

**CLASSIC MYTH IN THE
POETIC DRAMA OF THE
AGE OF ELIZABETH ..**

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Classic myth in the poetic drama of the age of Elizabeth .. by Harriet Manning Blake

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HARRIET MANNING BLAKE

**CLASSIC MYTH IN THE
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Classic Myth in the Poetic Drama of the Age of Elizabeth

A THESIS

PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

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That this study has been a pleasure is due to the continual encouragement and the generous criticism of Professor Felix E. Schelling, who has been its inspiration.

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Classic Myth in the Poetic Drama of the Age of Elizabeth

INTRODUCTION

Long after medieval times, allegory remained in England. As the delighted reader of the *Faerie Queene*, recognized in the Red Cross Knight, a loyal subject of England's Virgin Queen, so those who saw the court plays of John Lyly found the same radiant opportunity. Here, the dazzling heroes of old, re-discovered in the new heritage of Greek and Roman story, played parts invested with an added interest, for they "shadowed forth" the familiar figures of the court of Elizabeth. In the *Endimion* and the *Midas* of Lyly, classic myth appeared, yet speaking the language and the thoughts of the audience itself. This kind of association of the old with the new always gives satisfaction, while classic myth lends itself to the spectacular, and was thus an eminently fitting theme for court plays. Lyly's influence reached down through the entertainments of Daniel and the masques of Jonson, while classic myth always remained a favorite subject. In the Lord Mayors' Pageants¹ also myth easily came to be the popular medium of appeal, and each year from 1580 to 1639 we find the merchant adventurers and the mariners of England glorified into classical or national heroes. The allegory was so arranged as to glorify, not only the company or the Lord Mayor of London as the seat of commerce, but also the riches procured by trade. Hence Jason and the Golden Fleece, Neptune and his Tritons, Ulysses and the Sirens, with Scylla and Charybdis, became familiar personages, while many of the other Olympians figure in the thirty page-

¹ Felix E. Schelling: *The Elizabethan Drama*, Vol. II, p. 128. Also Fairholt: *Lord Mayors' Pageants*, Percy Society, Vol. X.

ants that have come down to us. In Masque, and Court Play, and Pageant, we realize how strong a hold allegory still kept upon the imagination.

The reason for the choice of classic myth is very simple. Not only does it offer opportunity for spectacle, but myth, which is "in its origin, an explanation, by the uncivilized mind, of some natural phenomenon"¹ offers a wealth of material for that ethical interpretation of phenomena which is at the heart of allegory. "Les facultés qui engendrent la mythologie sont les mêmes que celles qui engendrent la philosophie, et ce n'est pas sans raison que l'Inde et la Grèce nous présentent le phénomène de la plus riche mythologie à côté de la plus profonde métaphysique," says Renan. He adds: "La conception de la multiplicité dans l'univers, c'est le polythéisme chez les peuples enfant; c'est la science chez les peuples arrivés à l'âge mûr."² We might add that allegory falls between these two ages, at the time when moral lesson holds its fascination. That age lasted in England long after the moralities, and it delighted especially in the pageants and the masques in which, side by side with the growing national spirit, there came down this delight in allegory and in ethical interpretation.

Yet while Lyly was entertaining the court, a play by a very young man, fresh from the University, George Peele, was given before the Queen by the children of the Chapel Royal in 1584. In his *Arraignment of Paris*, Peele used the familiar myth of the Judgment of Paris, and cleverly, at the end, he changed the story, in order to pay a graceful compliment to the Queen. This was not allegory; it was simply a pretty turn of the fable for an aesthetic purpose. The ethical intent had given place to the aesthetic. There seems to be no great difference in kind between Lyly's court plays and Peele's *Arraignment of Paris*, and Peele's debt to the older playwright has been emphasized often; but there is this vital difference, that while Lyly's drama is allegorical in spirit and ethical in intent, the younger playwright has turned aside, and poured out his poetry in the simple spirit of beauty. Years afterwards, a little play, *The Sun's Darling* appeared, with

¹ John Fiske: *Myths and Myth-makers*. (1873), p. 21.

² Renan: *Histoire Générale des Langues Sémitiques* (1863), Première Partie, p. 9.

the names of Ford and Dekker on the title page. This, too, is filled with the æsthetic spirit. It is poetic drama. The ethical and the æsthetic intent must ever be distinct.

Notwithstanding the fact that myth abounds in Court Play, and Masque, and Pageant, the present study excludes them all, and confines itself to classic myth as it appears in poetic drama. Yet a larger view of the same period seems wise, and the history of classic subjects for plays in England from the 16th to the 18th centuries, and of the source of these classic subjects seems necessary in order to afford a true perspective. In the larger review, not only the myths of Greece and Rome as they appear in English drama have been considered, but classic story as well. The line between story and myth is sometimes hard to draw, and except that there is a true myth at the heart of each of the poetic dramas of which especial study has been made, there has been no attempt to separate myth from out the classic store of story as it came down to us in the drama of the Elizabethan period.

CHAPTER I.

PLAYS ON CLASSIC SUBJECTS BEFORE 1642.

Before 1642, at least twenty-nine classic subjects and fifty-nine plays appeared. Five extant plays bear witness to the popularity of Hercules as a hero, of which two, *Hercules Cælaus* and *Hercules Furens*, appeared in Thomas Newton's *Seneca his Tenne Tragedies Translated into English*, 1581.¹ The third play, *The Birth of Hercules*,² is a "translation, now free, now rather close, of the *Amphitruo* of Plautus," although "nearly one-third of the English play is entirely original." *The Birth of Hercules* belongs to a period before 1610.³ The two most popular dramas on this subject were, however, those mentioned by Henslowe, as "Hercules, Pt. I. Performed by the Admiral's men 7 May 1595 and then till 6 Jan. 1595-6—11 performances," and "Pt. II—Performed as a new play 23 May 1595 and thence till 25 Nov. 1598—8 performances."⁴ These have been generally accepted as Thomas Heywood's *Silver* and *Bronze Ages*, respectively. In 1592, Greene, in his *Groatsworth of Wit*, mentions a sixth play, *The Twelve Labours of Hercules*.⁵

Of Dido plays, there remain two, the Latin Tragedy by William Gager, 1583, reprinted in Dyce's *Marlowe*, and the *Dido, Queen of Carthage* of Marlowe and Nash, 1591; but there are others which have not come down to us. Nichols mentions a Latin Tragedy as having been acted at Cambridge in 1564,⁶ and Henslowe, a *Dido and Æneas*, 1598,⁷ which Collier thought a re-

¹ Edited by the Spenser Society, 1887.

² Edited, 1903, by Malcolm W. Wallace.

³ M. W. Wallace: *The Birth of Hercules*, p. 168.

⁴ Greg's *Henslowe Papers*, Vol. II, p. 175.

⁵ Grosart: *The Life and Works of Robert Greene*, Vol. XII, pp. 131, 132.

⁶ Nichols: *Elizabeth*, Vol. I, p. 245.

⁷ Greg's *Henslowe*, Vol. II, pp. 189, 190. See also J. Friedrich: *Dido-Dramen* 1888.