the allegorical without first attending to the literal] would be impossible because in everything that has an inside and an outside it is impossible to arrive at the inside without first arriving at the outside; consequently, since in what is written down the literal meaning is always the outside, it is impossible to arrive at the other senses, especially the allegorical, without first arriving at the literal” (II.i.9). Clearly Dante wants his audience to understand the importance of the literal—the story—before rushing past it to embrace the deeper meaning hidden under the surface, which happened frequently with the imposed Christian allegorical interpretations of the myths. This reiteration points to an appreciation of the beauty of the external, which attests to the value Dante places not only on their philosophical merit, but also for the beauty of the stories themselves. His focus on appreciating the myths also exhibits that he himself wants the narrative aspect of his poem to deserve such close attention and analysis.

On the literal level, Dante uses the myths to provide both characters and settings; they, paradoxically, add to the realistic portrayal of Hell and increase the horrific nature of the

underworld. Creatures such as Cerberus, Plutus, the Harpies, and Medusa help to create a place both familiar and gruesome. After all, the audience's familiarity with such characters would allow an immediate understanding of the creatures' grotesque nature, while Dante provides the unfamiliar reader with enough description to visualize the ugliness of the monsters. On the most superficial level, the mythic creatures in the *Comedy* supply artistic embellishments.

Interestingly, another possible reason for the frequent integration of the myths could be because of their prophetic application. Vossler makes an observation that Dante views himself as a kind of prophet:

Sometimes, however, Dante believes that he must put himself on a level with God. Then he does indeed have recourse to a biblical style—to that of the prophets, as befits the role of God's mouthpiece. Then he seeks to imitate that abrupt, obscure, mysterious, and direct subjectivity which we saw to be historically conditioned in case of the old prophets. Now we admire not so much his poetic originality as the craftsmanlike cleverness with which he attains the antique colouring, the archaic patina, of his forerunners. (103)

Vossler mostly refers to prophets in the Old Testament, and he notices this prophetic tendency in Dante's Latin epistles and *Paradiso*. Nonetheless, some of the elements Vossler lists as part of the prophetic genre apply to what Dante does throughout the entire *Comedy*: "The prophet seeks, in order to convert and convince, the most intimate relation with the religious conceptions of the whole people. An old formula, a brief passing allusion to mythical figures, legendary memories, or eschatological imaginings, must awaken, in his hearers, intimate and widely-shared feelings" (98). The prophets used the best materials they had—myths, legends, history. They knew that people would respond to stories that on some level reflected the desires in their hearts or showed

them the repercussions of disobedience. Even though the classical myths do not align with the Christian religion, the prevalent allegorical interpretations of the myths had caused them to be more associated with Christian doctrines than when the Greeks and Romans wrote them.

Furthermore,

The oratorical effect of the prophet moves upon an objective and popular foundation of old traditions and beliefs. Hence it did not affect his hearers as violently and mysteriously as a reader of the present day might suppose. On the contrary, it had a strong reflective, critical, and prosaic element, in that it was compelled to give a new content and spiritual significance to the old figures of mythical origin. (Vossler 98)

As opposed to giving new stories that may shock or surprise, the inspired prophets built on older, well-known legends, similar to the way the Greeks frequently based their plays on mythic tales; the audience already knew the plot, but the portrayal, especially when changed, caused reflection on the purpose of the retelling. Dante does indeed utilize the myths in the *Comedy* to “awaken . . . intimate and widely-shared feelings.” The prophets of the Old Testament did not only serve as seers, but as mouthpieces of God. And as a, possibly self-appointed, mouthpiece, Dante fulfills his role with similar methods. He desires from his audience introspection and repentance to God; the myths help him incite that response.

Along with the artistic and prophetic uses of the myths within the *Comedy*, Dante understood that much of a work’s meaning resides in the allegorical (with which he includes and distinguishes between the moral and anagogical), particularly according to the cultural perception of the classical myths. The entire *Comedy* serves as an allegory—a parable—of the soul, warning the reader to change and embark on a similar (not literal) journey to God. In order

to make a strong complete work, the literal and allegorical must work together, as Dante uses the myth of Orpheus to demonstrate: “Thus Ovid says that with his lyre Orpheus tames wild beasts and made trees and rocks move toward him, which is to say that the wise man with the instrument of his voice makes cruel hearts grow tender and humble and moves to his will those who do not devote their lives to knowledge and art” (*Convivio* II.i.3). Not only does music soften the hardest of hearts, but the beautiful appeals to the innermost being of people—hence the reason Plato worried about the effect poetry had on men. And with this softening of the soul and mind comes an openness to learn and understand. Additionally, through a beautiful work abstract concepts can be taught; the concrete imagery helps men to comprehend the ideas more clearly. And since, according to Dante, the *Comedy* is meant to deal with the moral “branch of philosophy” (*Can Grande* 40), and since the myths were most frequently used for moral allegory, their integration throughout the *Comedy* fulfills such a purpose.

In relation to allegory, Dante recognized that, because God is truth and everything is created by God, everything, particularly in this instance the myths and other ancient philosophy, must have some piece of truth, although some elements, whether of nature or from the minds of man, contain more truth than others. The classical myths, despite the inability of the pagans to understand Christian faith and ideals, hold truths. Dante notes the similarities between the Christian belief in the ultimate pervasive authority of God and the ancients’ conception of their gods:

To which also the writings of the pagans bear witness; for Lucan says in his ninth book: ‘Jupiter is whatever thou seest, wherever thou goes’. He says well, then, when he says that the divine ray, or divine glory, ‘penetrates and shines through the universe’; penetrates, as to essence; shines forth, as to being. And what he

adds as to ‘more and less’ is manifestly true, since we see that one essence exists in a more excellent degree, and another in a less; as is clearly the case with regard to the heaven and the elements, the former being incorruptible, while the latter are corruptible. (*Can Grande* 63-5)

Although here Dante refers to the common trait of omnipresence with God and Jupiter, the impression remains that both the pagan and the Christian recognized a divine being that permeated not only throughout the earth, but embodied truth itself. A difference between the ancients and the Christians was that the Christians had the full ability, through special revelation, to understand the complete truth and its implications. In reference to how the ancients perceived the “Intelligences,”<sup>40</sup> Dante notes that “they nevertheless did not perceive the truth because of both a deficiency of reason and a lack of instruction” (*Convivio* II.iv.8). Classical philosophers could understand only so much about the realm of the divine—they did not have divine revelation to aid them in comprehending spiritual truths—and so whatever philosophy is found within the myths falls short of fully expressing Christian concepts. The imperfect and wandering love of Jove cannot compare to the *agape* love of God.

Dante’s use of Virgil as his guide through the spiritual realm mirrors this understanding that the pagan philosophers and poets (along with their writings, including the myths) could not convey complete Christian truths. Virgil’s shade, despite his reason and worldly wisdom, cannot go past the Earthly Paradise at the top of Mount Purgatory; his pagan status prevents him from being able to guide Dante all the way to the heavenly realms, and ultimately to God. Virgil is able to explain why various souls reside in Hell and Purgatory, and he can even explain the

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<sup>40</sup> Dante defines them as “substances separate from matter . . . which the common people call Angels” (*Convivio* II.iv.2), and then continues to elaborate that the “pagans call them Gods and Goddesses, although they did not think of them in a philosophical sense as did Plato” (*Convivio* II.iv.6). Thus the concept of heavenly beings become “Ideas” for Plato, the Pantheon for the classical pagans, and angels for Christians.

purpose for each punishment, but his lack of salvation and spiritual revelation makes it so he can take Dante no further than Purgatory. Likewise, the myths cannot guide a person's mind and soul to God. They can convey universal truths, but the lack of Christian morals, along with their focus on imperfect deities and depraved heroes, ensures that they can only take a person so far. A person can learn morals and universal truths through the myths, but he cannot reach salvation through them, which is why some of the myths in the *Comedy*—particularly those in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*—require revision in order to demonstrate where they fall short without Christ.

Likewise, the often morally ambiguous heroes could not fully represent Christian ideals. But, as Dante points out, “we perceive many things by the intellect for which language has no terms” (*Can Grande* 84), except that they can be conveyed more easily through allegory. Thus the failing of myth to align perfectly with Christian morals does not prevent Dante from finding and utilizing the truth within the myths. Instead, he alters specific myths to portray more accurately Christian truths, such as with Phaeton, Icarus, and Ulysses, because they articulate truths which would be difficult to explain otherwise.

Because so much truth can be found through the allegorical, poet Dante apparently finds it necessary to ensure that his readers do read past the literal plot in the *Comedy* and understand the hidden meanings. Interestingly, when in the *Inferno*, poet Dante reminds his readers to look beyond the literal, he uses Medusa, a cursed woman with snakes for hair and the ability to turn to stone whoever looks upon her face. While waiting outside Dis, pilgrim Dante and Virgil encounter the Furies, who threaten them with the coming of Medusa. And so, fulfilling the role as guide and guardian of Dante, Virgil covers his eyes. Between this protective gesture and Medusa's arrival, poet Dante, in an uncommonly direct appeal to the audience, urges, “O you who have sound intellects, / consider the teaching that is hidden / behind the veil of these strange

verses” (IX.61-3). On the surface, Dante is reminding the reader to look beyond the literal and search for what has been hidden allegorically beyond the story. However, other critics have contemplated the meaning and insinuation of these three lines. Vossler analyzes the implications behind this tercet:

But when we regard these verses as something alien to the poem and as a separate matter, there arises a strife among the learned over the allegorical meaning of Medusa and the Furies. Yes, we even raise the question whether these three fateful verses refer to what precedes or to what follows. So the spectator who, during the pause, has lost the thread, asks his neighbor just where we are; and so disturbs the latter also, who had not lost the connection. (II.245)

Vossler’s concern for the reader’s uninterrupted flow of thought, while understandable, neglects to take into consideration Dante’s preoccupation with ensuring that a reader does not miss what lesson he is trying to teach. As the creator of a work with so many levels of meaning, Dante wants the reader to pay particular attention to this moment and what proceeds after it, even if that means a slight interruption.

John Freccero, moreover, argues that these three lines, along with Dante’s incorporation of Medusa and the Furies, provide guidelines to show the reader how to read and understand the allegory throughout the rest of the *Comedy*. He states, “Christian allegory . . . is identical with the phenomenology of confession, for both involve a comprehension of the self in history within a retrospective literary structure” (120). Not only must the allegorist situate himself within all of Christian theology, he must also relate the allegory to the audience, which is something Dante succeeds in doing, although he believes he must use this interpolation to remind his audience of the allegorical aspect of the poem. Freccero continues to elaborate on what he considers to be the

correct interpretation of this passage:

In precisely the same way that the pilgrim and the authorial voice are dialectically related to each other, the dramatic action involving the Medusa is related to the address to the reader immediately following it. This is suggested by a certain inverse symmetry: the *covering* of the pilgrim's eyes calls forth a command to *uncover* and see (*mirate*) the doctrine hidden beneath the verses, as if the command were consequent to the action rather than simply the interruption that it is usually taken to be. (120)

For Freccero, the narrator's interjection does not disrupt the poem; it works with the scenario to fortify the message behind the elevated command and the action within the poem. Freccero's argument seems to be more on target with poet Dante's intention with this passage.<sup>41</sup> Despite the possible disturbance of the reader's immersion into the poem, these lines serve as a sort of "pause" button to ensure the audience's explicit attention. He must understand the didactic intention, not only of Medusa,<sup>42</sup> but of the entire *Comedy* as well.

Indeed, poet Dante continues his metaphor of the veil in *Purgatorio*. In contrast to the encounter with Medusa, Dante inserts this interpolation while pilgrim Dante, Virgil, and Sordello witness the souls singing a hymn as the sun sets: "Here, reader, set your gaze upon the truth, / for now the veil is drawn so thin / that piercing is surely easy" (VIII.19-21). As the reader looks on this beautiful moment of Christian worship, the poet reminds him that this too serves a didactic purpose. Whereas with Medusa the reader requires a "sound intellect," by now both the journey

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<sup>41</sup> Freccero's chapter "Medusa: The Letter and the Spirit" more explicitly outlines what I believe to be an accurate interpretation of the Medusa scene and Dante's interpolation.

<sup>42</sup> Hollander notes that, partially because of the difficulty in interpreting Dante's intentions with the extrapolation, Medusa's purpose (other than to further the plot) is not clear. Arguments have been made that she represents heresy, despair, the hardened will, etc) (179). Although her complete allegorical purpose is not clear, Dante's choice of a woman who, once beautiful enough to gain the attention of the gods, was cursed so none could look on her face without instant petrification points to a warning of the dangers of the seemingly beautiful.

and the content should allow the audience to more easily grasp the abstract concepts hidden behind the story. The reader has traversed through Hell with Dante and seen both the causes and the results of sin; ideally, the reader has gained knowledge and wisdom along with pilgrim Dante. Additionally, whereas with more spiritual, Christian content the allegorical concepts may be more apparent, with the myths the hidden meanings may not come as easily upon first sight but require more discernment because their subject matter is not inherently Christian, although they may contain truth applicable to Christians.

But Dante does not merely place mythical characters in their traditional mythological form into the *Comedy*; in Hell most of the creatures appear in altered forms in order to create more Christian connections. For example, Cerberus, the three-headed guard dog of Hades, appears in Dante's hell as a "fierce and monstrous beast, / [who] barks from three gullets like a dog / over the people underneath that muck" (VI.13-15). Dante's description of Cerberus does not clearly articulate whether or not the creature is man or beast, but most of the attributes come from the *Aeneid*.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, even though Dante's overall depiction of Cerberus comes from an epic, Virgil's material is mythic tradition, and the association of Cerberus with Hades and living travelers goes beyond the *Aeneid*. On a more practical level, Dante's choice of Cerberus (and his reworking) carries with it the implication that all beings, even those from pagan myth, fall under the rule of the supreme God.

Additionally, Dante's Virgil's treatment of the beast differs from the account in the *Aeneid*: "But then my leader spread his hands, / picked up some earth, and with full fists / tossed

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<sup>43</sup> Enormous Cerberus sprawled there in his Cave.  
The baying of his three throats filled that country.  
The snakes rose on his neck, but then the seer  
Threw him a cake of drug-soaked grain and honey.  
With his three gaping mouths, in savage hunger,  
He seized it, and his monstrous arch of spine  
Melted, to stretch his huge form through the grotto. (*Aeneid* VI.417-23)

soil into the ravenous gullets” (VI.22-24). Whereas in Virgil’s account Cerberus is placated with a honeyed cake, Dante alters this Cerberus so he is placated with dirt. Hollander observes that “Dante’s strategic redoing of Virgil has its biblical resonance, as God’s malediction of the serpent (Gen. 3:14) concludes . . . and dust shall you eat all your life[.] The serpent’s punishment for having urged Eve to eat the fruit of the tree is himself to eat the dead earth; his punishment is now shared by Cerberus” (122). Not only does the presence of Cerberus create a Hell that the audience could relate to (he does, after all, mimic many aspects from Virgil’s well-known *Aeneid*, which is derived from myth),<sup>44</sup> but the adjustment provides a Christian association to bridge the gap between Christian and pagan, which might suggest that all aspects of Hell and sin ultimately mirror Satan himself. Even to the common man who had never learned deep theology and yet knew the myths, Cerberus’s connection to the serpent, along with Cerberus’s presence in Hell, reiterates the notion that God ultimately has power over them all. Even in myth no single god had control over all creatures; Jove did not control Cerberus because he was the god of the skies, but the true God, even in his heavenly realms, controls creatures in Hell.

Along with the integration of mythological characters for narrative purposes, in the *Comedy* fictional characters are combined with historical and biblical ones. The integration of the mythological giants with the biblical Nimrod poses an interesting study. Dante takes the idea that the men who built the Tower of Babel were actually giants from Genesis 6:4,<sup>45</sup> and the fact that these giants, as do the giants of classical myth, attempt to climb higher than their mortal place makes another connection between the biblically historical and pagan myth. However, whether biblical or classical, giants were recognized as symbols for pride, and that connection is

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<sup>44</sup> The fact that Dante draws from an epic does not detract from the strength of the myth itself; Virgil himself reworked myths that were already ancient and rich with vitality and Dante decided to rework Virgil’s interpretation.

<sup>45</sup> Genesis 6:4 says, “The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men of renown” (ESV). Some translations have “Nephilim” as “giants.”

emphasized through the giants' placement at the final crossing between the first eight levels of Hell and the final descent down to Satan—the ultimate symbol of pride. If placement was not enough, the travelers concentrate on the giants who are punished for their greedy ambition and belief that they could overtake their ruler(s). Nimrod, the supposed architect of the Tower of Babel, comes first, and then Ephialtes, one of the giants who attempted to overthrow the Olympians. Although Antaeus carries the travelers, his sin is not specified, other than the fact that he “took as prey a thousand lions” (XXXI.118) and was killed by Hercules—possibly because Antaeus did not take part in a revolt against the gods. Instead, the focus remains on those giants who are damned because of their pride that led them to attempt to scale the heights of heaven itself. Additionally, not only did giants have the larger physique (which translated into an overgrown sense of self) to accomplish their ungodly desires, but they had the mental capacities to attempt their endeavors. Dante's audience would have been familiar with both the biblical and mythological accounts of the giants, and they most likely recognized the allegorical meaning associated with the giants, and so their placement in the lower level of Hell reiterates the severity of the sin of pride.

Nevertheless, whereas Dante could have merely personified Pride, he integrates the well-known myths into the plot. Not only are the giants essential in the pilgrim's journey, but pilgrim Dante displays knowledge of the giants and anticipates seeing Briareus. More importantly, throughout this passage poet Dante refers to Roman gods Jove and Mars; even though Nimrod rebelled against God, he is being punished “because of whose vile plan / the world no longer speaks a single tongue” (XXXI.77-8): God is not mentioned. Here poet Dante only mentions deities in relation to the Olympians. Ephialtes is described as the “prideful spirit [who] chose to test his strength / against almighty Jove” (XXXI.91-2) and “joined the great assault / when giants

put the gods in fear” (XXXI.94-5). The combination of biblical and mythological does not cause any tension, but serves to reiterate that, mythological or biblical, these giants attempted to go against their rulers and are now being punished for their insolence—their pride. Likewise, their close proximity to Satan, the ultimate example of failed pride, continues to strengthen the reminder that, without the appropriate pride of Christ, all other pride goes against God, and is thus a sin and will be punished. Placing prideful characters with older traditions supports the message better than having a simple allegorical character of Pride.

When a reader, particularly one of Dante’s contemporary audience, peers beyond the literal, especially when Dante uses myth, he finds that the pagan myths ultimately serve to illuminate Christian morals. One such example is Dante’s description of Geryon:

And that foul effigy of fraud came forward,  
 beached its head and chest  
 but did not draw its tail up on the bank.  
 It had the features of a righteous man,  
 benevolent in countenance,  
 but all the rest of it was serpent. (XVII.7-12)

Before the physical description, poet Dante links Geryon with fraud—the creature now embodies the sin. According to Hollander, Geryon is “presented as the counterfeit of Christ, three-in-one rather than one-in-three” (322). Although in classical literature Geryon embodies multiple roles, the medieval audience would most likely have been familiar with at least one of them—probably where he “enticed strangers to be his guests, only to kill and eat them” (Hollander 322)—possibly more. Additionally, Geryon, as part serpent, represents the fraudulent nature of the Serpent in the Garden. His mythological characteristics, combined with the Christian infernal

setting merges to create a creature that turns the attention back to the Garden and what was lost, even more significant because pilgrim Dante alludes to two young men who lost the chance of success because they did not heed their fathers' warnings.

These two men provide perfect examples of how the incorporation of mythical allusions and extended metaphors strengthens both the concrete and the abstract. In at least three instances, he carries the metaphor throughout the entire *Comedy*. As pilgrim Dante rides Geryon's back, he compares himself to Phaeton and Icarus—two young men of myth who died because of their inability to heed warnings and instruction:

Phaeton, I think, felt no greater fear  
 when he released the reins and the whole sky  
 was scorched, as we still see,  
 nor wretched Icarus when he felt the melting wax  
 unfeathering the wings along his back  
 and heard his father shout: 'Not that way!' (XVII.106-11)

The failure of both young men was that they, similarly to the giants, attempted to extend farther than their mortal grasp could reach. Dante extends the comparison between himself and the two fated young men, but where both of them fell, Dante ascends, albeit first via descent. He becomes the corrected, Christian version of the myths.

Not only does the altered forms of the myths demonstrate the necessary shift in focus between the pagan and the Christian, but the use of these two myths both provides a resonance for those who recognize the myths, and Dante only needs to use six lines to impart emotions that would not have been adequately conveyed otherwise. The audience would have known the preceding moments to the falls: Phaeton's desire to stop the mocking of his peers by finding his

divine father and, when he does, being overcome with the desire to drive the chariot of Apollo; Icarus's long hours helping his father create wings to escape from Minos's tower and subsequent disregard of Daedalus's warnings. All these emotions would linger in the back of the reader's mind and amplify the emotion and recognition that pride ultimately brought about their downfalls, along with the understanding that Dante, despite his fear, will not fall because he is not reaching beyond his grasp; he is aiming for Christ, but along the way learning humility to let himself be guided.<sup>46</sup>

Unlike pure Christian allegorical interpretations of Phaeton, Dante does not say that Phaeton is the Antichrist or Lucifer, nor does the Sun represent Christ or God; instead, he demonstrates that Phaeton's plight can serve as a warning or an illustration to emphasize his point. Phaeton is not a representation; Dante is like Phaeton, albeit a Christian Phaeton who must change his ways in order to survive. The fact that Dante alludes to Phaeton while he rides Geryon provides an interesting shift of the allegory of Satan. Whereas Phaeton was commonly linked to Lucifer, now Geryon, in his fraudulent, partial-reptilian and *faux* Trinitarian form, becomes a more satanic figure, thereby changing an overtly Christian allegory into a more appropriate allusion. More importantly, Dante does not say that Geryon is Satan or Lucifer; his description allows the reader to make that connection while understanding Phaeton's well-known fate does not have to be the reader's.

But since Dante uses Geryon to descend into the depths of Hell before he ascends to Heaven, the "father" who, as Dante recalls, called out to Icarus may be in error in his warning. Shortly before Dante and Virgil reach Geryon, Dante meets with his intellectual "father," Brunetto Latini. Brunetto first refers to Dante as "my son" (XV.31) and Dante recalls "the

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<sup>46</sup> Dante carries the extended metaphor throughout *Paradiso* as well. He continuously compares himself to Icarus and Phaeton, Beatrice and other souls in heaven to Daedalus, and uses the imagery of wings and wax repeatedly, along with the idea that his ascent to the Sun parallels that of Phaeton.

cherished, kind, paternal image” (XV.83) he has of Brunetto. Brunetto taught Dante “how man makes himself immortal” (XV.85); as Daedalus imparted his knowledge upon Icarus, Brunetto shared his with Dante. But unlike Daedalus, who cries out for Icarus’s safety, Brunetto desires his own immortality: “Let my *Treasure*, in which I still live on, / be in your mind” (XV.119-20). Ann. W. Astell notes that the “whole encounter is carefully staged to make Brunetto, not unlike the Ulysses of *Inferno* 26, an alter ego for the Dante of the *Convivio*, who, guilty of intellectual presumption, had fallen in love . . . with a fully elaborated system of thought . . . which claimed to be universal and certain” (81). As an Icarus of intellect who attempt to fly too close to the sun of misplaced desire for knowledge, Dante will fail; however, because this new Icarus must descend to remove himself of any pride and intellectual narcissism, the “father,” in this case Brunetto, should not try to stop his journey. This new Icarus does not fall because of unheeded advice but purposefully descends in order to ascend successfully later. By inverting Icarus’s flight plan, Dante also inverts the role of the father in the myth; this time the advice should not be heeded because it leads the wrong way.

Along with Phaeton and Icarus, Dante compares himself with Narcissus, although not until *Purgatorio*. The first mention of Narcissus occurs in *Inferno* XXX.128-29 when Master Adam, the counterfeiter, spits at Sinon, “For you to lick the mirror of Narcissus / would not take much by way of invitation.” Without going into any explication of the myth, the reader would most likely notice that any mirror of Narcissus’s would reflect Sinon’s true self in such a way that, despite being hideous, he could not turn away, only to lose the image out of an unquenchable thirst: he could not resist the temptation to drink the reflective water. But while the first allusion to Narcissus involves damned shades, the second pertains to the pilgrim himself when he first sees Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise at the top of Purgatory: “I lowered my eyes to

the clear water. / But when I saw myself reflected, I drew them back / toward the grass, such shame weighed on my brow” (*Purg.* XXX.76-8). In this instance, Dante becomes a type of Narcissus, and yet, where Narcissus ignorantly did not recognize his own face and succumbed to the beauty of his image, Dante knows his own image and pulls away, serving as a corrected, Christian Narcissus. Instead of applying an allegorical Christian interpretation to the myth (along with all the other myths), Dante’s selected use of Narcissus strengthens the idea of the impure reflection—he becomes an anti-Narcissus.

Not only does Dante integrate classical mythological characters and imagery throughout the *Divine Comedy*, but he claims the myths for Christian purposes without violating their origins. He found universal truths within the myths, but he did not force Christian ideals where they did not fit; instead Dante altered specific myths to both fit his setting and connect to Christian values. The pagan myths ultimately strengthen an overtly Christian work, both on the literal and allegorical level. Their rich history and universal resonance gives them a unique place in history because, even though they were pagan stories in a Christianized world, almost every person knew at least part of the myths. That knowledge gave the myths power to speak to an audience in a way no other literature could, and Dante knew that. His use of the classical myths ultimately strengthened his Christian work and made the poem available for everyman.

Chapter 4: Christian Narration, Pagan Illustrations: Milton's use of Classical Mythology in  
*Paradise Lost*

Unlike Dante's allegorical journey through the underworld to heaven, Milton bases his epic poem on the more literal, historical account of the Fall of Lucifer and subsequent Fall of man.<sup>47</sup> Because Milton's poem already has familiar characters, he could not add mythological characters into his plot, with the exception of personifying Sin and Death, without running the risk of offending his audience.<sup>48</sup> Davis P. Harding reminds us "not [to] forget Milton's special problem. He was writing a Christian epic, and by making a principal use of classical mythology, he could have easily been guilty of bad taste. Consequently, he was obliged to make the function of myth within *Paradise Lost* distinctly subservient" (88), thereby pulling away from the earlier tradition of allegorical interpretations. The biblical nature of this epic and how Milton portrays it carries with them untold implications of how Milton views God, Satan, Creation, and man in his untainted state. With these considerations of theme and of theological limits come a necessity for Milton to engage his readers and take them to a time of both perfection and ultimate tragedy. Because he integrates classical mythological imagery so prevalently—they too come from a time before his contemporaries could recall—Milton successfully reaches the audience and draws them into a time of which they know very little—the prelapsarian age. In fact, the endurance of the myths owes itself to their universal resonance and ability to evoke within the audience emotions that go beyond their current time and place. As Dante also used the myths to strengthen

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<sup>47</sup> Merritt Y. Hughes makes the distinction that, while some religious men viewed the war in Heaven (both before the Fall and in Revelation) as allegorical, Milton took the stance that the empyreal battle was both historical and allegorical. He notes, "The biblical warrant for it as history might be small, but in the traditions of battles between the Olympian gods and the Titans which Hesiod tells, and which left their marks widely in classical literature and sculpture, Milton—like most of his contemporaries—saw a survival of sacred history in the legends of the pagans. . . . The forms might be allegory, but for Milton the legends about the Titans' war with the gods of light on Olympus were proof of a core of some kind of historical truth in the revolt of the angels" (xxii).

<sup>48</sup> Milton's association of Mulciber with the demons does not count as an instance of adding fictional characters, but stems from Milton's euhemeristic belief that the demons disguised themselves as gods, which aided in the creation of the myths.

his *Comedy* without imposing strict allegorical form upon them, Milton too integrates mythical allusions in ways that strengthen his depiction of the Fall of man and grace of God without slavishly allegorizing the myths.

By integrating the classical myths throughout *Paradise Lost*, Milton encountered two predicaments: he must negotiate spiritual problems (both public and private) involved with using the pagan myths while also ensuring that they do not overwhelm the biblical aspects of the work. Theodore Howard Banks notes that Milton “did feel more keenly than many of his Renaissance predecessors a dissonance between the falsity of various stories, even those not obviously degrading, about the gods and the truth about God revealed by God himself. This moral disapproval was in conflict with the stories that were told, by Ovid for instance. The result of this clash is that Milton’s attitude toward myths is complex” (206). Although the myths, especially through Christian allegorical interpretations, did play a large part in the Renaissance, there was still that recognized tension between the pagan myths and Christian beliefs, even though many attempts had been taken to alleviate that tension. Milton had to overcome this tension even more so than Dante because his work was dealing with an explicitly biblical subject and not an intentionally allegorical work. Pitt Harding agrees that “the project of converting the pagan epic to a Christian theme commits Milton to revive issues raised in the early encounter between the church and the classical order in which it emerged” (162); additionally, Milton had to reconcile the arguments of contemporary religious men and poets, such as Cowley,<sup>49</sup> who believed that Christian poetry should use only biblical material.

In addition to the cultural assertion against intermingling the pagan and Christian, Milton had his personal qualms with the pagan nature of the classical myths. According to some

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<sup>49</sup> Milton’s admiration for Cowley’s poetry would have made him familiar with his appeal in  *Davideis* to use only biblical material. ELABORATE

Puritans, the Bible needed to come foremost when finding poetic material and the classical myths had no place in Christian poetry.<sup>50</sup> However, as Banks points out, at the time he wrote *Paradise Lost*, Milton did not share the Puritan opinion of using solely biblical sources:

[I]n Milton's attitude toward Scripture we find a conspicuous difference between him and the others of his contemporaries who also devoted themselves in one way or another to the cause of religion. For them, but Bible was practically their only book; for him, the Bible was the book of paramount importance but by no means the only one. His love of literature took him far beyond the confines of religion, and the Bible is supplemented and enriched by the classics. (202)

While the Bible contained spiritual truths, stories, poetry, and numerous examples that could be used within his work, Milton found within the myths an artistic and moral resonance that could provide him with elements the Bible could not.

Thus, in order to alleviate the possible repercussions from using pagan myths within a Christian work, Milton takes two precautionary measures: first, he frequently clarifies that the myths are either fables—imperfect recollections of historical events—or feigned stories, not historical;<sup>51</sup> second, he ensures that the myths never override the biblical themes and story. The distinction between fable and history in *Paradise Lost* generally occurs in the poem's association with the Garden and occasionally Adam and Eve. For example, while describing the Garden Milton clarifies that some of the associations are not real: they are "*Hesperian Fables*" (IV.250) and "though but feign'd / *Pan* or *Silvanus* never slept, nor Nymph, / Nor *Faunus* haunted"

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<sup>50</sup> In "Peter Sterry and the Puritan Defense of Ovid in Restoration England," Matar notes that "Puritanism wielded a major blow to the tradition [of allegorical interpretations of classical myth in England]" (110), and he discusses Sterry's role in keeping the tradition alive—particularly among Puritans. But Matar also remarks that "Sterry felt the prevalent opposition to a Christian use of 'Heathen' literature and philosophy" (118).

<sup>51</sup> The only times Milton does not specify that the myths are false is where tradition accepts that the myths sometimes parallel biblical accounts or where he agrees with the euhemeristic tradition of viewing the gods as disguised demons.

(IV.706-8). Although the myths can aid in describing a seemingly mythic Paradise by spurring the imagination, they are not true and must not appear to be, lest the pagan material merge with the Christian. Additionally, as Jonathan H. Collett specifies,

There is an important difference, however, between the mythological imagery in Paradise and in Hell: the myths used to describe Paradise are “feign’d,” while those in Hell are “fabl’d.” Milton is very careful about this distinction, because it justifies his using material from the classical myths at all. He wants to emphasize the reality of the tradition deriving the gods and goddesses from the fallen angels, so in those passages he identifies the Greek and Roman myths simply as “fables,” accounts set down by the ancients. (92)

Because of the more accepted tradition of connecting the demons with the gods of classical myth, Milton does not have to make as great a justification of using mythological imagery in conjunction with Satan and Hell. The Garden, on the other hand, must retain its divine nature and thus the fictional aspect of most myths is constantly reiterated. In *Paradise Lost*, however, Milton’s subject goes beyond merely telling the story of the Fall of man; he writes a poem of epic proportions that not only illustrates his perception of Satan and Hell, but also depicts what he sees as perfection with the understanding that it will not be attained until we reach the future paradise. Milton’s appropriate use of the myths allows him to create a work that illuminates the utmost heights and lowest depths of Heaven, Earth, Hell and within human nature.

Through finding the best possible myths and placing them carefully—such as those of Hyacinth, Pandora, and Proserpina—Milton attains balance between the subject and the myths. Osgood admires the fact that “[t]he myth never encumbers the poet and gets in his way. It does not have the appearance of something in the wrong place, which makes itself the excuse for

being there. Rather it is properly related to the more important thing, and falls into the place where it belongs” (xxx). Milton does not fall into the common dilemma of attempting to make every aspect of a myth fit a Christian interpretation; by placing his Christian material in the forefront and making the myths subservient, he prevents the myths from becoming gaudy, heavy-handed moralizing and overwhelming the poem. This balance allows the myths to enhance the Christian themes in *Paradise Lost* instead of detracting from the overall artistry and moral excellence of the work.

We have discussed Milton’s need for reconciling the tension between the pagan myths and Christian settings and keeping a balance between appropriate use and overuse of the myths; the next step is to see how exactly he accomplishes these things to create a work that not only tells the story of man’s creation and subsequent fall but also carries within it Christian lessons of sin, redemption, grace, and insight into the human psyche.<sup>52</sup> First of all, as Collett points out, “There are practically no instances in *Paradise Lost* of myth used exclusively for visual physical description as there are, for example, in Chapman, the Fletchers, or others of the ‘Spenserians,’ or in the similes of Homer. Milton’s epic similes involving mythical comparisons are point for point relevant to the actions of the story. Thus myth serves the double function of description and thematic development” (88). At no time does Milton use extraneous myth for mere adornment; even his physical descriptions carry with them intentional implications. For example, the lines

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<sup>52</sup> Both Osgood and Collett give three methods they believe Milton uses to integrate classical myth within his poetry, particularly *Paradise Lost*. Osgood’s categories are Milton’s use of simile or comparison (xiii), “incorporation of a myth or the ancient conception of a divinity into a poetical setting of Milton’s own creation” (xviii), and “descriptions of nature [that] are generally either mythological or touched with mythology” (xxiii). Collett, on the other hand, divides Milton’s methods based on subject matter: “First are those myths that follow in the tradition which considers the gods and goddesses to be the fallen angels in a new guise” (88-9); “[t]he second broad use of myths is in descriptions of Eden and its inhabitants based on the sensual beauty of the myths, attested to since the days of the Church Fathers” (89); “[f]inally, in Book XI Milton introduces a third use, those carefully chosen myths that are types of the Old and New Testament revelation that Adam will receive” (89). Even though they both have great detail and insight, I will be using elements of both methods, but I will not be following their categories and instead will be concentrating more on the explicit methods Milton uses to strengthen his Christian themes while not following traditional approaches.

that tell of Adam's "Hyacinthine Locks / Round from his parted forelock manly hung / Clust'ring, but not beneath his shoulders broad" (IV.301-03) not only give an image of Adam's hair, but the allusion to Hyacinth—a mortal so beautiful that even Apollo fell in love with his beauty—evokes the understanding that Adam, like Hyacinth, has the ability to have a close relationship with God, while also insinuating that Adam will be wrenched away from God in a form of death.<sup>53</sup> Even more so, Adam was made not only spiritually but even physically to have a close relationship with God. Two words generate a brilliant image while carrying deeper undertones for the reader familiar with the myth, all the while allowing the myth to retain its true form.

Likewise, Milton's explanation for the sun's change in course<sup>54</sup> involves a mythic allusion: "At that tasted Fruit / The Sun, as from *Thyestean* Banquet, turn'd / His course intended" (X.687-89). According to the myth, the sun averted its eyes (some myths say it reversed its course) when Atreus served his brother the flesh of his own children. Not only does Milton make the connection between the sun's shift in course, but, as Collett comments, "The implication of the analogy with 'that tasted Fruit' in Eden does not require any elaboration" (95). And yet, if we do elaborate, the mythic echo of man eating man, an offense to nature itself, is presented here as the first affront to nature, especially the nature of man. Without over embellishing, the brief allusion brings with it the implication that the consumption of inappropriate food had cosmic repercussions. Interestingly, as Collett notices, this allusion is the

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<sup>53</sup> While Hughes's note connects the allusion to Homer's account of how Athene gave Ulysses "superhuman beauty . . . when she made him taller and mightier than ordinary men and gave him flowing locks like the hyacinth flower" (93, n 301), Bruce Thomas Boehrer in "Milton, Homer, and Hyacinthus: Classical Iconography and Literary Allusion in *Paradise Lost* 4.300-303" (2006) views the allusion as a direct reference to the myth of Hyacinth and Apollo, and although I do not agree with Boehrer's analysis of Milton's purpose for the allusion (homoerotic overtones), he does have a good argument for Milton's source.

<sup>54</sup> Hughes clarifies that, based on the previous twenty lines, "Milton's passage seems . . . to reflect Aratus' survey of the Zodiac in *Phaenomena*) and Boehme's theory in *Mysterium Magnum* (254, n 668-78), which states that Adam's fall brought with it the change in seasons, particularly winter, thus implying that the sun must have changed its course.

only reference to a classical myth in the latter half of Book X. Perhaps Milton does not need as much aid in describing fallen man and his fate as he does with the prelapsarian perfection of Eden and horrific Hell and its inhabitants. Nevertheless, as with Adam's "Hyacinthine locks," Milton's selective use of a myth increases the potency of the description; the thought of eating the flesh of one's own children induces a horror that hardly could be attained more effectively.

The most condensed instances of mythological imagery occur in the Garden of Eden. Eden, the representation of lost perfection and future paradise, provides Milton with the opportunity to utilize the myths frequently. Bush accurately describes mythology as "a kind of evocative short-hand, a language that satisfies the human need for imagination and emotional transcendence of mortal and earthly imperfection" (*Pagan Myth* 20), and Milton uses this aspect of myth to its fullest potential, particularly when describing the prelapsarian Garden. Because of some parallels between the Golden Age of myth and the Eden, Milton draws connections between the Tree of Life and another tree known for its tempting fruit:

Out of the fertile ground he caus'd to grow  
 All Trees of noblest kind for sight, smell, taste;  
 And all amid them stood the Tree of Life,  
 High eminent, blooming Ambrosial Fruit  
 Of vegetable Gold[.] (IV.216-20)

As with the apples of the Hesperides, the Tree of Life carries fruit that tempts mortals and yet is meant only for gods. Traditionally the entire Garden was associated with the Hesperides;<sup>55</sup> in keeping with the required distinction between myth derived from Scripture and fiction, thirty lines later Milton clarifies, "Others whose fruit burnish with Golden Rind / Hung amiable,

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<sup>55</sup> Sir Walter Raleigh, in his *History of the World*, states that the myth of the dragon-guarded golden apples of the Hesperides derives from the story of Eve and the Serpent, and also that the Garden was transported from Asia to Africa after the Fall (73).

*Hesperian Fables true, / if true, here only*" (IV.249-51). Milton is willing to associate the perfect beauty of the Hesperides and its golden fruit with that of Eden, but he maintains that the former may be fictional, although if it is not, it must be a mythological echo of the original Garden of Eden. Nevertheless, the allusion to the Hesperides brings with it the identification of a luscious garden with succulent fruit, full of vitality and boundaries. The connotation of fruit fit for divinity transforms Eden from a mere garden to Paradise.

But with the perfection of Eden comes the knowledge that it will not last; thus Milton uses select myths to foreshadow the Fall while also enhancing the imagination of the reader. One such instance occurs when Milton compares Eden with other famous gardens:

The trembling leaves, while Universal *Pan*  
 Knit with the *Graces* and the *Hours* in dance  
 Led on th' Eternal Spring. Not that fair field  
 Of *Enna*, where *Prosperin* gath'ring flow'rs  
 Herself a fairer Flow'r by gloomy *Dis*  
 Was gather'd, which cost *Ceres* all that pain  
 To seek her through the world; nor that sweet Grove  
 Of *Daphne* by *Orontes*, and th' inspir'd  
*Castalian* Spring might with this Paradise  
 of *Eden* Strive[.] (IV.266-75)

The picture of Universal Pan, commonly equated with the god of all nature, dancing in harmony throughout the Garden evokes a sense of energy and vibrancy. Additionally, the gardens of Enna and Daphne, located in Sicily and Syria respectively, provide the audience with tangible examples of the most beautiful gardens in the world. But with the seemingly idyllic gardens

come the undertones of future ruination. Milton himself alludes to Pluto's kidnapping of Proserpina from Enna, causing her mother, Ceres, to search for her and neglect nature, resulting in desolate winter. And although Milton refers to the Garden of Daphne, a physical location, his mention of the garden cannot go without the connection to its origins: the nymph Daphne, pursued by the Cupid-struck Apollo, cried out to Mother Earth, who answered by turning Daphne into a laurel tree. Again, as the garden of Enna's beauty is tainted by the kidnapping of Proserpina, the garden of Daphne is tainted by its origins. In both cases, the corruption comes from the desire of a god for what he should not have, which betokens Satan's role in tempting Eve and consequently leading to the Fall. Collett recognizes that "the feigned myths were ideal material for conveying the irony in that beauty and innocence of Eden were the anticipations of the Fall, both because the myths were themselves of the fallen world and, even more, because Milton chose myths that combined sense appeal with sorrow" (93). With a few mythological allusions Milton not only paints a picture of Paradise, but he reminds his readers that this Paradise ends.

Within *Paradise Lost's* vibrant Garden, Milton uses mythological allusions to foreshadow the fall while also commenting on prelapsarian human nature. After all, God made man "[s]ufficient to have stood, though free to fall" (*P.L.* III.99), and so Milton integrates the myths to depict the original man and woman in their sinless state while also insinuating their imperfect human nature to come. Because Eve was the first to eat the forbidden fruit and thereby bring sin into the world, Milton compares her with classical mythological characters who, perhaps because of their beauty, fell. When Eve first awakes, she finds herself

Not distant far from thence a murmuring sound  
Of waters issu'd from a Cave and spread

Into a liquid Plain, then stood unmov'd  
 Pure as th' expanse of Heav'n; I thither went  
 With unexperienc't thought, and laid me down  
 On the green bank, to look into the clear  
 Smooth Lake, that to me seem'd another Sky. (IV.453-59)

Although able to describe what she sees, Eve still does not comprehend that the image in the water is a reflection of what exists above her. Milton keeps Eve as an innocent creation, still learning of what is around her, and yet her reaction to seeing herself mirrors the tragic myth of Narcissus:

As I bent down to look, just opposite,  
 A Shape within the wat'ry gleam appear'd  
 Bending to look on me, I started back,  
 It started back, but pleas'd I soon return'd,  
 Pleas'd it return'd as soon with answering looks  
 Of sympathy and love; there I had fixt  
 Mine eyes till now, and pin'd with vain desire,  
 Had not a voice thus warn'd me, What thou seest,  
 What there thou seest fair Creature is thyself,  
 With thee it came and goes[.] (IV.450-69)

Without mentioning Narcissus, Milton uses the myth proleptically to demonstrate Eve's propensity for self-love, though not yet come to fruition. The gods turned Narcissus into a flower because he was wasting away while gazing at his reflection; Eve, on the other hand, is saved that fate through a voice that takes her to her husband. The past tense of "had fixt" reiterates that,

unlike Narcissus, Eve does not become catatonic and self-absorbed; she, albeit temporarily, is saved from self-love. Nevertheless, by alluding to Narcissus Milton retains Eve's original innocence while still foreshadowing her fall through misplaced desire. Thus, with a description mirroring a myth Milton successfully conveys a deeper meaning, without imposing explicit Christian doctrine upon it.<sup>56</sup>

And just as Milton uses myth to describe Adam's god-like beauty, he refers to Pandora's beauty when describing Eve; however, unlike with Narcissus, Milton states explicitly the connection between Pandora and Eve: both beautiful, they cause the downfall of man. With the description of Adam and Eve's nuptial consummation, Milton specifies that Eve is

More lovely than *Pandora*, whom the Gods  
 Endow'd with all thir gifts, and O too like  
 In sad event, when to the unwiser Son  
 Of *Japhet* brought by *Hermes*, she ensnar'd  
 Mankind with her fair looks, to be aveng'd  
 On him who had stole *Jove's* authentic fire. (IV.714-19)

Pandora's box, the infamous carrier of all of the world's ills, was opened by Pandora's husband, Epimetheus, the "unwiser Son,"<sup>57</sup> in essence allowing the effects of sin into the world. By elaborating on the connection between Eve and Pandora, Milton not only depicts a woman of

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<sup>56</sup> Most people of the Renaissance did associate Narcissus with self-love and vanity, so it is no surprise that Milton alludes to Narcissus when Eve first awakens. But another connection could be found in Sterry's metaphor of Narcissus and the soul:

This shadowy ffigure is that, which wee call this world, & the body. The Soule often looking upon this, like Narcissus upon his owne fface in the ffountaine, forgets it to be itselfe, forgets that itselfe is the fface, the shadow, & the ffountaine, so it falls into a fond Love of itselfe in it's owne shadowy ffigure of itselfe. So it languisheth, & dys becoming only a Shadow of itselfe, in which itselfe with all it's superior, and true Glories ly buried. (*Of the Nature of a Spirit* 162)

Through their friendship, Milton may have been aware of Sterry's connection between Narcissus and the soul, and thus not only does Eve's encounter recall the cost of vanity and demonstrate that, even though she was without sin she had the capacity to misplace her love, she represents the soul of Everyman.

<sup>57</sup> Hughes notes that scholars in the Renaissance sometimes identified Japhet, the son of Noah, with the titan Iapetus (104).

almost unimaginable beauty (she outshines one of myth's most stunning women), but he reminds the reader that, possibly because of her beauty, she causes the Fall. Nevertheless, Pandora's box also contained hope, and so Eve also carries with her the promise of hope through her offspring and the eventual Messiah.

As with most of his allusions, Milton's reference to Pandora also serves the double purpose of description and connotation. Milton does not use the allusion to Pandora merely because of Pandora's attractiveness and her role in releasing the world's ills, but because of the parallels with other characters in the myth. The placement of the allusion during the marriage of Adam and Eve connect Adam with Epimetheus—the one who, because of his wife's beauty, chose to open the cursed box.<sup>58</sup> Thus Eve, although the instigator of disobeying God, does not carry all the blame for the Fall; she shares it with her husband, who acted out of love for her. Along the same lines, James Whaler observes that when Milton compares the consummation of love between Adam and Eve to Jupiter and Juno—

hee [Adam] in delight  
 Both of her Beauty and submissive Charms  
 Smil'd with superior Love, as *Jupiter*  
 On *Juno* smiles, when he impregns the Clouds  
 That shed *May* Flowers (IV.497-501)

—Milton colors the seemingly innocuous simile with another foreshadowing of the fall through a reference to the *Iliad*, “especially to the termination of the story of Juno's beguiling of Jupiter” in Book XIV (Whaler 1051). Whaler proposes that

by suggesting the conclusion of that story Milton forces upon us the point and

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<sup>58</sup> Whaler makes the apt observation that, in order to be completely parallel, “God would send Eve to be avenged on Satan [Prometheus], and Satan and Adam would be brothers” (1056). However, because Milton does not force the parallel, he keeps from the common trap of imposed allegorical interpretations.

moral of the whole. Armed with the girdle of Venus, Juno has deceived her consort into abandoning himself to passion. . . . In the midst of his prelapsarian idyl of the Garden he could not more delicately—or more impressively—suggest, by his reference to the fine of Homeric myth, that neither Olympus nor Eden can escape connubial deceit. (1051)

The imperfect nature of the gods prevents them from having deceit-less marriages. However, Adam and Eve, as God remarks, could have prevented such artifice. Indeed, they were created “just and right, / Sufficient to have stood” (III.98-9); but with the knowledge of the outcome, Milton can integrate this allusion to presage the Fall. Nevertheless, Whaler’s observation requires Milton’s contemporary reader to be familiar enough with Homer to remember this particular incident between Jupiter and Juno in order for the full parallel between the divine and mortal couples to make sense. And although that may have been the case for many readers, even without knowledge of that myth the reader could still catch the tint of foreboding. Jupiter, one of myth’s greatest philanderers, may have eyes full of love for Juno at this present moment, but his eyes frequently wandered. This understanding of the god suggests that the currently pure love between Adam and Eve will only be temporary; it serves as a prolepsis to the postlapsarian lust in Book IX that will not satisfy and even further points to the later bickering that results from imperfect love in a fallen world. But at no point does the allusion take away from the innocence and love of the moment; Milton embeds the myth so that it first enhances the image of divine love while subtly betokening the future events.

When Milton uses the myths in conjunction with Satan and Hell, he does not use beautiful myths with shadowy undertones; he integrates those that enhance the offensiveness of those who had gone against God. But for those who have been lured into believing that Milton’s

depiction turns Satan into a classical hero,<sup>59</sup> Milton's description of Sin and her relationship with Satan serves a dual purpose: her birth presages the Fall and their incestuous relationship illuminates Satan's depravity. When Satan first sees Sin outside the Gates of Hell, he finds her

seem[ing] Woman to the waist, and fair,  
 But end[ing] foul in many a scaly fold  
 Voluminous and vast, a Serpent arm'd  
 With mortal sting: about her middle round  
 A cry of Hell Hounds never ceasing bark'd  
 With wide *Cerberian* mouths full loud, and run  
 A hideous Peal: yet, when they list, would creep,  
 If aught disturb'd thir noise, into her womb,  
 And kennel there, yet there still bark'd and howl'd  
 Within unseen. Far less abhorr'd than these  
 Vex'd *Scylla* bathing in the Sea (II.650-60)

At the end of the description Milton ensures the relation to Scylla by naming her. According to Hughes, "the allegorization of the myth to make Scylla a symbol of sin goes back at least as far as St. John Chrysostom [fourth century a.d.]" (48). Aside from the conventional connection, the grotesque description of Sin serves to enhance her fallen nature. John M. Steadman argues that Milton draws from more than just the story of the cursed Scylla, but takes from the tradition of the serpentine hybrid woman:

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<sup>59</sup> Russell M. Hillier, "By force or fraud / Weening to prosper': Milton's Satanic and Messianic Modes of Heroism" (2009), gives an interesting argument about Milton's depiction of Satan as condemning the classical modes of heroism. Although he does not refer directly to Milton's use of classical mythological imagery, Hillier's article does demonstrate the Milton does not intend for Satan to be a sympathetic character but instead Satan serves to argue against the ideal archetype of the classical hero. The heroic figure in *Paradise Lost* is Christ: first in Book III as the willing sacrifice, then in Book VI in the routing of the Satanic host.

By “following fame,” by investing his figure with the form of the conventional woman-serpent as well as attributes reminiscent of particular parallels, Milton enhanced the propriety, verisimilitude, and probability of his otherwise incredible monster. The outlandish and fantastic portrait could rely on an entire tradition, as well as the specific precedents of Ovid, Fletcher, and others to make it convincing. (103)

Even with the possibility that Milton does rely on the extensive tradition of the serpentine hybrid, the fact that Milton refers particularly to Scylla instead of merely leaving an open description requires some analysis. According to Ovid, Scylla began as a beautiful nymph; likewise, Milton depicts Sin as a fair woman from the waist up, suggesting that to a certain extent Sin can have a pleasurable appearance. But no matter the entire purpose behind modeling Sin after Scylla, Milton’s restraint and balance between the character of Sin and the myth results in a figure that inspires introspection that most likely could not be achieved through imposed Christian doctrine or a completely unique depiction of sin.

Not only does the personification of Sin as a hybrid monster force the reader to recognize the true nature of sin, but Milton’s choice for the nature of her birth refers to the origins of sin.

Sin recounts her birth to Satan:

All on a sudden miserable pain  
 Surpris’d thee, dim thin eyes, and dizzy swum  
 In darkness, while thy head flames thick and fast  
 Thre forth, till on the left side op’ning wide,  
 Likest to thee in shape and count’nance bright,  
 Then shining heav’nly fair, a Goddess arm’d

Out of thy head I sprung; amazement seiz'd  
 All th' Host of Heav'n; back they recoil'd afraid  
 At first, and call'd me *Sin*, and for a Sign  
 Portentous held me[.] (II.752-58)

Sin's birth requires reflection of the implications of this association. It reflects the birth of Athena, the goddess of wisdom; sin enters the world through Eve's desire for knowledge. Milton specifies that Sin sprang forth from the left side of Satan's head, which reiterates the notion that Sin enters the world through a desire for knowledge. It also suggests that there is a type of philosophizing that leads to false and sinful action. When Eve eats the fruit from the Tree, she claims,

O Sacred, Wise, and Wisdom-giving Plant,  
 Mother of Science, Now I feel thy Power  
 Within me clear, not only to discern  
 Things in thir Causes, but to trace the ways  
 Of highest Agents deem'd however wise. (IX.679-83)

She initially responds positively to the power that comes with knowledge and wisdom. Once time has passed and both Adam and Eve have recognized the full implications of their actions, Adam warns, "Let none henceforth seek needless cause to approve / The Faith they owe; when earnestly they seek / Such proof, conclude, they then begin to fail" (IX.1140-42). Not only does sin enter the world through the desire for wisdom, but the improper pursuit of wisdom can still result in spiritual failure. Without having to mention Athena (Minerva), Jove, wisdom, or knowledge, Milton evokes the question of how exactly Sin enters the world, and he uses knowledge of Athena's birth to do that without forcing an obnoxious digression.

With the birth of Sin comes the birth of Death, which Milton correlates not only with a classical image, but with a biblical one as well. Sin continues the story of her birth and subsequent affair with her father:

but familiar grown,  
 I pleas'd, and with attractive graces won  
 The most averse, thee chiefly, who full oft  
 Thyself in my thy perfect image viewing  
 Becam'st enamor'd, and such joy thou took'st  
 With me in secret, that my womb conceive'd  
 A growing burden. (II.761-67)

According to James 1:15, "Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death" (ESV). Satan, out of his desire to overthrow God, begets Sin, and then, out of further sinful desire, through incestuous relations begets Death. Even though here Milton limits his mythological allusions to Sin and her offspring, his choice in myths builds layers that articulate deeper truths than could have been achieved otherwise. Through Sin's monstrous form, unnatural birth, and incestuous relations, Milton illuminates the horrific nature of sin, remarks on sin's origins, and tarnishes any misplaced admiration for Satan. Without myth, this section may have been more unwieldy and digressive in order to achieve the same understanding of sin. The integration of myth enhances Milton's Christian themes while embellishing the artistry of the poem.

No where within *Paradise Lost* does Milton allow the myths to override his Christian material; instead, his careful integration of specific myths augments the work both artistically and morally. Osgood describes Milton's ability to interweave the biblical and mythical as

“clearness of vision,” the “characteristic of the poet which differentiates him from his period, and, in fact, from all the movement known as the Renaissance” (lxviii). The poet finds the best of the myths to relate the best in history while drawing from the worst myths (worst in the sense of depravity, not excellence) to depict the worst in earth and Hell. While he could have followed within the footsteps of his predecessors and merely applied Christian allegorical interpretations wholesale to the myths, or even written a purely biblical work, his integration of select myths that fit the occasions ultimately combines to create a work of great artistry and Christian ideals.

### Concluding Remarks

Undoubtedly, the methods used by Dante and Milton did not follow the cultural precedent, and yet they successfully integrated the classical myths to utilize their traditional connotations, artistic beauty, and ability to convey abstracts. The assimilation of classical mythology into poetry is not a particularly surprising occurrence; for centuries poets have recognized the artistic elevation and resonance the myths add to poetry. Dante and Milton also knew that the myths had the ability to enhance their poems; both poets understood that the myths endured because they contained a deep resonance that also translated into a lasting beauty. In essence, they knew what many poets have realized and implemented throughout history. What scholarship has not analyzed thoroughly is that in order to use the myths appropriately Dante and Milton had to overcome more challenges than perhaps realized. Davis Harding remarks that “Milton has been severely criticized from time to time for the freedom with which he has introduced mythological elements into his poem” (88), and he is one of few scholars who take into account the problems intrinsic in relying on myths so heavily in a Christian context. Dante too had to overcome biases from Christians against using pagan myths, although Milton’s criticism may have been greater because of the explicitly biblical material of *Paradise Lost*.

Despite the appearance of general cultural acceptance of the myths, religious men in the Middle Ages and English Renaissance did not always believe that the myths should be studied, much less enjoyed. The conviction that the myths came from the devil or even the fact that they came from a pagan culture prevented some Christian intellectuals, such as Mussato and Cowley, from acknowledging what the myths had to offer in the form of moral teaching or artistic inspiration; most of these men rejected the myths vehemently and suggested others do the same, on the grounds that the pagan myths did not belong in a Christian world and that they had the

potential to corrupt a person's mind and soul. Milton in particular understood this sentiment later in his life, and in *Paradise Lost* we can see his insistence on distinguishing between what is pagan and what is Christian. It is essential to understand not only the cultural perception of the myths but the recognition that there was a tension between the pagan myths and Christian beliefs; otherwise, we miss an element of ingenuity with what Dante and Milton accomplish with *The Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost*.

Analyzing the cultural background also provides us with a context from which to view *The Divine Comedy* and *Paradise*, not only to understand better what Dante and Milton did not do, but what they did do. They integrated pagan myths into Christian works because they perceived that the myths could not only add beauty to the poems but enhance Christian themes in ways that could not be achieved otherwise. Osgood notes that “[t]he poet who was religious, and hence peculiarly and continually sensitive to moral truth, found in existing mythology a partial expression of the truths dear to him, and in his poetic treatment added to the moral, religious, or imaginative value of the myth which he employed. Reverence as well as imagination characterizes such treatment” (x). Yet with those partial truths came potential conflict with the Christian truths that had to be resolved. The poets could use the myths, but only with the understanding that the myths carried elements that did not always align with Christian doctrine, such as the Olympians who had the tendency to display both the worst and best attributes in humans. With the moral truths came flaws that, instead of glossing over, Dante and Milton highlight to illuminate the greater Christian truth.

So instead of participating in the common trend of completely allegorizing the myths in order to correct the dissents between the pagan and Christian, thus concealing any of the flaws, Dante's and Milton's methods involve choosing specific myths that already fit the concept they

are trying to portray without imposing their own interpretations on them, such as Dante's prideful giants or Milton's serpentine Sin. The allegorical nature of *The Divine Comedy* in particular could have fit Christian allegorical interpretations of the myths, but instead Dante chose to use specific myths because of their pre-existing worth and not what he could impose on them; he could have made Geryon represent Satan or Cerberus the Serpent, but instead he places them appropriately throughout the *Comedy* to add both literal illustrations and deeper moral implications. Yet with this method also came a danger on the other end of the spectrum that could also inhibit the balance of the poems: the myths could override the Christian themes if not used appropriately and subserviently. Evidently Dante and Milton did not fall into that trap, making their achievements all the more impressive.

In contrast to Dante's possible problems, most of the struggles Milton had stemmed from the biblical nature and prelapsarian aspect of *Paradise Lost*. He was taking not only an explicitly Christian account of humanity, but he interweaves the imperfect, somewhat heretical myths into his portrayal of a perfect paradise—possibly the place they least belong. Nevertheless, their capacity to evoke images of golden gardens while foreshadowing the Fall, all within a few lines or even words, makes them the ideal sources. Thus, Milton deftly adapts the pagan nature of the myths to strengthen his Christian work by having them describe a golden age with the underlying message that it will not last. Their decisions to stay away from pure Christian allegorical interpretations ultimately allows the myths to retain their beauty and inner core while subsequently presenting Christian truths in a more natural way.

By considering all the factors involved in using the myths—particularly the fact that the myths were pagan and had the possibility of weakening the Christian themes within *The Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost*, not to mention the overall artistic quality of the works—we are able

to have a deeper appreciation for what the myths add to both poems. Interestingly, most scholarship so far has focused on only one or two aspects of Dante's and Milton's decisions and accomplishments in choosing to use the myths. Scholars such as Osgood analyze the copious number of myths involved in each work but do not quite delve into the intricacies involved in maneuvering between the cultural and personal recognitions of the tension between pagan and Christian, and those who analyze the myths within the poems generally neglect to focus on how exactly the myths strengthen the overall Christian themes of the works and not just add to their artistic merit. Dante and Milton navigated not only the spiritual issues inherent with using pagan myths in explicitly Christian works, but their methods of choosing myths based on existing truths and artistic suitability turns their works into two of the greatest Christian poems.

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