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Authors	Schuett, Gabriella
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Shaping a Nation and Transforming Identity: Ovidian Mythic Allusions in William  
Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and John Milton's "Lycidas"

by

Gabriella Schuett

Under the Direction of Dr. Stephen Dobranski

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master's of English Literary Studies  
in the College of Arts and Sciences  
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the ways in which the classical underpinnings of two major Renaissance works shape the exploration of national identity in those works. By identifying mythological allusion as a semiotic system, we can understand how its presence in written texts informed the cultural, social, and political identities of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century readers. Mythic allusions function as signs in a literary text which signify greater meaning, and when an audience has access to the collective body of classical knowledge, they can piece together the cultural implications of the allusion's presence within the text. Examining the mythological allusions in Milton's *Lycidas* and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* allows us to construct some of the foundations of British national identity.

INDEX WORDS: John Milton, William Shakespeare, Ovid, British Nationalism, National Identity, Renaissance, Early Modern British Literature, Mythology, Myth, Allusion

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2024

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by

Gabriella Schuett

Committee Chair: Stephen B. Dobranski

Committee: Stephen B. Dobranski

Tanya M. Caldwell

Paul J. Voss

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Services

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to the enduring myths which fascinated me more and more as this project evolved and which will continue to hold my intense interest. It is dedicated to my loving and supportive parents Timothy and Ana Schuett who never failed to provide encouragement, home-cooked meals, or a place to rest my body and my mind.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There is not space enough in this almost 100-page document to adequately express my gratitude, but I hope in these brief words, I can acknowledge those who guided my writing, encouraged my learning, and supported my growth.

My thesis committee is made up of some of the smartest and most scholarly minded people I have had the privilege to know and study under. To Dr. Stephen Dobranski who both directed and inspired this thesis: your contribution to my growth as a student and a scholar cannot be overstated. From the first mythology class I took with Dr. Dobranski, I was fascinated with Greco-Roman myths and their enduring adaptations. This thesis would not be complete without his efforts as a teacher, a mentor, and an editor. I am forever grateful for his detailed critique, endless patience, and for lending his genius and time to this project. Dr. Paul J. Voss changed my perspective on Shakespeare as a playwright and historical figure; his confidence in my work gave me more strength and assurance than he will ever realize. Dr. Tanya Caldwell lent a listening ear and a helpful hand in a capacity beyond that of a thesis reader; her smallest suggestions in the prospectus phase of this project sparked curiosities that I hope to delve deeper into as my education continues.

I have some of the most patient friends who, despite not having the slightest interest in early modern literature or classical mythology, were always willing to listen as I developed my ideas aloud. To Katie, you have been my best friend through every major and minor event in my life. You are the oak tree to whom my sapling has been tied—supporting me and strengthening me as I blossom into myself. To Zachariah, you are the sweetest of zephyrs which follow the most brutal of storms.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION: AUTHORITY AND APPROPRIATION: THE MYTHOLOGY OF BRITISH NATIONAL IDENTITY

In the nineteenth century, Lord Elgin, ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, removed seventeen marble sculptures from the Pantheon at the Acropolis in Athens. The British Museum purchased these marbles in 1816. Still today, the museum separates these fragments of temples and religious idols from their cultural contexts and presents them as pieces of history from which British civilization arose. The British Museum has gone so far as to refuse to break up their collection and return the artifacts to Greece because they tell “a unique story of our common humanity” (The British Museum). These so-called Elgin Marbles suggest how, more generally, the recognized authority of the classical tradition inspired the British to assume a classical identity and build their own upon it. Appropriating the power of ancient mythology, the British bared icons and myths of their meaning to the culture and religion from which they came. Just as Roman roads and walls became part of Britain’s infrastructure, the development of British national identity relies heavily on the appropriation of Greco-Roman culture.

This thesis will examine the ways that early modern literary works also contributed to British national identity by borrowing from and re-interpreting antiquity. Focusing on William Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and John Milton’s “Lycidas,” I will present the mythic allusions in each text as a mechanism of appropriation from one great civilization with the purpose of forming the identity of another. In Greek and Roman religion and culture, myth explains what otherwise had no explanation—in both the natural world and in the existing social and moral order. For the Greeks and the Romans, myths were a site of storytelling and religion. For Britain, as I will show, writers appropriated the power of classical mythology, stripping

icons and myths of their meaning for the culture and religion from which they came, and using them for new, sometimes nationalistic purposes.

The concept of national identity is a myth in and of itself. The western world felt the cultural impact of Great Britain from well before its official formation in the eighteenth century. But what does it truly mean to *be* British? Daniel Defoe's 1701 satire *A True Born Englishman* demonstrates that a truly English person does not exist. In his "Explanatory Preface" to the work, Defoe points out "the vanity of those who talk of their antiquity" for the British "are derived from all the nations under heaven" (1). Our understanding of British culture and its national identity is deeply informed by the study of its literature. Pages written during the Renaissance, Restoration, and eighteenth-century are dominated by poems, narratives, plays, characters, and cultural icons that describe and, to some extent, dictate what it means to be British, originating from the early modern exploration of national identity. My reasons for focusing here on Shakespeare's *Midsummer* and Milton's "Lycidas" are the authors' shared Ovidian inspiration, my wish to examine two genres (comedy and elegy), and my belief that these texts illustrate the complexity of the ways in which literary mythic engagement contributed to early modern British national identity. Britain's identity, one that has permeated the cultural development of many other nations, draws from an even longer-established classical tradition: *the* classical tradition—that of Greco-Roman mythology.

Like a precious inheritance, classical mythology has been passed down through the centuries, with each recipient altering that inheritance to make it their own. From Homer to Virgil to Ovid to early modern poets, we see authorial interest compounding as time goes on. Just as Ovid owes "debts to the past" in his mythic adaptations in *Metamorphoses*, so later authors who allude to Ovid pay homage to him (Kilgour xiii). But these subsequent writers are

also indebted to the traditions that Ovid inherited. Such textual relationships as those between Virgil, Homer, Ovid, and the Renaissance authors they inspire are ambivalent, complex mixtures of fond imitation and covetous competition, as Thomas Greene notes in his examination of classical influence on Renaissance poetry (53).

Writings by Renaissance authors who reworked classical texts were also, of course, influenced by and indicative of the writers' own history and culture. As ideology-building tools, the mythological allusions in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literary works are especially effective when we consider how they grew from humanism's "recognition of the degree to which [man's] higher destinies are in his own hands" (Hanford 143). Early modern readers and writers regarded Ovid as not just a storyteller but a "moral teacher," and many of the allusions to *Metamorphoses* were treated as didactic allegories, informing readers about the classical values of harmony, balance, and restraint, which appear in much early modern literature (Bush 73). Values present in literature were then acted out and reproduced through societal engagement, creating a circular, cyclical effect—the culture represented the values and vice versa. Early modern authors who studied and revered these past cultures were able to engage with the complexities of classical allusion, integrating mythical characters, settings, and themes into a new British context. This process resulted in artists laying the first stones of an early modern British national identity.

The presence of mythic allusions in early modern British literature perform a specific function within the texts, influencing the effect each piece has on its audience. However, the only means a reader has of unearthing the significance of these allusions is through recognition of the body of knowledge from which the myths come, and this understanding was not necessarily passed down in a linear fashion. Craig Kallendorf describes the passing and reception of culture

as a chain: while a reader generally understands a text in the same way that the author would have in his or her own time, each new interpretation, reception, and adaptation of the myth adds a link to the chain. Kallendorf applies the concept of *transformation*, a term coined by a group of scholars at the Humboldt University in Berlin, to explain how the “process of cultural change helps to create the culture with which it is in dialogue” (147).<sup>1</sup> A mutual relationship exists between the text and the culture, whereby the culture is both absorbing the myth and changing it: readers’ interpretations of these myths both result from and contribute to the developing early modern culture.

By translating a text, an author is also transforming it. As Tanya Caldwell observes, translation can function as “an outlet for coded commentary” (9), and some early British writers translated the works of the ancients with specific rhetorical intent. Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in particular was ripe for the kind of transformation through translation that enabled early modern audience’s engagement with classical myths. The text is called *Metamorphoses*, and the transformations which occurs through translation reflects the transformations that take place in the text itself. Arthur Golding, George Sandys, and John Dryden each undertook the monumental task of translating *Metamorphoses*: Golding’s translation strived for fidelity to the original text, providing a more literal translation that aimed to convey the meaning of Ovid's words; Sandys remained generally faithful to the original Latin but took more liberties, incorporating his own poetic flourishes and interpretations; and Dryden introduced significant changes and adaptations,

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<sup>1</sup> Information about this research may be accessed with special permissions at [https://www.hu-berlin.de/en/research/profil/schwerpunkte/sfb/beendet/sfb\\_sp.html](https://www.hu-berlin.de/en/research/profil/schwerpunkte/sfb/beendet/sfb_sp.html).

operating under the belief that translation should not only convey the meaning of the original but also possess literary merit in its own right.<sup>2</sup>

Like the transportation of the Elgin marbles to the British Museum, these acts of translation were in a sense another form of appropriation. National identity has always been problematic for the British because so much of that identity is rooted in the selective use and transformation of different components of various cultures. This thesis aims to show how the many allusions to and adoptions of the classical tradition in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Milton's "Lycidas" function as foundational pieces of a developing British national identity.

Admittedly, a nation's identity can be difficult to pin down; it is a multi-faceted concept that attempts to capture "a sense of a nation as a cohesive whole, as represented by (the maintenance of) distinctive traditions, culture, linguistic or political features" (*OED*). The mythic allusions in early modern British literature address each of these seemingly small threads of national identity—language, culture, and politics—and put them in a particularly British context. For example, Maggie Kilgour and Andrew Hadfield have explored the physical and symbolic significance of water to Britain's national identity as it appears in, respectively, John Milton's *A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle* and Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, while Angela Locatelli has examined various pedagogical and political uses of the myth of Orpheus in English Renaissance writings. Mythic stories themselves became lodged in the psyches of early modern authors and audiences, who gradually discovered new ways of reading old texts, like the

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<sup>2</sup> A deeper analysis of the impact these translations had on the burgeoning British national identity will continue in chapter 1 of this thesis.

juxtaposition of Orphic reverence for music with Shylock's disdain for musical revelry in *The Merchant of Venice*. These classical allusions then served multiple functions for both writers and readers. Mythic allusions were a kind of language: the signifier was the myth, and the signified were the various possible meanings that it carried.<sup>3</sup> Re-imaginings, re-adaptations, and re-appropriations of myths occurred commonly during the early modern period, with each new iteration often adding, directly or indirectly, to the growing understanding of what it meant to be British.

The idea that mythic allusions are in a sense a literary language is at the cornerstone of my analysis of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Milton's "Lycidas." Recognizing that individual identities are formed by our understanding of how we differ from others, we can accept that national identity comes about from whole groups of people distinguishing themselves from other groups. Every distinct facet of the self is mediated through language—through the understanding of the world around us and our identification of our place within it. Just as the English language distinguished the British from other nations, the language of allusion paved the way for a humanist-educated audience to understand themselves in terms of the mythic signs that symbolized an early modern experience of the world.

The first chapter of my thesis will expand on the existing critical discussion of British national identity and its relationship with the classical tradition. As it is the basis of my textual analysis, an exploration of this relationship deserves a whole chapter. The concept of national

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<sup>3</sup> I should note here that my concept of mythic allusions refers not only to direct mentions of mythic figures, but also to aesthetic and structural appropriations of classical style that occur in Shakespeare and Milton's works.

identity is a nuanced one, especially when we consider the Janus-like face of Britain's early establishment, developing culture, and widespread, imperialist influence. The country's far-reaching cultural influence—one it carries on as we look to the future—depends largely on the appropriation of classical myth into British identity—an action that requires looking to the past; the irony of this phenomenon requires deeper investigation. In my first chapter, I assess how a humanist education formed an audience primed to receive the mythic allusions in early modern literature and apply them to a uniquely British experience. This analysis is bolstered by an evaluation of the acute impact that translating certain classical texts had on the formation of British national identity—specifically, the three previously mentioned translations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* by Golding, Sandys, and Dryden. To explain the relationship between myth and national identity, I also elaborate on the concept of allusion as language, and language as foundational to identity formation.

The second chapter consists of a deeper analysis of the mythic allusions in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, specifically how they function as a literary language that informs our understanding of early modern British national identity. While the allusions have a dramatic effect, their presence has several layers of irony that only those with a similar classical education can detect. Shakespeare clearly incorporates Ovidian myths through his inclusion of figures and stories, but only informed spectators can predict what lies ahead for the characters who bring mythology into their dialogue. These spectators can still enjoy the anticipation of finding out exactly how the lovers come through their folly to achieve the Elizabethan ideal of married love. They can appreciate how Shakespeare's reinterpretations of classical myth nestle into an early modern context.

The unspoken understanding between the playwright and his audience demonstrated his ability to build on ancient history in new ways. He refers to Ovidian figures and forms and applies them to an early modern setting. Athens calls to mind the Grecian city, but the audience can also recognize traces of a quaint, Chaucerian dukedom—a setting that infuses the play with a distinctly English aura. Theseus' rule over Athens seems more like a courtier's overseeing his lands than to the leadership of a mythic hero. The reenactment of the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe, the play's Athenian setting, the appropriation of Theseus and Hippolyta—such allusions demonstrate Shakespeare's talent for reproducing classical modes in a way that begins to set the scene for an original national identity. The significance of these and other allusions are elaborated in this chapter.

One crucial aspect of reproducing foreign stories for a domestic audience is recognizability. Shakespeare uses mythic allusions in this play to construct a fantasy world rooted in a story with which his readers were already familiar. Any deviation from the original myth holds just as much meaning as the instances where he adheres to the inspiration for his framing-world. The allusions in the play develop its characters, drive the plot forward, and allow the playwright to account for a harsh history in a whimsical fashion. This was perhaps a way to flatter the audience for their understanding of and access to a mythic body of knowledge—guaranteeing their participation in a collective, cultural experience. Shakespeare employs mythic allusions as political commentary, but his execution leans into the play's comic genre. Touching briefly on Shakespeare's close relationship with Ovid, I will show how the playwright's choices of thematic setting, character development, and plot demonstrate the way that a classical tradition can be reworked into a uniquely British context.

In the third chapter, I explore the poetic construction of Milton's "Lycidas," specifically how Milton infuses a pastoral elegy with Ovidian relics that nevertheless transpose beautifully to an English setting. Like *Midsummer*, "Lycidas" contains more than simple allusions to mythological figures. The poem employs models of subjectivity and objectivity which echo the mediation of the constructed self to the natural world we often see in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Pastoral conventions, particularly those present in "Lycidas," establish "paradigms of voice and agency" which both mimic the Ovidian mythic modes and reflect the growing awareness of one's own identity in relation to one's nationality (Shohet 102). The speaker of the poem seems to embark on a parallel journey to that of early modern readers who were beginning to navigate their subjective identities in context with their collective experiences.

Milton's mythically charged writing style reflects the cultural inclinations of his time, and this poem demonstrates the shared understanding between poet and audience of mythology, the pastoral mode, and national pride. The humanist-educated audience to whom Milton aimed his writing was primed to interpret a collective meaning behind his elegy—one that hearkens to Ovid's declaration at the end of his poem about the lasting impact of his art. My analysis will focus chiefly on the comparison between the original myths and their new context, but it will be supported by a discussion of Ovid's stylistic influence on Milton and of Milton's humanist education. The mythic allusions in "Lycidas" function as signifiers that make possible the audience's comprehension of the poem's meaning. They refer to allegorical characters as well as the physical landscape of Britain, giving way to an interpretation of the poem for the reader who can speak the language of mythological allusions. This kind of informed interpretation divulges the connection between the literary language and the nation whose identity it helped to build.

In the conclusion, I weave together the threads of national identity, the classical tradition, and the two authors whose works are emblematic of Britain's inclination to assume the authority of cultures that preceded them. Recognizing the presence and application of the classical tradition in British national identity can help us better traverse the complex concept of literature that is both a product and producer of the culture from which it came. My conclusion puts the burgeoning British identity of the Renaissance in historical context, showing how its foundations gave way to a contemporary culture still rife with mythic allusions to this day. The allusions are the language that helped to found this identity, and we must learn to interpret this language to gain further insight into a culture whose influence we continue to experience to this day.

## 2 CHAPTER 1: THE LANGUAGE OF ALLUSION & THE FORMATION OF BRITISH NATIONAL IDENTITY

### 2.1 Critical Overview

A comprehensive overview of the critical discourse surrounding the interplay between classical myth and Renaissance literature exceeds the scope of this thesis. However, there are a few foundational texts I am building on in my analysis of the presence and application of classical mythology in Renaissance literature. Among the earliest, Douglas Bush's text *Mythology & the Renaissance Tradition in English Poetry* (1932) explores the presence of mythology in early modern British literature. Bush focuses on Chaucer, Spenser, and Milton to highlight how Greco-Roman mythology evolved from its medieval roots into English Renaissance poetry. He also underscores Ovid's significance; he asserts at the start that “a history of mythology and the Renaissance tradition must be largely an account of the metamorphosis of Ovid” (xiii).

Published fifty years later, Thomas Greene's *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (1982) broadens the scope of antiquity's influence to include French and Italian literature. Adding to Bush's assertions of mythology's significance for Renaissance literature, Greene puts *imitatio* at the center of his analysis. For Greene, the works of Virgil, Homer, and Ovid show up as “dynamic presence[s];” they are a “complex set of origins” from which all major Renaissance works grow (19). Though Greene focuses on Petrarch's *imitatio*, his discussion of the ways that Renaissance imitations of classical models create new meaning overlaps with the work of scholars who have assessed more specifically Shakespeare and Milton's mythic engagement.

Among the most notable works on Shakespeare and Ovid is Robert Kilburn Root's *Classical Mythology in Shakespeare* from 1903. This influential work explores the aesthetic

impact and recognizability of classical allusions in Shakespeare's plays and poems. Root traces the evolution of Shakespeare's use of Ovidian (and, in a few cases, Virgilian) myth across his career in an attempt to establish the chronological context for all of Shakespeare's works. This was an important study at a time when the chronology of Shakespeare's plays was in question, and it is still valuable for demonstrating that the cultural impact of Shakespeare's works was due in part to their mythological engagement.

Jonathan Bate's 1993 *Shakespeare and Ovid* developed Root's insights by emphasizing Ovid's influence on Shakespeare's style rather than simply his importance as a source for the myths that Shakespeare used. Bate draws, too, from Greene's insights on *imitatio* and insists that Shakespeare's works "demand to be read side by side" with their Ovidian counterparts (85). Bate links Ovid's sensuous tone to recurring themes in Shakespeare's works, effectively portraying Shakespeare as "an Elizabethan Ovid" (5). This characterization suggests how an author can become a cultural icon, representative of the nation from which he comes and its identity. Bate calls the environment in which Shakespeare produced his works "a renovation of an admired earlier culture" (83).

Bate's analysis of Ovid's broad influence on Shakespeare gives way to Agnès Lafont's more focused ideas about the sexual inspiration the classical poet provided the early modern playwright. In *Shakespeare's Erotic Mythology and Ovidian Renaissance Culture* (2017), Lafont curates a collection of essays which challenge traditional Renaissance views on sensuous love; she turns her gaze to "more parodic and darker strains of erotic desire" as we see them in Shakespeare's Ovidian-influenced imagination (1). Lafont argues that Ovidian erotic mythology is the key to exploring the "deviant and subversive sexual desires" in Shakespeare's plays (25). The Ovidian mythology in Shakespeare's plays serve as "common aesthetic grounds" for the

playwright and his audience, and Lafont's examination of this overlap establishes just how crucial mythology's presence was for the development of early modern British culture.

The interest in mythology which continues to inform Shakespeare studies has a similarly long history in the study of Milton. Many scholars have analyzed Milton's mythic engagement as well as his contribution to early modern nationalism. The standard starting point for investigating Milton's use of mythology remains C. G. Osgood's *Classical Mythology of Milton's English Poems* (1900). In fact, Bush stresses his debt to Osgood in the chapter on Milton in his own book.

In his introduction, Osgood likens the ever-evolving appropriations of myth to the Greek-inspired architecture of a cathedral: "the pagan pride is gone, but in its new humility the column is more beautiful than of old" (xiii). Osgood's analysis of Milton's mythology continues in much the same way, with the author calling attention to the specifically Christian approach Milton takes to the myths he appropriates—a phenomena we also see in English translations of *Metamorphoses*. Osgood contends that Milton employs three methods of introducing mythology in his works: by simile or comparison; by incorporating the myth or deity into a new poetical setting; and by allusion to classical mythology in descriptions of nature.

Whereas Osgood's analysis incorporates an exhaustive catalogue of mythic references in Milton's works, Francis Blessington's *"Paradise Lost" and the Classical Epic* (1979) provides a more specific take on the process by which Milton crafted his famous poem. Blessington puts *Paradise Lost* in the context of the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Aeneid*, asserting that "*Paradise Lost* is Milton's own commentary on these classical texts" (xi). He divides Milton's poem into three spheres of action: hell, heaven, and earth, and further breaks down his treatment of each through its structure, style, and narrator. Parsing out the required attributes of an epic and directly tying

each to some facet of *Paradise Lost*—the anti-hero that is Satan, the descent into the underworld, a vast setting spanning from heaven to hell and the garden that lies between, and the supernatural forces of God(s), angels, and demons—Blessington skillfully demonstrates Milton’s well-deserved place amongst the classical authors and epics which inspired him. He paints a picture of Milton as a poet whose works were not just historically significant but history-making.

It is not surprising that, similar to critical analysis on Shakespeare and mythology, Milton’s relationship with antiquity is strongly influenced by his association with Ovid. In 1946, Davis Harding published *Milton and the Renaissance Ovid*, addressing Milton’s engagement with Renaissance editions and translations of *Metamorphoses*. From the verbal parallels in their writing to their whimsical world-building, Ovid and Milton share significant similarities which prove the ways in which the latter drew from the former. Where other critics center their analysis on the *classical* Ovid’s influence on Milton, Harding stresses the *Renaissance* Ovid—that is, a Christianized Ovid—as a crucial inspiration for Milton’s Latin poems, his masque, and *Paradise Lost*. It is this very adoption and adaptation of myth in Renaissance writing that fascinates so many early modern scholars and informs my own argument.

Richard DuRocher’s 1985 *Milton and Ovid* also singles out Ovid, but focuses more narrowly on *Paradise Lost*, specifically the way Milton develops characters and treats heroism and epic narration. DuRocher begins by acknowledging Ovid’s formal and generic reach as the poet of the *Amores* and *Ars Amatoria*, and then shifts his discussion to Milton’s engagement with *Metamorphoses*. Like Blessington, DuRocher explains the epic qualities of *Metamorphoses*, but he goes on to argue that Milton’s chief interactions with it were as “a developing cultural artifact” (29). He also examines the “dialogue of Milton and Ovid” and compares it to the similar dialogues between Spenser and Ovid, and Milton and Virgil (11). DuRocher shows the evolution

of Milton's engagement with Ovid from "youthful imitation" (39) to "subtle and comprehensive" allusion" (64).

Rather than identifying the extensive influence Ovid had on *Paradise Lost* on the whole, Mandy Green's *Milton's Ovidian Eve* (2009) further connects the Renaissance similarities between pagan myth and scriptural truth. She distinguishes herself from Bush and DuRocher's observations about the seemingly antagonistic relationship between Milton and Ovid (Christian and pagan) by arguing that the allusions surrounding Eve in particular do not attract the same "dismissive comments" about the tension in Milton's inspiration (5).

Taking a step back to look more broadly at Milton and Ovid, Maggie Kilgour's monograph *Milton and the Metamorphosis of Ovid* (2012) describes the relationship between the two poets and the reception of classical traditions; she questions ideas of originality and "undermines the illusion of a single pure source" in her analysis of the authors who influenced Ovid and of Ovid's influence on Milton (xiv). She argues that Milton studied not only Ovid, but also the adaptations of Ovid by earlier poets. In doing so, Kilgour explores the forms and meaning of creative imitation and challenges accepted notions about the way traditions are created and remade over time.

This thesis delves into the interplay between Shakespeare and Milton's mythic engagement and their profound influence on the formation and evolution of national identity, something that a few scholars have addressed. By closely examining the ways in which these two traditionally canonical authors weave mythological motifs, symbols, and narratives into their works, we can illuminate the role they played in shaping the cultural imagination and collective consciousness of early modern British society.

Patrick Cheney's *Shakespeare, National Poet-Playwright* (2004) reevaluates Shakespeare's role in shaping national identity, emphasizing his significance beyond the theatrical realm. Cheney highlights Shakespeare's broader impact on British history and culture, considering factors such as the rise of commercial theaters and the printing press. While acknowledging Shakespeare's formidable dramatic achievements, Cheney underscores the author's enduring literary influence and his status as a national poet-playwright in part by tracing Shakespeare's literary roots to Ovid. He sees Shakespeare as someone who relied on "the Renaissance notion of imitation" (17) but also broke poetic and generic boundaries.

Other studies that assess Shakespeare or Milton's contribution to the concept of national identity in early modern Britain are bolstered by research on the development of national identity as a whole. Beginning with Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983), for example, we see scholars sorting through the question of identity origins. Anderson theorizes that nations are not organic or pre-existing entities but are instead "imagined communities" socially constructed through shared beliefs, symbols, and narratives (15). Like Cheney, who highlights the importance of Shakespeare's works being printed and circulated, Anderson traces the development of nationalism to the era of print capitalism: the dissemination of printed materials in vernacular languages facilitated a sense of belonging among disparate populations. He highlights the role of cultural artifacts such as newspapers and novels in fostering a common identity among strangers with familiar national origins.

Throughout this thesis, I try to distinguish between nationalism and national identity, although each plays a role in the evolution of the other. National identity refers to the sense of belonging, shared values, traditions, culture, and history that individuals or groups within a nation associate with said nation; whereas nationalism is a political ideology characterized by a

strong attachment to one's nation, often accompanied by loyalty to one's own nation over others. In the subsequent chapters, I am drawing connections between the broad, critical discourse on nationalism in reference to early modern Britain, and then relating it to a growing idea of national identity.

One critic who has contributed significantly to the study of early British nationalism as it developed through literature is Andrew Escobedo. His *Nationalism and Historical Loss in Renaissance England: Foxe, Dee, Spenser, Milton* (2004) explores the intersection of nationalism and historical consciousness in Renaissance England through the “persistent interest” of key figures’ and “their nation’s place in time” (20). Escobedo delves into how these authors grappled with notions of national identity and collective memory in the face of historical upheaval, “ornamenting history with the vestments of fable (193).

Similar to Escobedo’s analysis which connects nationalism and national identity to specific British authors’ responses to historical events, Elizabeth Sauer’s anthology *Emergent Nation: Early Modern Literature in Transition, 1660-1714* (year?) collects diverse essays that explore the dynamic literary landscape of Britain during a period of significant transition. The anthology contains evaluations of generic, ideological, cultural, and local transitions that occurred between 1660 and 1714, using the literature of early modern Britain to trace these changes. David Loewenstein and Paul Stevens’s *Early Modern Nationalism and Milton’s England* (2008) focuses more narrowly on Milton’s developing patriotism and nationalism. The essays in this collection trace the poet’s ideas about a nation through his response to the English Revolution, his writings on the church and Reformation, and his attention to the promotion of the English language.

Because there is no shortage on scholarship which analyzes the presence and application of mythology in Renaissance literature nor on research about Britain's beginnings as a nation, it is surprising that, to my knowledge, none of the sources I have consulted directly identify mythic allusion as a foundational element of British national identity. Mythology permeated early modern education, art, literature, and language, but it did not exist in a vacuum. The adoption of classical myths was dependent on their adaptation to fit Renaissance cultural contexts, and this process of revision and reception began forming a collective British identity.

## **2.2 National Identity and Education**

The concept of national identity is complex. It is formed by the interplay of historical, cultural, political, social, and global factors. These elements shape the collective sense of belonging and shared identity within a nation. National identities evolve over centuries, shaped by conflicts, migrations, and cultural exchanges. How can we know who we are except through the knowledge of how we differ from others? But British identity is unique in that it does not ask "how are we different from those around us" but instead asks "how do we emulate the prestige and authority of those who came before us?" To piece together the foundation of Britain's national identity, we must look at how myths were appropriated to explain the nation's origin, the role mythology plays in humanist education, the necessity of translation, and the function of allusion as a kind of literary language.

On some level, of course, the concept of a national identity is itself a myth: it comprises a set of ideas or practices imbued with symbolic significance that have over time become naturalized and widely accepted. Yet Britain's specific origin story is rooted in an invented mythology from ancient Greece and Rome. British legend touts the mythic figure of Britain's

founder, Brutus of Troy, an alleged descendent of Aeneas and a fabled ancestor of the legendary King Arthur. Brutus' narrative begins with his birth in Italy after the fall of Troy. The supposed great-great-grandson of Aphrodite, Brutus—even before he was born—was said to have been graced with two prophecies: a sorcerer's prediction that he would cause his parents' deaths and be punished with exile, and a vision from the goddess Diana showing him a fertile island to the west where he would ultimately settle. By enmeshing British history with legends derived from Greek and Roman myth, medieval chroniclers ensured that they and their successors could align themselves with a rich and storied culture.

The connection of Britain's origins to Greco-Roman myth through the legend of Brutus was also one of the reference points for early modern humanist education. The rise of humanism in sixteenth-century Britain injected art, literature, politics, and education with renewed interest in classical writings. The budding awareness of a rational, autonomous human consciousness encouraged individuals to look back on Greco-Roman mythology with a different interpretation—one that saw these myths as more than just pagan stories and instead treated them as tales that mediated human experience with the natural world. Roland Barthes famously discussed such stories in terms of ideology, specifically arguing that mythology naturalizes human behaviors that are anything but innate (110), and we can often see early modern authors introducing mythology in their texts in this way.

We can further trace the integration of mythologies into early modern British literature through the wide references to the myth books of Boccaccio, Comares, Cartari, and Gyraldus; Renaissance authors would have been familiar with these books and the allegorical interpretations of mythic figures and accounts that they contained (Revard 341). Whether consulting myth books or reading classical authors directly, early modern authors could infuse

their writing with mythic allusions, thus introducing the classical values at the center of Renaissance humanism—harmony, balance, and restraint. The synthesis of classical values and early modern humanism as it contributed to the growing sense of British nationality was largely enacted through an education system that stressed the importance of learning ancient rhetorical models through translation of classical texts into English.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was emblematic of this pedagogical emphasis. Students were tasked with double translations, first rendering in English a passage from an ancient writer, and then translating the English version back into Latin or Greek and comparing their work with the original passages. For Greek, students translated works by Lucian, Demosthenes, Herodotus, Aristophanes, Homer, and Euripides; for Latin, Terrence, Virgil, Horace, Cicero, Caesar, and Sallust (Chaplin 282). Through translation, students not only learned classical languages but also captured the rhetorical spirit of the writers with which they worked. Most notably, the rhetoric of the *Aeneid* praised the hero as “a model of virtue,” while his enemies were “condemned for their vices” (Kallendorf 140). Ovid, by comparison, provided classical, rhetorical models for poetry that “dwells on the destructive power of time, and which seeks to wrest immortality from its ravages” (Burrow 302-03). Each classical author had unique, substantive lessons for early modern students as they were simultaneously being indoctrinated in ancient rhetorical models and verse forms. It was later, when applying these structures to their own writing or identifying them in the writings of English authors, that students demonstrated the success of their classical educations. By engaging with culture, they contribute to it and, ultimately, to the burgeoning sense of British nationality.

### 2.3 National Identity and Translation

If translating classical texts from their original Latin to English was a useful educational tool, it was also a seminal act of identity formation. Though early modern authors drew inspiration from several classical sources, this thesis takes particular notice of Shakespeare and Milton's Ovidian influences because of the crucial role that the *Metamorphoses* played in the early modern education system, the development of literary technique, and the interpretation or appropriation of the classical tradition. When early modern translators chose to work with Ovid's text, they brought to their readers ease of access and, therefore, reimagination. As I noted in the introduction, the three pivotal translations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are those of Arthur Golding, George Sandys, and John Dryden.

The first translation of Ovid into English which was especially effective in facilitating the reception of classical myths was Arthur Golding's 1567 edition of *Metamorphoses*. It gave early modern artists with little or no Latin easier access to ancient myths while imagining "porous, permeable boundaries" dividing Christian artists and audiences from the pagan culture of Ovid's poem (Wallace 728); Golding in his moralizing prefaces to his translation helps to mitigate potential offense to early modern readers, as he underscores the similarities between otherwise competing cultures (731). He thus gave his Christian audience permission to engage with pre-Christian writings; readers could indulge in their mythological, classical curiosities while maintaining their religious beliefs.

Golding's translation was apparently read widely: it went through nine editions, the last of which was published in 1612.<sup>4</sup> We might attribute its popularity to the ease with which an early modern audience could relate to his Christian framing of pagan myths, although his moralizing is subtler in the body of the text. In his translation, Golding reflects the humanist emphasis on individual agency and introspection, whereas Ovid's original poem focuses more on divine intervention and often downplays the influence of men and women on the course of history (Gibbs and Ruiz). When sixteenth- and seventeenth-century authors drew from Golding's Ovid, they were participating in and producing a new British national identity.

George Sandys published his translation of the first five books of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in 1621, just as he set out for the colony of Virginia.<sup>5</sup> Like Golding, Sandys not only translated the language of the text; he transformed Ovid's verse forms from Latin hexameters to English heroic couplets, aiming to create a text that was true in meaning to the original language but also aesthetically pleasing to read in English.

Where Sandys' translation took a more word-for-word approach in retaining meaning from Latin to English, Dryden's translation represented a breakthrough in the transformative process. That is not to say Dryden's approach to translation was always liberal. He divided translations into three categories: metaphrase, where a translation preserves the exact meaning

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<sup>4</sup> Originally published in two installments (1565 and 1567), the subsequent publications were in 1575, 1584, 1586, 1587, two editions in 1593, 1603, and the final in 1612.

<sup>5</sup> No extant copy of the 1621 edition exists, however. The first complete edition of the fifteen books of *Metamorphoses* was published in London in 1626 with two more editions following in 1628 and 1632.

and structure of the original language, often at the expense of interpretive freedom; paraphrase, which allows the translator to rephrase and reinterpret the original text for readability and convey its essence; and imitation, in which the translator engages with the original text on a deeper level, producing a work that is an original creation that still remains faithful to the source material.

Dryden was himself the product of an education that emphasized the significance of the classical tradition, and his translations of Ovid's works engage with ancient material in an early modern framework—employing more patterns, more couplets, and more logic as his humanist education would mandate.

Each author's decision to translate *Metamorphoses* into English indicates his reverence for classic tradition, and the popularity of these translations suggests the ongoing hold that classical stories had on the seventeenth-century reader's imagination; however, these English translations by English authors—regardless of whether it was intentional—inspired a distinctly British perspective on the myths rendered from their original Latin. As noted earlier, humanist education required that boys learn Latin and Greek; they were also expected to translate texts from various languages into English. Reading *Metamorphoses* in its original language was necessary to learn rhetoric and verse forms, but engaging with the English translation led readers to particularly English interpretations of ancient myths.

### Original English Compositions and National Identity

Translation of classical texts into English also underscored the necessity for original compositions in English that would then contribute to a distinctly British canon. Alexander Gil, who was high master at St. Paul's School while Milton was a student there, continued to emphasize classical learning but also proudly advocated the use of English to write original

poetry. Gil's tutelage would have encouraged Milton to build on his Greek and Roman predecessors and to view the writing and reading of English poetry and prose as a "serious and patriotic endeavor" (Chaplin 285). Though little is known about Shakespeare's formal education, we do know that as the son of a burgess, he would have been entitled to free tuition at a local grammar school and, therefore, studied rhetoric, Christian ethics, and literature; though he never attended university as Milton did, Shakespeare was rumored by an actor in his troupe to have taught Latin briefly as a country schoolmaster (Levin 3). Both Shakespeare and Milton enjoy a shared humanist education rife with references to the classical tradition which so heavily influenced their writings. The classical allusions an author incorporated into their own work could convey the author's relationship to the self, to their audience, and to literary tradition, and they were indicators of an emerging consensus of identity.

Authors could not effectively invoke heroes, monsters, and muses without expecting that their audience shared a substantial understanding of the myths from which they came. The references to and adaptations of myth in works such as *Arcadia* or *The Faerie Queene* demonstrate not only Philip Sidney's and Edmund Spenser's respective understanding of their classical source material but also their assumption of an audience familiar with the same ancient stories. Authors who incorporated mythic figures in their works were doing more than merely alluding to them—they were reimagining literary forms, reworking physical settings, and recontextualizing historical nuance to capture something about an antiquated past that resonated with their early modern audiences.

The appropriative nature of British national identity is significant because of the huge influence British culture had—and continues to have—on the Western world. In this thesis I am pointing out how Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Milton in "Lycidas" used

mythology in a way that informed early modern British national identity, but there are larger implications for this research. One culture's engagement with another—one that is ancient and mythically-charged—sparked something exceptional in its own right: early modern British national identity, as I argue. But because of Britain's imperialism, that identity subsequently influenced the formation of various other cultures. Classical values seeped into British civilization, which then went on to conquer and occupy much of the globe—reaching a point where almost all Western civilizations are now in some way influenced by classical myths.

### 3 CHAPTER 2: SHAKESPEARE'S MYTHIC MIDSUMMER

#### 3.1 Introduction

Shakespeare's infusion of classical myth into his plays is well documented, and scholars largely agree on the particularly Ovidian influence throughout the playwright's works. Robert Kilburn Root in the 1960s compiled a comprehensive list of the mythic allusions present in Shakespeare's plays and poems, noting that with few exceptions, the substantive mythology of Shakespeare's works comes from Ovid and Virgil (14). Excluding the references to Theseus, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* contains 37 mythological allusions, and among those, Root notes, there is only a "slight trace" of Virgil (122). Jonathan Bate amplified Root's findings when he referred to Shakespeare as an "Elizabethan Ovid" (5), and many subsequent scholars have drawn on Bate's study to understand Shakespeare's relationship with Ovid. Patrick Cheney, for example, highlights how Shakespeare's use of poetry throughout his plays reflects Ovid's own poetical prowess, a comparison which leads us to a better understanding of the "Renaissance Ovid" (29). Cheney hypothesizes that humanist scholars trying to recover classical learning would have seen Ovid as a poet-playwright—based on Ovid's lost play *Medea*, a tragedy that survives in only two lines—and it was from this vision of Ovid that Shakespeare fashioned himself. Agnès Lafont further complicates Bate's analysis. She affirms Renaissance notions of Ovid as "an apologist for the joy of sex" but seeks to "challenge and nuance" traditional portrayals of love by focusing on "more parodic and darker strains of erotic desire" (1). She analyzes Shakespeare's use of mythology in terms of its eroticism within both classical and continental aesthetic contexts. Outside of these examples, scholars continue to produce new

perspectives on the play, many of which center around *Midsummer*'s cultural, theological, and pedagogical significance.<sup>6</sup>

Though all of these scholars identify the importance of Ovid's presence in Shakespeare's works, they do not recognize how the Ovidian mythic allusions help establish an early modern British national identity. In this chapter, I assert that *A Midsummer Night's Dream*'s multitude of mythic allusions establish a shared body of knowledge from which the dramatist's contemporary audience could have drawn to facilitate both their understanding of the unfolding events onstage and their navigation of the Elizabethan society in which they lived. This interplay—the audience's recognition of the myths and their active application of knowledge of those myths—contributes to a burgeoning British national identity.

In addition to Root, critics have long noted the importance of Ovidian myth in Shakespeare's mid-1590s comedy. Darlena Ciraulo's analysis of the similarities between Ovid's

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<sup>6</sup> *Critical Insights: A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2020) edited by Nicolas Tredell, for example, contains 16 articles by 13 scholars which explore these and other topics including the play's use of gender and queerness, as well as comparisons between the play and its cinematic and modern theatrical adaptations; Grant Smith in *Names as Metaphors in Shakespeare's Comedies* (2022) argues for the interpretation of literature as an expression of basic human emotions rather than as cultural propaganda, and his chapter on *Midsummer* examines the symbolic nature behind the play's mythic figures beyond mythological significance. Leonard Barkan's *Reading Shakespeare, Reading Me* (2022) looks at reading Shakespeare as an act of self-discovery, with the chapter on *Midsummer* comparing Bottom's performance to the performative nature of life.

myth of Salmacis and Shakespeare's portrayal of Titania and Bottom's entanglement explores the play's treatment of strong women and its critique of gender roles (97). Taking a less gendered but still socially-framed critical approach, Claude Fretz's analysis of animal dreams and human-animal transformation in *Midsummer* identifies Shakespeare's method of adapting Ovidian myth for an early modern audience through his references to religion and demonology (329). In her chapter of *Shakespeare's Botanical Imagination*, Lisa Hopkins then turns to the play's portrayal of "plants as agents of transition," arguing that the plants of the *Midsummer* wood exist in "the scientific [sphere] of botany and the mystical one of fairylore" (172); she shows how the plant life in *Midsummer* is both mythical and recognizable to a British audience, and emphasizes the Ovidian boundary-blurring effect of the plants' presence at the threshold between Athens and the mystical wood. While a full account of the scholarship surrounding the Ovidian influence in *Midsummer* is not possible within this thesis, these representative texts illustrate the way that existing analyses tend to stop just short of recognizing the relation between Ovidian mythic allusions in *Midsummer* and early British identity.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Other influential studies of Ovid's role in *Midsummer* include: Naill Rudd's "Pyramus and Thisbe in Shakespeare and Ovid: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Metamorphoses* 4. 1-166" (1979), which documents how the Ovidian framework of the play at large affects the audience's reception of the embedded performance and its deviation from classical source material; Hanne Carlsen's "WHAT FOOLS THESE MORTALS BE! Ovid in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*" (1988), which underscores Ovid's presence in *Midsummer* through Shakespeare's depiction of love and his use of direct allusions; Medeleine Forey's "'Bless thee, Bottom, bless thee! Thou Art Translated!': Ovid, Golding, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*" (1998), which establishes

Just as a comprehensive survey of scholarship focusing on myth in *Midsummer* is unachievable in this space, so too is a full catalogue of each of the play's mythic allusions and an analysis of its contribution to British national identity. Rather than attempt to provide an exhaustive account of each passage where Shakespeare uses Ovid, I wish to examine the significance of 1) the play's physical stage-setting and the dual settings of Athens and the forest; 2) the characters of Theseus and the fairies (Titania, Oberon, and Puck); and 3) the artisans' portrayal of the myth of Pyramus and Thisbe. In *Midsummer*, the interplay between myth and reality forms the fabric of the narrative. Throughout the play, the purpose of myth transcends mere storytelling; it engages the audience in the process of identity building by functioning as a literary language. Within this intricate web of dreams and realities, the mythological motifs serve as dynamic agents, shaping not only the setting, characters, and plot, but also reflecting and influencing the nascent notions of British nationhood.

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the particular influence of Golding's translation of *Metamorphoses* in *Midsummer* by comparing specific speech patterns present in both the play and in Golding's text; A. B. Taylor's "Ovid's Myths and the Unsmooth Course of Love in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*" (2004), which explores the presence in *Midsummer* of the Ovidian myths of Pyramus and Thisbe, Ino and Athamas, and Salmacis and Hermaphroditus; and Christopher McDonough's "'[Stabs Himself.] Thus Die I, Thus, Thus, Thus!': A Forgery, Virgilian Allusion, and Schoolboy Joke in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*" (2019), which addresses the many-pronged implications of the added stage direction from the embedded play in *Midsummer*.

## 3.2 Mythical Setting

### 3.2.1 *The Stage*

In a discussion of how Shakespeare's plays contributed to the formation of Britain's national identity, we must acknowledge the theater's role in establishing and expanding a specifically British cultural experience. The broader setting of the Elizabethan stage encases the drama's dual settings of Athens and the wood to which the lovers retreat in *Midsummer*. The social standing of the actors on stage, the kinds of people who attended performances, and the physical theatre in which the play was performed give us insight into how the dramatic presentation of obviously Ovidian themes would have resonated with an early modern audience.

In the early sixteenth century, professional theater and performers existed on the margins of society; it was not until the 1560s and 1570s that English professional theater gained some semblance of respectability—coinciding with and likely a result of the establishment of permanent theaters. Aristocratic patrons of drama took actors into their households so they could avoid being perceived as vagabonds or masterless men (McDonald xi). Despite the ardent efforts of public officials to close the theaters, plays remained undeniably popular because of their accessibility and affordability; class divides “melted before the magical process of dropping pennies in a box” (Harbage 12). In the theater, the distinguishing titles of craftsman, retailer, and gentry unified to one identifier: audience. The diversity of the crowd reflected that of the nation, creating a space where collective identity mattered more than that of the individual. Gathering in an open-air theater, audiences diverted their attentions from everyday life and communally experienced the theatrical construction of a world that reflected and often critiqued their own.

The physical staging of *Midsummer* as it would have been performed for an Elizabethan audience would be “an unrecognizable mixture of plainness and elaborate decoration” to a

modern theatergoer (McDonald xi). Rather than modern conceptions of theatrical decor, early modern audiences saw a stage set with large props like trees to indicate the scenery or painted tapestries to provide a backdrop for the action; they would know the play's location from a sign carried across the stage—reading “Athens” for the opening and closing scenes of *Midsummer* or “Forest” for the scenes in the woods. The setting of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, however minimalist it appeared in performance, was enhanced by the attributes it shared with Elizabethan society and through the play's descriptive dialogue. The play's physical staging is the only part of *Midsummer*'s setting that we can reasonably identify as simple; as we move between the Athenian and wooded settings of the play, complex notions of lawfulness, erotic desire, and transformation arise.

### 3.2.2 Athens

Though the mystic wood hosts the majority of the sensual and metamorphic action, *Midsummer* begins and ends in the city of Athens where many a Greek myth may trace its origin. In much the same way that the British claimed mythic foundation through the legend of Brutus, Athens claimed Theseus as one of its early, historical kings and “not, like other heroes, just a doer of prodigious deeds” (Graf 138). When Shakespeare set *Midsummer* in Athens and staged the mythic hero Theseus as its ruler, he was implicitly drawing a comparison between the commonwealth of England and this long-respected ancient republic.

Like Elizabethan England, Ovidian Athens was a place of cultural and global renown. In *Metamorphoses*, Ceres, goddess of the harvest, gives Triptolemus seed and bids him to leave Athens so he can “scatter it / Partly in virgin land and part in fields / Long fallow” (V.647-48). This myth establishes Triptolemus as the founder of agriculture, and when asked where he comes from he replies: “Famous Athens is my country” (654). To an early modern reader, Ovid's

telling of Triptolemus' cultivation of both "virgin land" and "fields / Long fallow" might mirror Britain's colonization of supposedly new worlds and its occupation and appropriation of existing civilizations. Ovidian Athens, like Great Britain, was a land that bred more lands, and Shakespeare's appropriation of an Athenian setting to suit British sensibilities is an especially pointed example of how mythic allusion in early modern literature could help to establish the nation's sense of identity.

Another aspect of Britain's identity as a world power which it shares with Ovidian Athens is its well-established reputation amongst both allies and enemies. When a myriad of atrocities befalls Thebes "and cities near at hand besought their kings / To visit Thebes with words of sympathy" (VI.413-14), cities from all over Greece send their condolences, but "Athens alone (Who could believe it?) lagged" (424). The parenthetical aside in this line indicates just how uncharacteristic it was of "Famous Athens" to be unable to send representatives to Thebes. Ovid goes on to explain that Athens was absent from this gathering only because the city was being attacked by "Sea-borne bands / Of wild barbarians" (425-26). Athens escapes the barbarians' clutches through the aid of an ally, Tereus of Thrace, and though this alliance eventually proves disastrous for the city's royal family, this myth establishes Athens as a city with strong allies, a fact later reinforced in Book VII of *Metamorphoses* when Aeacus responds to Minos' request for aid in a war against Athens: "No land is bound by closer ties than we / To Athens: ours are treaties of such force" (489-90).<sup>8</sup> In the play's Athenian setting, Shakespeare's

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<sup>8</sup> Tereus eventually takes Philomel from Athens under false pretenses; he rapes her and cuts out her tongue to prevent her from telling anyone of his deeds. Eventually, Procne and Philomel exact vengeance on Tereus by murdering Tereus' son Itys and feeding him to his father. Each

Elizabethan audience could see a version of their own political greatness acted out on stage, a classical reflection of their own kingdom that might have evoked a critique either in favor of or against the similarities presented.

But by casting Athens as the setting of *Midsummer*, Shakespeare appropriates the ancient Grecian city, transposing the site of classical culture and democracy to a kind of dukedom—something more familiar to an Elizabethan audience who understood the class divides between noblemen, gentry, and peasants (Barton 252). Classical Athens represents both the ideals and the imperfections of a republic; it is “a polity where laws restrain the ruler” (Herman 5). Exchanging historical accuracy for Elizabethan familiarity—for there were no dukes in ancient Greece, “renowned” or otherwise (I.1.20)—Shakespeare crafts an ancient Athens which, like Elizabethan England, was ruled by a monarch; the monarchs of both were equally, if not more so, as accountable to the laws of the land as their subjects. In her famous “Golden Speech” of 1601, Queen Elizabeth I rejected the notion that “the glosing lustre of a glistening glory of a Kings title may so extoll us, that we thinke all is lawfull what we list, not caring what we doe” (The National Archives). In the opening act of *Midsummer*, the audience sees a ruler similarly bound by the laws of his land: “Or else the law of Athens yields you up / (Which by no means we may extenuate)” (I.1.119-20). It makes sense, then, that the pardon Theseus gives in act IV takes place while the characters are still in the forest, outside the bounds of a cruelly lawful Athens.

Though the lawful order of Athens seems to reflect the political harmony of Elizabethan England, the audience might question the validity of certain laws in Shakespeare’s Athens. Like

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figure is transformed into a bird with qualities that personify some aspect of their predicament or personality (Ovid VI.409-689).

ancient Athens, Elizabethan England was experiencing a period of relative stability and prosperity, with Queen Elizabeth I reigning as a lawful monarch. By depicting Athens as a place of order and harmony—a recognizable environment to an Elizabethan audience—Shakespeare may have been subtly commenting on the virtues of good governance and the importance of social cohesion.

However, contemporary spectators would likely have taken issue with both the entitled sense of ownership Egeus has over his daughter and her punishment of death should she disobey him. In Elizabethan England, arranged marriages were common, and as in Hermia's case, the disobedient daughter might face a cloistered life, "Chanting faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon" (I.1.73). But a bride's refusal to marry her parents' choice of husband was not punished with death. Ultimately, Theseus exerts his will over the law, allowing the play to avoid a tragic ending where Hermia and Lysander are put to death for their commitment to each other; instead, the play presents the typical comedic resolution of "gentle concord" through marital union (IV.1.142). But even this divergence from the law, like Demetrius' continued enchanted state, complicates the generic need for the restoration of order, "balancing levity with much darker themes" (Herman 22). Here, *Midsummer* may call for its audience to agree that equitable interpretations of rules are preferable to strict adherence to the letter of the law, but viewers must also question the reliability of a ruler who would go back on his earlier promises—even if the action better suits the generic themes needed for the play's resolution. The theatre is a useful way for an Elizabethan audience to question their communal socio-political experience and perhaps to find answers that help them establish a collective identity.

### 3.2.3 *The Wood*

Where Athens mirrors (and perhaps complicates) the ordered, civilized aspects of Elizabethan social expectations, the wild, untamed forest “a league without the town” (I.1.165) reflects individual desires and the irrational self. The contrast between the two settings serves as a thematic backdrop for the play. To thwart the expectations of the duke and Egeus and to fulfill the young lovers’ desire to marry, Hermia and Lysander must go through the wood “to that place the sharp Athenian Law / Cannot pursue” (I.1.162-63). In Athens, the dispute of Egeus’ right of ownership over Hermia, however arcane, is mediated by a law-bound authority figure who eventually comes down on the side of an equitable interpretation of the law. In the contrasting woods, the quarrel between Titania and Oberon over custody of the changeling boy results in Oberon essentially poisoning Titania so that she unwittingly gives him what he wants. The mythically charged Athenian setting comments on Britain’s similar renown and governance; turning our attention to humankind’s relationship to the natural world, the portrayal of the forest is both distinctly British and Ovid-inspired.

Though the wood is a place of myth and magic, we also see it as a refuge—not just for the lovers to escape Athenian law, but also for two friends to confide in one another. Anyone who has lived in the natural world, however, can attest to its fickle characteristics. Telling Helena where she plans to meet with Lysander, Hermia identifies “the wood where often you and I / Upon faint primrose beds were wont to lie, / Emptying our bosoms of their counsel sweet” (I.1.214-16). Hermia recalls a time in which she considered Helena a “playfellow” (220), and in her fondness of that shared childhood memory, she entrusts Helena with a rather adult secret. In *Metamorphoses*, the lake Pergus was also a place of refuge: “Here Proserpine / Was playing in a glade and picking flowers, / Pansies and lilies, with a child’s delight” (V.393-95). The goddess

of the spring should have been able to trust the safety of the field and rely on the protection of “the other girls” (397). Unbeknownst to both Hermia and Proserpine, the flowery fields where they felt youthful freedom would become sites of betrayal, with Helena alerting Demetrius to the lovers’ escape route and Pluto taking advantage of Proserpine’s vulnerability in order to abduct her. Though the primrose beds are not a direct allusion to Proserpine’s abduction, a humanist-educated audience might connect the once-safe wood of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to the ever-changing world of *Metamorphoses*. While some of Shakespeare’s depictions of the woods in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* mirror the mythic events of *Metamorphoses*, other portrayals of nature call to mind the Ovidian tendency to explain worldly events through divine action.

When one of the fairies in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* accounts her wanderings to Puck, the audience hears of her flights through bushes and briers, and understands that she resembles a pollenating bee; the spots on the gold flowers where their scent comes from are “fairy favors” (II.1.12). Continuing her work, the fairy “must go seek some dewdrops” and “hang a pearl in every cowslip’s ear” (II.1.14-15). The mingling of magic and nature here sounds Ovidian. The magical explanation for pollination, the presence of dew, or the look of a certain flower—each a natural process—is similar to many mythic explanations of nature in *Metamorphoses*: Pegasus stamps his hoof and creates the spring of Hippocrene (V.263-9); Minerva’s transformation of Arachne after the mortal challenged the goddess to a weaving contest explains a spider’s ability to weave a web (VI.140-52); or five nymphs did not include Achelous in their offerings, so he turns them into the five islands of Echinades (VIII.574-93). Most of the mythic influences on the natural world in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* are smaller in scale than what we see in *Metamorphoses*—a fact that bolsters the audience’s willing suspension of disbelief—but the portrayal of the wood in

*Midsummer* still mirrors the lush, ever-changing natural settings in Ovid's myths. And though many of the mythic effects are minor, we also see instances of major mythical consequences.

When Oberon's jealousy prevents Titania and her attendant fairies from performing their ringlet dances, the natural and human world are thrown out of balance: the sea dries up, fog fills the land, rivers flood, crops rot in unplowed fields, and disease spreads (II.1.80-117).

Throughout *Metamorphoses* we see similar situations where the actions of divine beings explain the workings of the natural world, but the one that most closely resembles the effect of Titania and Oberon's discord on the natural world is the continuation of an earlier mentioned myth: the rape of Proserpine.

After the son of Saturn abducts Proserpine from the glade near Pergus, he crosses paths with Cyane, "the most renowned / Of all the nymphs in Sicily," who entreats the lord of the underworld to relinquish Proserpine: "'Stop, Pluto, stop!' she cried, 'You cannot take / This girl to wife against Queen Ceres' will!'" (V.409-10,413-14). In response, "Saturn's son restrained / His wrath no longer" (420-21), and Cyane—"heartbroken at the rape" (427)—now "wasted all away" (431), going through a morbid metamorphosis: "Her shoulders, back and sides and breast dissolved / In slender rivulets and disappeared" (439-40). Ovid includes Cyane's pleas and an account of the tragic transformation she undergoes in response to Proserpine's rape to underscore the gravity of Pluto's deed and to foreshadow the effect it will have on the natural world.

The goddess of the harvest searches for her daughter ceaselessly—"Never the Dawn rising with dewy hair, / Nor the Evening star saw her rest" (V.439-8)—but eventually Ceres stops for refreshment and inflicts a transformation of her own upon a boy who laughs at her. It is a reminder that even (and perhaps especially) when in anguish, the gods dole out

disproportionate punishment—even to other gods. And though not intended as a punishment, the gods imposing their will has huge ramifications.

But the truly devastating consequences the goddess has in store for humanity come before she realizes that another god is responsible for her daughter's abduction. When Cyane hints at Proserpine's fate the only way she can (by floating Proserpine's girdle to the top of her spring), Ceres wreaks havoc:

So there with angry hands she broke the ploughs  
 That turned the soil and sent to death alike  
 The farmer and his labouring ox, and bade  
 The fields betray their trust, and spoilt the seeds.  
 False lay the island's famed fertility,  
 Famous through all the world. The young crops died  
 In the first blade, destroyed now by the rain  
 Too violent, now by the sun too strong.  
 The stars and winds assailed them; hungry birds  
 Gobbled the scattered seeds; thistles and twitch,  
 Unconquerable twitch, wore down the wheat. (V.476-86)

Like in the wood of *Midsummer* where the arguments between fairies have catastrophic effects on humankind, the fields of Sicily in *Metamorphoses* are here decimated by a mother's grief. Ovid's enumeration of Ceres' plagues reflects almost exactly the trials inflicted on humanity by Titania and Oberon. In the play, floods come when oceans "have overborne their continents" (II.1.92), and as a result, "The fold stands empty in the drownèd field, / And crows are fatted with the murrion flock" (96-97). Mortals experience the pains of winter without any of

its pleasures, and because “No night is now with hymn or carol blessed” (102), the moon “Pale in her anger, washes all the air / That rheumatic diseases do abound” (104-05). Although “the governess of floods” (103) alludes to the moon goddess Diana, the reference to (Christmas) carols would have allowed Shakespeare’s Christian audience a glimpse of their own religious traditions—their culture imposed on and intertwined with the classical tradition. Shakespeare gives a pagan explanation for natural disasters and failing crops, but it is not an alternative god who shapes nature; instead, it is the dispute of two fairies.

Of course, there are notable differences between Ovid’s and Shakespeare’s two narratives beyond that Ceres is a goddess and the fairies are merely god-like: Oberon does not abduct Titania, both have supernatural powers, and the fairy king and queen are arguing over a changeling boy. Yet both Ovid’s myth and Shakespeare’s portrayal of Oberon and Titania explain natural events in supernatural terms to further their respective plots. Ceres uses her grief and anger to entreat Jove to relinquish their daughter. Oberon similarly points to the chaos as further reason for Titania to hand over the changeling boy; he uses the effect their argument has on the natural world to justify putting a spell on his queen: “Well, go thy way. Thou shalt not from this grove / Till I torment thee for this injury” (II.1.146-7). He explains how he will enchant Titania using the plant upon which “the bolt of Cupid fell” (165), describing the arrow as “Quenched in the chaste beams of the wat’ry moon” (162). Alluding to the goddess Diana, he also refers back to the moon’s role in the catalogue of the plagues. The allusion to the moon goddess and the reference to the moon itself realigns the fairies with the divine figures in *Metamorphoses*, showing that their impact on the wooded setting of *Midsummer* is just as severe as that of the gods on the natural world of Ovid.

Ultimately, Ceres bargains with Jove for her daughter's freedom, but as Proserpine has already eaten food from the underworld, she must remain there for half of the year. Ceres's grief at her daughter's absence during fall and winter prohibits crops from flourishing, but as the goddess of spring emerges from the underworld, so spring emerges from winter. Ovid attributes the changing of the seasons to Ceres' separation from Proserpine while Shakespeare implies that the "the seasons alter" because of Titania and Oberon's discord (II.1.107). These instances where the mythic creatures' actions explain the world's workings would have enabled Elizabethan audiences to identify their own natural landscape in the classical aesthetic of the *Midsummer* forest.

### 3.3 Mythical Characters

#### 3.3.1 Oberon, Titania, and Puck

The divine forces at work in *Midsummer* are not gods and goddesses, although various characters refer to specific Greco-Roman deities by name and attribute in their dialogue. The fairies, who seem to be god-like but not quite godly, are the ones who insert themselves into the play's events. For an Elizabethan audience, the fairies could have reflected a ruling class whose actions and edicts had a profound effect on the everyday lives of ordinary citizens. Oberon, Titania, and Puck are distinctly British interpretations of Ovidian gods, meddling in the lives of mortals and engaging in disputes which disturb the balance of the natural world.

We might closely associate Oberon, as king of the fairies, with Jove, especially when we consider his jealous, Juno-like wife, Titania. The jealousy is not unwarranted as Oberon's affairs include Theseus' bride-to-be, Hippolyta. If we are to believe Titania's account, Oberon even imitates Jove's rapacious habit of shapeshifting to overcome the objects of his desire, but Shakespeare portrays Oberon's behavior with less dubious motives than Ovid treats Jove's. In an

ekphrastic passage describing scenes on a tapestry, Ovid accounts nine rapes committed by Jove under various disguises.<sup>9</sup> Rather than transforming himself into a bull or swan, Oberon takes the shape of Corin, “Playing on pipes of Corn, and versing love / To amorous Phillida (II.1.67-8). The pastoral conventions here would have been familiar to an Elizabethan audience as they were often closely associated with early modern English treatments of mythology (Bush 73). The lack of bestiality portrayed in this one instance of seduction primes the audience to distinguish the more civilized king of the fairies from the pagan king of the gods, though they each remain lustful, unfaithful figures. But where Jove forces himself on his victims, Oberon woos the object of his affections with music and poetry, making the fairy king a much more socially, if not morally, acceptable version of divinity for an early modern audience.

Despite his more palatable means of seduction, Oberon’s alliance with Jove underscores the fairy king’s deceptive qualities. Jove exploits mortals and other divinities alike mainly to pursue sexual satisfaction. Oberon intervenes to ensure romantic or matrimonial balance, but not before his intrusion first causes chaos and confusion—events that an Elizabethan audience would have expected from the genre of comedy. When Oberon decides to assist Helena by enchanting Demetrius with love-in-idleness, he assigns the task to Puck, who is not known for his earnest

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<sup>9</sup> Europa was “...cheated / By the bull’s disguise” (Ovid VI.105-6); he raped “struggling” Asterie in the form of an eagle (111); Jove ravished Leda “Under the white swan’s wings” (113); “Jove once in a satyr’s guise had got / Antiope with twins” (114-15); he, as “Amphitryon, / Bedded Alcmena; in a golden shower / Fooled Danae, Aegina in a flame” (115-17); and disguised “as a shepherd [he] snared Mnemosyne / And as a spotted serpent Proserpine” (118-19).

attention to detail. Eventually, Oberon orders Puck to right the effects of his “misprision” (III.2.90), and the lovers are happily coupled. Though the spell put on Demetrius achieves romantic harmony, the audience might still question the morality of forcing a man out of love with one woman and into love with another.

But if Oberon’s interference with the young lovers is selfless—an attempt to establish romantic harmony—does his treatment of Titania reek of Jove’s selfish drive? Or is the fairy king simply attempting to restore marital balance between himself and his queen? The changeling child at the heart of the conflict between Oberon and Titania in *Midsummer* could be taken for Ganymede, “Jove’s stolen lad” (Ovid XI.757), whom he loved so much as a mortal that the boy is now the eternal cupbearer on Olympus, even “(Though Juno frowns)” (X.162). But rather than lusting after the changeling, as Jove did for Ganymede, Oberon apparently wishes to take custody of the boy to be his “henchman” or page (II.1.121)—a more comfortable position for an Elizabethan audience in which to see a young boy.

Jove likely abducts Ganymede out of sheer desire rather than an urge to spite his wife, but Oberon seems to want the changeling particularly because Titania “perforce withholds the lovèd boy, / Crowns him with flowers, and makes him all her joy” (II.1.26-27). From the patriarchal perspective of an Elizabethan audience, Oberon, as a monarch and a man, should expect Titania not only to reserve her attentions for her husband but also to yield to him whatever is in her possession that he desires. Puck laments, “And now they never meet in grove or green” (28); the audience might see this as Titania’s withholding both the child and her wifely duty of congress. Titania’s claim to the child is strong; she “will not part with him” for the sake of his mother, her attendant, who died in childbirth (II.1.137) and only gives up the boy when Puck drugs her with love-in-idleness. When Oberon frees Titania from her enchantment, she

looks to Oberon's authority to "Tell [her] how it came this night / That [she] sleeping here was found" (IV.1.99-100). A powerful monarch with a clear claim to the child in dispute, Titania is still forced to submit to the will of her husband, and because the spell takes her memories, Oberon retains the authority to craft the narrative of their argument's resolution. Even if this was simply marital harmony restored, Oberon's alignment with a lust-motivated Jove might have prodded an Elizabethan audience to question the benevolence of the fairy king and, therefore, the patriarchal monarchy he upholds and represents.

While audiences could rightly draw the parallel between Titania, Oberon's bride and queen of the fairies, and Juno, Jove's wife and queen of the gods, there are other mythic figures with which we can associate Titania. Her name signifies any daughter of a Titan; therefore, *Midsummer's* Titania could refer to a collection of goddesses including Circe, Latona, Pyrrha, Diana, or Juno (Staton 167). However, the only time Ovid refers to Titania in *Metamorphoses* is in the myth of Actaeon, who stumbles upon Diana bathing after a hunt (III.175). In *Midsummer*, Diana is an especially interesting comparison for Titania; both women have attendants—fairies in the case of Titania, and maiden huntresses for Diana—and are closely associated with the woods and night time.

Shakespeare's two uses of the term *vot'ress* prompt a more nuanced comparison of Titania and Diana. Titania calls the changeling's mother "a vot'ress of [her] order" (II.1.123), and Oberon refers separately to "the imperial vot'ress" of Diana (163). Titania's love for this particular follower prompts her to care for the child and to refuse Oberon custody of him. To overcome Titania, Oberon uses love-in-idleness, a flower imbued with magical properties by Cupid's arrow after it misses its intended target, "a fair vestal, thronèd by the west" (158). This member of Diana's order, a likely allusion to the virgin Queen Elizabeth, evades Cupid's arrow

when it is “Quenched in the chaste beams of the wat’ry moon” (162). Queen Elizabeth’s vow of chastity resembled the virgin status of Diana’s followers, but clearly members of Titania’s order took no such vow, given that the fairy queen’s favored attendant is mother to the changeling. By allying the separate attendants of Titania and Diana through the term *vot’ress* and alluding to Queen Elizabeth as one of the moon goddess’s followers, Shakespeare entangles England’s monarch in a mythical comparison, imposing classical culture onto British identity.

The similarities of Diana and Titania and the connection between Diana and Queen Elizabeth make for a complex commentary on England’s monarchy. On the one hand, Queen Elizabeth’s alliance with a chaste warrior goddess depicts her with virtue and strength but also with a sense of austere rigidity. After all, when Callisto is raped and impregnated by Jove, Diana expels the nymph from her service without question (Ovid II.426-67). Titania, like Queen Elizabeth, challenges notions of patriarchy and demonstrates her power throughout the play, but she eventually submits to the will of her husband after the humiliation of falling blindly in love with an ass-headed man. But Titania, having had a number of her own affairs, is not the chaste figure we know both the moon goddess and Queen Elizabeth to be. Shakespeare’s audience may have been able to apply the best features from each of the divine figures to their own ruler, and perhaps they could interpret their queen’s real-life resistance to erotic desire as the trait which makes her superior to the queen of the fairies.

Titania’s affairs may instead align her with Venus. The goddess of love inspired many a man to shift his affections, and Titania, according to Oberon, led Theseus “From Perigenia, whom he ravished” and made “him with fair Aegles break his faith, / With Ariadne, and Antiopa” (II.1.78-80). Here, *Midsummer* attributes Theseus’ infidelity to Titania’s meddling,

which may have helped to redeem his character for contemporary audiences, although his capture of Hippolyta and her forced marriage to him is surely troubling.

Puck is the least divine fairy in stature and carriage, but he still qualifies as one of the god-like figures in *Midsummer*. His shapeshifting abilities “Like horse, hound, hog, bear, fire, at every turn” (III.1.106) associate him with Proteus who could “change and change again in many forms” (Ovid VIII.730). But Puck’s power does not stop at his self-transformations. Puck perpetrates Bottom’s metamorphosis, giving as little thought to this act as he would any other prank. Bottom’s transformation mirrors Midas’ punishment in *Metamorphoses*. Puck criticizes “A stranger Pyramus than e’er played here” (III.1.83), highlighting Bottom’s terrible acting. For his lack of talent, Puck turns Bottom’s head to that of a donkey. In *Metamorphoses*, Pan and Apollo have a contest of musical skill, which Apollo wins, and “Crass-witted Midas’ voice called it unjust” (XI.178). Offended, “Apollo could not suffer ears so dull / To keep their human shape. He stretched them long, / Filled them with coarse grey hairs, and hinged their base” (179-81). As the god of music and poetry, Apollo curses Midas with donkey ears for his lack of musical taste. The Elizabethan audience could have recognized the mythic significance of Bottom’s fate, but they would have certainly understood the irony of the transformation: Bottom, who makes an ass of himself at every turn, now has a literal ass’s head.

Though Puck’s prank on Bottom casts the mischievous fairy as an Apollo figure, the fairy’s other actions are more in line with Mercury—a known trickster and, like Puck, a divine messenger. Puck, “that merry wanderer of the night” (II.1.44), carries Oberon’s messages just as Mercury “bears his father’s mandates through the sky” (Ovid II.744). Puck also resembles Cupid. When Oberon traces the source of love-in-idleness, he says, “That every time I thought I saw (but thou couldst not) / Flying between the cold moon and the earth / Cupid, all armed” (II.

156-8). Puck is a “shrewd and knavish sprite” (II.1.33), and by Puck’s own description “Cupid is a knavish lad” (III.2.440). Puck flies at night doing Oberon’s bidding and transforming the lovers’ affections; similarly, Cupid alters the passions of both gods and mortals. Perhaps the reason “Puck could not see Cupid is because he *was* Cupid” (Bate 136)—or at least, reminiscent of Cupid. And, like Morpheus, Puck draws the mortals to sleep.

The three major fairies of *Midsummer* serve as substitutes for several gods and goddesses, but as fairies, they retain their “traditional English flair” (Staton 165). Oberon’s close association with the most powerful god underscores his divine standing in *Midsummer* and highlights for the audience his ability to influence the natural world. Titania’s alignment with disparately-characterized goddesses makes her a complex and unpredictable figure, but, in keeping with Elizabethan patriarchal expectations, she is at least temporarily subdued by her lord husband. Order is only restored in *Midsummer* when Oberon lifts the enchantment from Titania and they unite in their blessing of the three marriages, but the audience might question the quality of married love when it is exemplified and upheld by a dysfunctional couple who embody such problematic deities (Taylor 59). Puck, too, possesses the characteristics of several classical gods, but in *Midsummer*, he is the folksy Robin Goodfellow; his service to Oberon also demonstrates a hierarchy that Elizabethan audiences would have recognized and seen reflected in the mythic allusions surrounding his character. The fairies are not truly gods; rather, they are interpretations of gods tailored to an Elizabethan audience.

### 3.3.2 *Theseus and Hippolyta*

Similarly, Theseus is not just the storied hero who slays monsters; he is also a monarch with a past of conquering other lands and peoples—a figure whom an early modern audience could easily understand. Theseus is perhaps the most obvious mythic reference in *Midsummer*. He

speaks the first lines of the comedy which, in true comedic fashion, introduce the impending “nuptial hour” (I.1.1). The Athenian duke’s mythical counterpart is an outright rapist; despite Shakespeare’s indication that Titania inspired his behavior, this stain on Theseus’ character may have indicated to an Elizabethan audience that his motivations and presence within the play are not entirely benevolent. Certainly, the uneasy interactions between Theseus and his intended Hippolyta cast doubt on the sincerity and viability of their relationship.

An Elizabethan audience “imbued with patriarchal values” may have nevertheless approved of the violent way Theseus wins Hippolyta’s hand in marriage (Taylor 49): “Hippolyta, I woo’d thee with my sword / And won thy love doing thee injuries” (I.1.16-7). However, Shakespeare may have been critiquing the restoration of order through marriage in his portrayal of the Amazon’s response to her intended’s impatience for their union. She tempers his urgency, offering patience instead:

Four days will quickly steep themselves in night,  
 Four nights will quickly dream away the time,  
 And then the moon, like to a silver bow  
 New-bent in heaven, shall behold the night  
 Of our solemnities. (I.1.7-11)

Hippolyta’s invocation of the moon may be a simple reference to the passage of those four days and nights, and her mention of a silver bow might just refer to the physical appearance of the moon; but the humanist-educated Elizabethan audience would know that the goddess of the moon is also closely associated with virginity, and her bow, instead of inspiring lust or love like Cupid’s, might trigger an unconsummated marriage.

On the morning of the couple's wedding day, the audience sees Theseus and Hippolyta exploring the boundary between Athens and the wood. Theseus announces, "My love shall hear the music of my hounds" (IV.1.105). The summoning of Theseus' hunting dogs prompts Hippolyta to recollect a time when she hunted a bear with Hercules and Cadmus. If *Metamorphoses* is "a collection of tales, loosely held together," then we can see that same "vague frame" present in these lines of *Midsummer*, because Cadmus and Hercules have a tenuous connection to one another (Carlsen 99-100).<sup>10</sup> Hippolyta's reference to these two heroes deepens her association with Ovidian myth. Bate hypothesizes that Hippolyta's memory does not come directly from Ovid; instead it is "an elegant variation" of another myth in which a different huntress accompanies other legendary heroes: Meleager's hunting of the Calydonian boar alongside Theseus and Atalanta (137). Hippolyta's adaptation of this myth may have been her attempt to connect with Theseus, but he, whether unaware or uncaring of her effort, responds by doubling down on the superiority of his hounds to any "In Crete, in Sparta, [or] in Thessaly" (IV.1.125). The exchange suggests that Theseus is more consumed by his own exploits than any he might share with his wife in the future; as the audience might expect from a mythic hero, Theseus is impatient for the wedding night but uninterested in the marriage itself.

Theseus' subsequent dismissal of the mythically-inspired performances that Philostrate enumerates complicates the duke's character as both mythic hero and Athenian nobility. In

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<sup>10</sup> In *Metamorphoses*, Cadmus founds Thebes and engages in a lengthy battle with a serpent whose teeth he plants in the soil "From which a future people shall arise" (III.105). Hercules' story instead dominates the myths in book 9 of *Metamorphoses*. Shakespeare's humanist-educated audience would have presumably known Hercules as a hero greater even than Theseus.

addition to the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe, Philostrate's list includes a song of the battle with the Centaurs; a play which details the dismemberment of Orpheus by the incensed Bacchanals; and a story of the "thrice three" (52) Muses who mourn for the death of Learning, which Theseus discards because he deems the didactic material not suitable for a wedding party.

Theseus claims to reject the song of the Centaurs' battle because he has already told his bride his version of that story which highlights his kinship with Heracles. This paints the *Midsummer* Theseus in a positive light, allying him with another storied hero and presenting him as a husband concerned with his wife's entertainment. However, in *Metamorphoses*, the gory battle between the Lapiths and the Centaurs takes place at a wedding, and Theseus plays a significant role in the gruesome—though warranted—destruction of the centaurs. Perhaps the duke does not want his own wedding guests reminded of his barbarism at another nuptial gathering. Theseus passes over the performance of Orpheus' dismemberment not because it details the bloody yet beautifully-described death of the Thracian poet, but because he saw it upon his return from conquering Thebes. By dropping in this detail, Theseus highlights his proficiency as a conqueror, but he might also be hiding a more sensitive side behind this boast. Orpheus' demise directly results from the loss of his wife Eurydice on the day they were married; the tale is "bound up with rape and revenge," which hardly makes it appropriate entertainment at a marriage celebration (Bate 131). Here, Theseus might be displaying a genuine concern for the feelings of his bride and guests. An Elizabethan audience could have used the Ovidian allusions to reconcile the onstage, aristocratic Theseus with his mythic counterpart.

Beyond their indication of the duke's complex character traits, the rejected tales of the Centaurs' battle and Orpheus' demise disclose that "the relationship between the sexes has its discords as well as its concords" (Bate 131). The components of this catalogue, aside from the

Muses mourning Learning, have individual Ovidian significance; yet they fit seamlessly together to portray a cohesive collection that gives the audience insight to the boastful yet sensitive duke of *Midsummer* and the violent yet capable mythic hero of *Metamorphoses*. The performance chosen by the groom reveals more about *Midsummer* than just Theseus' character. Philostrate's list of potential performances ends with "A tedious brief scene of young Pyramus / And his love Thisby; very tragical mirth" (V.1.56-57). This parodic take on a tragic Ovidian myth reminds the audiences both on-and-off-stage that the comedic misunderstandings between lovers can sometimes have tragic ends.

### 3.3.3 *Pyramus and Thisbe*

In *Midsummer*, the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe appears as a play within the play; in *Metamorphoses*, the story is a myth within a myth. One of Minyas' daughters suggests to her sisters that they share "Some tale in turn to while the tedious hours / Away and give delight to idle ears" (Ovid IV.44-45). In a way, this introduction of the myth justifies the irreverence with which Shakespeare's artisans treat their performance; it is a mere story told simply to fill the time and entertain unoccupied minds. But Shakespeare's decision to put the classical material of that embedded narrative in the hands of craftsmen does more than mimic the language used in Ovid—it allows him to break down social class divides, "to bring high culture to the people" (Bate 137). Shakespeare's on-stage portrayal of interactions between groups of disparate social standing reflects the audience's ability to retain their individual identities while also participating in the collective experience which ultimately shapes national identity. Yet, as in Ovidian myth, the intermingling of the social statuses in *Midsummer* never reconciles the class of god with mortal, of fairy with citizen, or of monarch with subject.

Shakespeare himself occupies the disparate statuses of consumer and producer—the reader of Ovidian myth and the author of mythic interpretations. Rather than staging *Pyramus and Thisbe* as a play in its own right or even writing it as a narrative poem as he did with the myth of Venus and Adonis, Shakespeare presents the tale as an embedded performance. Bate sees this as Shakespeare reconciling his identities of author and audience through the processes of *imitatio* and *translatio*, making the classical text “speak the distinctive language” of early modern culture (131). In effect, Shakespeare’s staging of *Pyramus and Thisbe* enabled his audience a contemporary understanding of and unique engagement with classical material.

Still, why did Shakespeare morph Ovid’s tragic myth into a comic site of poor poetry? Theseus answers this question: “Our sport shall be to take what they mistake, / And what poor duty cannot do, noble respect / Takes it in might, not merit” (V.1.90-92). The ensuing lines paint a pompous picture of Theseus, but this quotation—his initial response to Hippolyta’s disdain for watching a poor performance—stresses the importance of the interplay between art and audience. The audience must distinguish between their reception of a performance or its quality and the intention behind it. When Shakespeare incorporated Ovid’s myths into his comedy, he was acting in the role of an audience to Ovid’s stories, but the playwright himself had little control over how his own audience would perceive his appropriation of ancient myth. Thus, Shakespeare as the audience of Ovid contributed to Ovid’s art by reinterpreting *Metamorphoses*, while Shakespeare as author invites his audience to contribute in turn to the art of his play in their interpretation of it.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This reading of *Midsummer* is directly influenced by Dr. Stephen Dobranski’s seminar on mythology (ENGL 3400) at Georgia State University.

Shakespeare's audience was likely already aware of one existing modernization of Pyramus and Thisbe which may have influenced their response to its on-stage portrayal: Arthur Golding's translation. Golding's version moralizes Lion, Wall, and Moonshine, whereas Quince's Pyramus and Thisbe takes them literally, making them individual cast-members. The literal (mis)interpretations do not end with Quince's casting: when Bottom as Pyramus asks, "Wilt thou at Ninny's tomb meet me straightaway?" (V.1.201), the humanist-educated audience may have assumed this was the actor's attempt to make sense of the Latin *ad busta Nini* (Rudd 183); in response to Theseus' interjection that "The wall, methinks, being sensible, should curse again" (V.1.181-82), Bottom cannot help but take this suggestion literally, and he breaks character to respond, "No, in truth, sir, he should not" before clarifying Thisbe's scripted cue (183).

In addition to their overly literal interpretations of the characters, dialogue, and audience response, the cast of characters in *Midsummer* mis-alludes to other myths throughout their performance: "Limander" refers to Leander, and we must assume "Helen" is Flute's attempt to recall Hero from Marlowe's "Hero and Leander" (V.1.195-6); Bottom as Pyramus insists "Not Shafalus to Procrus was so true" (197)—an ironic reference considering Cephalus failed to remain faithful to Procris and then took his goddess-mistress' advice to test his wife's fidelity, which resulted in her abandoning him to instead serve Diana (Ovid VII.699-750). These attempts at allusions give the embedded play an "Ovidian ambience" (Rudd 181), but the failings of the actors to recall accurately the myths (or their lines) suggest that the performance parodies the romance between Hermia and Lysander. Like Pyramus and Thisbe, Hermia and Lysander are forbidden to marry; they run away from their homes to be together, but not before pledging their love with allusions to various mythic figures. The obvious deviation between the two lovers'

stories is the happy resolution for Hermia and Lysander and the tragic end for Pyramus and Thisbe.

The discrepancies between Ovid's Pyramus and Thisbe and the artisan's performance of the myth number too many to count here, but Thisbe's soliloquy at the end of her performance on the *Midsummer* stage omits an especially important detail from Ovid's version. Much like the catalogue of possible performances Philostrate provides for the post-wedding entertainment, a list of tales from which Minyas' daughters choose precedes the tragic tale in *Metamorphoses*. The last story the sister suggests is "of the tree whose fruit, once white, / The touch of blood now dyes a dusky red" (Ovid IV.50-51). While Quince's prologue does mention the "mulberry shade" (V.1.147), Thisbe's final speech omits the origin story of the berries' coloration that Ovid describes so vividly:

She fixed the sword's sharp point below her breast,

Then fell upon the blade still warm with blood.

The parents and the gods received her prayer:

The mulberry retains its purple hue;

One urn the ashes holds of lovers true. (IV.162-66)

At the end of Quince's Pyramus and Thisbe, Shakespeare withholds the metamorphosis of the mulberry tree that is so crucial to Ovid's tale. The significance of this transformation instead comes earlier in the play "thanks to the logic of comedy which reverses the metamorphic process" (Laroque 65). Rather than the mulberry tree stained by blood, emblematic of the lovers' deaths, Shakespeare gives us love-in-idleness whose juices cause love. Oberon describes this flower to Puck: "Before, milk-white; now, purple with love's wound" (II.1.167). The linguistic echoes of a previously white plant now stained purple with blood or a wound indicate that the

creation of this plant in *Midsummer* must hearken to Ovid's Pyramus and Thisbe. The plant still undergoes a transformation, but it occurs when "the bolt of Cupid" misses its mark and instead strike this flower (165). Shakespeare's order of operations shows is he is "more interested in transformation as a cause than in transformation as an effect" (Barkan 257). Where the stained mulberries embody the result of the lovers' tragic death, love-in-idleness inspires Lysander's, Demetrius', and Titania's altered passions.

The parodic performance of Pyramus and Thisbe by the craftsmen, the allusions to Ovidian mythic figures throughout the play, the shifting implications of the stained plant's transformation—all these details point to the mutualistic effects between audience and art. Theseus can recognize the shivers and paleness of great clerks as a well-intended welcome the same way that an Elizabethan audience could identify the passionate love evoked by the mere mention of Cupid or the chaste virtue embodied in a reference to the moon. The interplay between art and audience lies at the center of the language of mythic allusions.

### **3.3.4 Conclusion**

This analysis of mythology in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is far from comprehensive, but it identifies some of the key Ovidian influences which would have resonated with Elizabethan audiences. In assessing the significance of the theater as physical space, we may understand how Elizabethan spectators engaged with each other and responded to plays. Looking at the *set* of Shakespeare's plays gives way to analyzing the *setting* in terms of Athens and the forest. Both hold mythic meaning and contain Elizabethan parallels. The forest is a place of metamorphosis, where characters undergo profound changes both physically and emotionally. In contrast, Athens is a place of stability and order, where change is more gradual and controlled.

Constructing its characters from mythic figures and alluding directly to Ovidian myths, the play explores themes of love, magic, and transformation within the context of English society. The audience's recognition and application of the play's mythic allusions would have contributed to the construction of a distinct national identity. The interplay between audience and art forms the language of mythic allusion, especially within Shakespeare's intensely mythical comedy. As England emerged as a major European power during the sixteenth century, works of literature such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the mythic allusions they contain played a subtle but crucial role in shaping perceptions of English culture and identity.

## 4 CHAPTER 3: MILTON'S "LYCIDAS" AND BRITISH NATIONAL IDENTITY

### 4.1 Introduction

Scholars have long-examined Milton with particular attention to his relationship with the classical tradition and, more specifically, with Ovidian mythology. Writing in the late nineteenth century, Charles Osgood in his foundational *The Classical Mythology of Milton's English Poems* analyzed various ways that Milton used Greek and Roman myths for their "moral, religious, or imaginative value" (ix). In *Milton and the Renaissance Ovid*, Davis Harding subsequently highlighted the specific debt Milton owes to Ovid. Harding examined Renaissance editions of *Metamorphoses*, tracing "each successive change" in the early modern author's attitude toward and appropriation of the classical poet (7). Francis Blessington later applied Osgood and Harding's ideas to a more focused study of *Paradise Lost*: Blessington showed how Milton's epic is a Christian interpretation of the *Odyssey*, *Iliad*, and *Aeneid*.

More recently, John Mulryan's "Through a Glass Darkly:" *Milton's Reinvention of the Classical Tradition* identifies Milton's uses of and changes to Ovidian myth as "a mythological tradition of cultural synthesis" (53). Richard DuRocher's earlier formative study, focusing exclusively on Ovid, more fully demonstrates the ancient poet's significance for Milton. DuRocher spotlights a series of allusions, echoes, and generic and narrative continuities in *Metamorphoses* and *Paradise Lost*. In *Milton's Ovidian Eve*, Mandy Green applies DuRocher's ideas about Ovid's inspiration of Milton in *Paradise Lost* more specifically to Eve's character, paying particular attention to Eve's comparison with Narcissus. Maggie Kilgour looks more broadly at Milton's body of poetic works in *Milton and the Metamorphosis of Ovid*, arguing that Milton, like many Renaissance authors, looked to Ovid's revision of the past and his relationship

with other classical writers as a model for transforming classical texts to produce creative imitations and imaginative originals.

While many other examinations have been published on the presence and purpose of Ovidian myth in Milton's writings, it is surprising how few scholars have looked at Milton's pastoral elegy "Lycidas" for its mythic significance. Mulryan, for example, briefly mentions "Lycidas" in discussing the Orpheus myth; he compares the Maenads who murdered the mythic poet to mindless natural forces like the ocean that claimed the life of Edward King, the subject of Milton's elegy (31). Stella Revard devotes an entire chapter to "Lycidas" in *Milton and the Tangles of Neaera's Hair*, focusing largely on the poem's generic complexity. She asserts that Renaissance poets modernized the ancient pastoral genre to give it contemporary significance, and she questions the poem's categorization as an elegy instead of an ode.

Whether investigating Ovid's influence on Milton or examining the mythic elements of "Lycidas," these texts do not fully address the ways in which Milton's engagement with Ovid helped develop an early British national identity. This does not mean, however, that scholars have ignored Milton as a patriotic poet nor "Lycidas" as a nationalist poem. For example, Lawrence Lipking argues the cartographic details in Milton's elegy are important indicators of British influence across the Irish Sea in his article "The Genius of the Shore: Lycidas, Adamastor, and the Poetics of Nationalism." Referencing Lipking's idea that a nation's political and geographical losses bind them together, David Loewenstein and Paul Stevens also point to "Lycidas" as an important example of literary nationalism in *Early Modern Nationalism and Milton's England*; the essays in this collection posit that nations and nationhood are constructed by their populations and the culture they produce. The book's larger goal is to explore Milton's role in establishing British nationalism through his own developing patriotism.

But scholars who address Milton's contribution to British national identity have not examined the role that his mindful engagement with Ovid played in shaping that identity. Many scholars note that Milton uses the classical tradition in *Paradise Lost* as a canvas on which to paint his Christian ideology; in his blending of Christianity and antiquity, Milton moralizes myths, promotes his own religion, and cements his importance to British history and culture. In this chapter, I argue that the mythic allusions and poetic voice in "Lycidas" perform a similar function, entangling Christian ideologies with mythic figures to elevate the tone of Milton's pastoral elegy and align Milton and the nation he represents with the classical tradition; furthermore, Milton's meditations on the immortality achieved through artistic fame which we see in "Lycidas" reflect Ovid's own concern with the lasting impact of his works.

#### **4.2 Mythic Power and Failure**

From the opening lines of the poem, Milton infuses "Lycidas" with both obvious and subtle mythic references: "Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more / Ye myrtles brown, with ivy never sere" (1-2). As critics have long observed, Milton's humanist-educated audience would have known this catalogue of nature alludes to Apollo, god of poetry, who adorned his hair with laurel wreaths (poets traditionally crowned themselves with laurels); Venus, goddess of love, who came into existence holding a sprig of myrtle; and Bacchus, god of wine and revelry, who was often depicted crowned with ivy which also symbolizes immortality.<sup>12</sup> Eventually, the poet calls upon the muses for the strength and inspiration to continue his tribute to Lycidas, but not before he alludes to Apollo, Venus, and Bacchus. Similarly, Ovid begins *Metamorphoses*: "Of

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<sup>12</sup> These descriptions of the deities and their symbolic plants are supported by Edith Hamilton's *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes* (1999).

bodies changed to other forms I tell; / You Gods, who have yourselves wrought every change, / Inspire my enterprise and lead my lay” (I.1-3). Rather than single out any one god or goddess, Ovid credits all of the gods—ensuring, paradoxically, that none of them get any real credit. The poet of “Lycidas” alludes to Apollo, Venus, and Bacchus, but he does not directly name them in his opening lines. Milton mirrors Ovid’s subtle suggestion of authorial importance. Ovid’s “continuous song” (4), though inspired by the gods, is an enterprise of his own making; Milton’s “Lycidas,” though an overt response to a “sad occasion dear” (6), covertly corresponds to questions about his own enduring reputation.

The speaker invites Apollo, Venus, and Bacchus into his verse only to forsake their presence through the destruction of their sacred plants: “I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude, / And with forced fingers rude, / Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year” (3-5). His grief is evident in these opening lines, and a mythically-informed audience needs only to note the treatment of these plants to anticipate the poem’s direction. The desecration of Apollo’s laurels perhaps demonstrates the speaker’s skepticism of the significance of his poetry in the face of tragic loss; the harsh treatment of Venus’ myrtles might suggest the speaker’s anger at the futility of loving a person so easily taken from him; the crushing of Bacchus’ ivy may indicate the speaker’s rejection of revelry during this solemn time or represent his frustration that those vines may remain evergreen while his friend has perished so young. The pathetic fallacy in these opening lines alerts his audience that his loss is so great that nature grieves with him. But nature does not act of its own accord here; the speaker inflicts his own loss on the world around him.

The reference to the sacred plants aligns Milton’s poem with pastoral conventions we also see throughout *Metamorphoses*, but the defilement of these plants signifies both a jealousy for and a rejection of the power of the gods they represent. The deities invoked in these lines

overcome their personal losses by transforming their loved ones rather than allowing them to simply die. In *Metamorphoses*, Apollo turns Hyacinth into a hyacinth flower “with prophetic words” (X.213) so that his lover “Endures undimmed; with pomp and proud display” (224); Venus “Reproached the Fates” (726) to change Adonis into an anemone flower so that he “shall endure each passing year” (728); Bacchus gives Ariadne “a star’s eternal glory” when he takes her to wife after Theseus abandons her (VIII.185). Additionally, Apollo endures rather than enacts the transformation of his would-be lover Daphne. Cupid forced both the sun god’s pursuit of the nymph and her rejection of him, striking Apollo “with piercing point of gold” (I.12) and Daphne with his arrow “tipped with lead” (13). Daphne, rather than suffer rape, asked to be turned into a tree, yet in the end Apollo still violates her by plucking her leaves and making her the symbol of his power: the laurel tree.

In all these cases, the gods ensure the memories of their beloveds will live forever even if their physical forms perish. The speaker invokes these deities with similar intent: to memorialize his friend. But he also alludes to the Judeo-Christian tradition with the poem’s first three words, “Yet once more,” which echo the book of Hebrews: “Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven. And this *word*, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain” (12.26-27). This verse suggests that followers of Christ have an unshakable, heavenly destiny, unlike earthly things which can be changed or destroyed. The speaker’s demolition of the laurels, myrtles, and ivy demonstrates that even the botanical representations of the gods’ transformative power are not invulnerable. Later in the ode, the swain will credit Christ with ability to grant life after death, but first he relies on the image of pre-Christian symbols intertwined with biblical language to convey his grief. The “uncouth swain,” whatever faith he has, cannot forestall the

death of his friend through any mythic metamorphosis or Christian inspiration (186); instead, he crafts an elegy that combines the classical tradition and Christian ideologies to cement Lycidas—and perhaps himself—in time, history, and memory.

Depending on the ancient authority of the classical tradition to carry the weight of his loss, the speaker tells us that Lycidas “must not float upon his wat’ry bier / Unwept, and welter to the parching wind / Without the meed of some melodious tear” (12-14). Though the speaker puts himself at the center of the elegy in echoing Ovid’s initial invocation, he is saying that Lycidas deserves to be mourned with proper ceremony. So, after taking the poetic equivalent of a deep breath, the speaker embarks on his lamentation: “Begin then, sisters of the sacred well, / That from beneath the seat of Jove doth spring; / Begin and somewhat loudly sweep the string” (15-17). By invoking the muses, he alerts the audience to the importance of the verse ahead; he draws support from the nine goddesses of the arts and simultaneously aligns himself with the likes of Homer, Hesiod, and Virgil. But rather than calling upon a specific muse, Milton again mirrors Ovid’s broad invocation. The speaker later refers to “some gentle muse” (19), almost deifying poets like himself and putting the power of inspiration and commemoration in their hands. He hopes for a future poet to someday acknowledge his “destined urn” (20). Here, we can almost see the swain’s motivation unfolding: if he writes a worthy tribute for Lycidas, perhaps his own unavoidable death will be attended with similar care. As he mourns his friend and fellow shepherd, so too might another poet imbued with the divine significance of the muses “bid fair peace” to his “sable shroud” (22).

Milton’s use of mythic figures in the opening verses of “Lycidas” hints that their enduring relevance may inspire his own pursuit of a fame that transcends time, but in the face of human death and tragedy, he paints the mythological beings as ineffectual or complicit. The

swain asks, “Where were ye nymphs when the remorseless deep / Closed o’er the head of our loved Lycidas?” (50-51), indicating his wish that these minor deities would have intervened to save Lycidas. But, as the speaker laments, if “the Muse herself that Orpheus bore” could not save her own son, what could she or any of them have done for Lycidas (58)? As Ovid recounts the story in *Metamorphoses*, Orpheus was the son of Calliope, the muse of epic poetry, and Apollo, the god of music and poetry; Orpheus’ mastery of poetry and music was so great that it caused Tantalus to forget his thirst, vultures to neglect their feast, Sisyphus to stop pushing his stone, the Furies to weep, and Persephone to release Orpheus’ wife Eurydice from the underworld (X.42-52). The description of Orpheus’ gruesome end in “Lycidas”—“His gory visage down the stream was sent” (62)—invites the audience to echo the poet’s questions about the power of mythic figures and the importance of poetry itself.

Immediately after this realization of Calliope’s impotence, we see the poet grappling with his own significance: “Alas! What boots it with uncessant care / To tend the homely slighted shepherd’s trade, / And strictly meditate the thankless muse?” (64-66). The poet contemplates the worthiness of his trade, lamenting that just as soon as the artist verges on achievement, then “Comes the blind Fury with th’ abhorrèd shears, / And slits the thin-spun life” (75-76). Here, Milton conflates the Fates (three women who spin the thread of life, assign a person’s destiny, and cut the thread at death) with the Furies (three vengeful women who punished evildoers). He paints Atropos, the Fate who cuts the thread of life, as a Fury blindly exacting punishment on the poet who has done nothing wrong except devote his life to finding inspiration. The swain presents a pagan world with no order or divine providence which is instead dictated by mythic monsters who embody “fatalism that deemphasizes freedom of the will” (Daniel 101). This allusion highlights the fierceness of death and its seeming purposelessness, calling the audience’s

attention back to the poem's subject: the sudden and purposeless death of a young man at the height of his potential.

Just as the poet seems on the verge of losing all hope, Phoebus interjects: "But not the praise" (76). The sun-god cuts into this line of verse before the blind Fury can sever the thread of life "Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil" (78). It is fitting that Phoebus interrupts the poet's expression of professional insecurity—the god of poetry must advocate for the continued pursuit of artistic achievement—but here Milton makes the mythic figure submit to a Christian authority. In "Lycidas," even "the perfect witness of all-judging Jove / As he pronounces lastly on each deed" (82-83) does not present the poet with his prize: "Of so much fame in *Heav'n* expect thy meed" (84, my emphasis). Though Phoebus represents poetic achievement and Jove presides over the worthiness of the poet's actions, the final reward of fame only occurs in the Christian heaven. Rather than continue with classical figures and settings, Milton imbues the final line in this verse where shepherding represents writing poetry with Christian ideology. Despite Phoebus' promise that the poet's efforts to memorialize his friend will be rewarded, the gods seem to have greater concern for exonerating themselves in Lycidas' death: Neptune "questioned every gust of rugged wings / That blows from off each beakèd promontory," but "they knew not of his story" (93-95); "sage Hippodates" claimed "That not a blast was from his dungeon strayed" (96-97); and "Sleek Panope" could not have helped because she was playing with her sisters. That the gods would deign to defend themselves against this charge shows they were at the very least invested in Lycidas' life, but their failure to intervene in his death demonstrates their fickle nature. In *Metamorphoses*, the gods sometimes impose their will on mortals indiscriminately, but in "Lycidas," it was the lack of this imposition that brings on questions of their potency. Milton gradually reveals the mythical beings for what they truly are:

fictitious figures, “a fond dream that accomplishes nothing” (Lipking 210). They cannot be held responsible for Lycidas’ death; instead, Hippodates defends the gods’ innocence by identifying the true perpetrator of Lycidas’ demise: “It was that fatal and perfidious bark” (100). Put simply, wood is a fallible substance, ships are made of wood, and sometimes ships sink. But even this simple explanation is complicated by mythical influence; the ship was “Built in th’ eclipse, and rigged with curses dark” (101). Hippodates cannot separate the natural world from supernatural influence, and though he claims innocence in Lycidas’ death, the god of winds cannot deny there was some divine influence on the circumstances of Lycidas’ death.

### **4.3 Myth and Nationhood**

Milton’s use of mythic figures throughout the poem suggests his awareness of their cultural significance; he wrote for an educated audience who would understand the meaning behind his allusions, but he also would have had to keep in mind his political and religious environment. In expressing his personal loss, the poet simultaneously speaks for his nation and the “grievances that hold it together” (Lipking 205). In addition to their biblical significance, the first three words of the poem “Yet once more” suggest that the poet has been in this painful position before, and the audience, having experienced loss themselves, could identify with the ensuing elegy from a patriotic perspective. Lipking argues that the collective loss felt by the British population was geopolitical (Britain’s diminished influence in Wales and Ireland) and theological (England’s lack of spiritual guidance resulting from the religious reformation). As the poem unfolds, Milton weaves classical materials together with national symbols to help construct the tapestry of British identity; eventually, as I will show, the speaker relies on pastoral conventions to comment on the corrupted clergy in England before turning to a combined British and classical mythology to lay Lycidas to rest.

After denouncing the mythic deities as ineffectual agents, the speaker introduces Camus, the deified embodiment of the river Cam, which symbolizes Cambridge University where both Milton and King attended. Describing Camus as “footing slow,” the speaker fashions this British river god with “His mantle hairy, and his bonnet sedge” (103-4) after the likes of Achelous, an Ovidian river god, who has “tangled tresses bound with reeds” (Ovid IX.3). Camus’ British association, though, comes from more than just his name; the sedge bonnet he wears was likely made up of native plants growing near the Cam’s riverbanks. And his Ovidian inspiration stems from more than the similarity of his headdress to Achelous’ hair. Camus wears a bonnet with colors “Like to that sanguine flower inscribed with woe” (106) which refers to the hyacinth created by Apollo who “Inscribed upon the flower his lament” (Ovid X.214). Using Ovid as a classical reference point, Milton presents Camus as a nationalist mythic figure who presides over a culturally significant landmark. The river god is a British deity with classical features. Camus sees Lycidas as a subject under his dominion and seeks to hold someone accountable for his death, asking, “Who hath reft . . . my dearest pledge?” (107).

Directly on the heels of the quasi-mythic Camus comes Milton’s dissatisfaction with the English clergy as the swain introduces “The pilot of the Galilean lake” (109). Saint Peter calls the clergy “Blind mouths! that scarce themselves know how to hold / A sheep-hook, or have learned aught else the least / That to the faithful herdman’s art belongs!” (119-21). Where the act of shepherding previously represented the art of writing poetry, the speaker now employs it as a biblical metaphor; the shepherds (the clergy) do not understand how to tend their flocks (their congregations). Neptune, Camus, and the pilot of the Galilean lake form a progression of motifs: “Nature, Culture, Religion” (Rudrum 71). The poet moves from making direct mythic allusions to creating a British myth with classical features and ultimately crafts a theological commentary

that depends on classical and pastoral traditions. Milton's own opinions on the English Church are well documented.<sup>13</sup> In "Lycidas," we see early evidence of Milton's dissatisfaction with the English clergy; as the headnote he added in 1645 announces, the ode "foretells the ruin of our corrupted clergy, then in their height." In the ode, St. Peter accuses the English clergy of being greedy and indifferent; they are men who "for their bellies' sake, / Creep and intrude, and climb into the fold" (114-15). He claims they care for nothing other "Than how to scramble at the shearers' feast, / And shove away the worthy bidden guest" (116-17); he reduces them to their worst feature: "Blind mouths" (119). Rather than serving the needy and feeding the hungry as clergymen ought to do, the English bishops sought their own comforts above the care of their congregations. For Milton, the influence of the corrupt clergy separated the people from the simplicity of Scripture. The personal loss that was the death of Edward King—who would have been the kind of righteous clergyman that England needed—reflected Milton's greater concern with his nation's loss of spiritual guidance.

After his pastoral meditation on the corrupt English clergy and a digression on decorating Lycidas' hearse with flowers, Milton invokes the archangel Michael as a patron saint for England. Michael represents a notably British mythical figure, a protector of the island often portrayed with a sword. The speaker implores Michael to "Look homeward . . . now, and melt with ruth," meaning that he wants the angel to shift his gaze toward the mainland and mourn the loss of Lycidas (163). Just as Phoebus mediates mortal and divine discourse, the angel Michael relays God's Word to His people. Milton then folds British mythology in with Ovidian myth: "O

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<sup>13</sup> See Milton's *Of Reformation* (1641), *Of Prelatical Episcopacy* (1641), *Animadversions* (1641), *The Reason of Church and Government* (1642), and *Apology for Smectymnuus* (1642).

ye dolphins, waft the hapless youth” (164); the speaker asks the dolphins to carry Lycidas’ body to shore as they did for the infant Melicertes in *Metamorphoses* (IV.481-54). This combination of English and classical myths hearkens back to when the speaker questioned the whereabouts of the “old bards” and “famous Druids” during Lycidas’ demise (53). Milton locates these emblems of British mythology in England with specific geographic references such as “where Deva spreads her wizard stream” (55) or “on the shaggy top of Mona high” (54). Conflating the angel Michael with this Ovidian mythic reference resembles the way he refers to the “old bards” and “famous Druids” (53) alongside nymphs and “the sage Hippotades” (96). By entangling English and classical myth in his poem he suggests that the classical tradition is a cornerstone of British culture and identity.

Allusions to and appropriations of mythic figures were not the only ways that Milton used the classical tradition to establish British national identity. Like many of his British contemporaries, Milton wrote classic poetic forms in Latin. For example, he composed “Epitaphium Damonis” on the death of his friend Charles Diadotti, and “In Quintum Novembris” (“On the Fifth of November”), another of Milton’s early Latin poems, celebrates the anniversary of the failed Gunpowder Plot of 1605. Writing about distinctly British content in classical Latin, Milton demonstrated from early in his career his ability to mingle the classical tradition with British culture and identity. Originally published in *Justa Edouardo King Naufrago* (“Obsequies in Memory of Edward King”), a compilation of elegies by Cambridge students for their drowned classmate, “Lycidas” is one of a few poems in the collection written in English, whereas most of the others are in Greek or Latin. Milton’s decision to write “Lycidas” in English was an inherently nationalistic gesture. Though “Lycidas” is often called a pastoral elegy, Milton himself designated the poem as a monody, or an ode for a single voice rather than a chorus

(Revard 165). By publishing a classical verse form in the English language, Milton was giving ancient authority to a piece of new British literature.

#### 4.4 Myth and Immortality

“Lycidas” alludes directly to several mythic figures and incorporates Ovidian myths into original British versions of mythic figures, but the poem shares another compelling similarity with *Metamorphoses* in its concern with achieving immortality through artistic fame. For Milton, “Fame is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise / (That last infirmity of noble mind)” (70-71). The worthy pursuit of fame motivates the poet “To scorn delights, and live laborious days” (73). Milton’s aspirations for lasting renown corresponded to his desire for his nation to occupy a prominent place in history; his literary vocation was not to be simply a poet or even a religious poet—his goal was to be a “national poet” and “contribute crucially to the formation, invention, and teaching of his nation” (Loewenstein and Stevens 4).

Ovid and Milton appear to agree that the influence of their respective nations will both determine and be determined by their success. So much of early modern British culture drew from the classical tradition because of the ancient world’s lasting impact. Pagan beliefs inspired a monotheistic culture to the point where mythic figures feature heavily in places of Christian worship or in poems such as Milton’s whose secondary purpose is critiquing the shortcomings of the English church. But even Ovid recognizes the limitations of national influence: “Times are upset, we see, and nations rise / To strength and greatness, others fail and fall” (XV.418-19). After accounting the fall of so many famed cities, Ovid asks “What but a name is left” of these cities and their heroes (427). In *Metamorphoses*, “from Trojan stock a city rises, / Rome, where the Tiber flows from the Apennines, / And with vast efforts founds her destiny” (430-32). Aeneas is this “Trojan stock”—the storied ancestor to not only Romulus (the founder of Rome)

and Augustus (the founder of the Roman Empire), but also Brutus, founder of Britain. Rome, the center of classical tradition, relies on a more ancient tale to bolster its authority, and so Britain builds on Rome's influence to justify its dominion. It is this idea that a name can continue the legacy of a nation that both Ovid and Milton cling to in their search for immortality achieved through artistic fame.

Additionally, Milton and Ovid shared a sense of dissidence with the dominant political and theological ideologies of their times. Augustus exiled Ovid from Rome to Tomi; the poet himself claimed this banishment was a result of *carmen et error*—poetry and an error.<sup>14</sup> While scholars agree that *Ars amatoria* is the poem to which he refers, we see Ovid's subtle critique of Augustus throughout the myths in *Metamorphoses*. For instance, when Ovid describes the ages of mankind, the Golden Age is marked by humanity's freedom from a rigid ruler:

No punishment they knew, no fear; they read  
 No penalties engraved on plates of bronze;  
 No suppliant throng with dread beheld their judge;  
 No judges they had then, but lived secure. (I.91-4)

In these lines, Ovid seemingly negates the prosperity of Augustus' rule by implying humankind was better off without the kind of empire he imposed. Milton's misgivings about the English clergy conveyed in "Lycidas" reflect Ovid's discontent with the morally rigid Augustan regime. Milton seems to aspire to be a Renaissance Ovid, crafting poetry that also includes meaningful cultural critique and writing lines of verse which future poets will strive to emulate.

Milton's concern with the Church of England centers around his distaste for the morally corrupt clergy, and Ovid's political critique was of the morally rigid Augustan laws. Though

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<sup>14</sup> See Ovid's *Tristia* 2.207

Milton desired increased moral accountability and Ovid sought reduced moral imposition, the two poets shared and awareness of the lasting impact their words would have on their contemporary audiences and eventually on history's perception of the nations they represented.

In the Epilogue of *Metamorphoses*, Ovid famously writes:

Now stands my task accomplished, such a work  
 As not the wrath of Jove, nor fire nor sword  
 Nor the devouring ages can destroy.  
 Let, when it will, that day, that has no claim  
 But to my mortal body, end the span  
 Of my uncertain years. Yet I'll be borne,  
 The finer part of me, above the stars,  
 Immortal, and my name shall never die.  
 Wherever through the lands beneath her sway  
 The might of Rome extends, my words shall be  
 Upon the lips of men. If truth at all  
 Is stablished by poetic prophesy,  
 My fame shall live to all eternity. (XV.871-79)

Ovid asserts that he will live on forever in the ways people remember and reinterpret his writings; he undergoes his own metamorphosis from classical poet to storied mythographer.

While Milton shares Ovid's concern with lasting reputation, his portrayal of how one achieves immortality in "Lycidas" differs from Ovid's. It is not by the will of mythic gods or goddesses that Lycidas was "sunk low, but mounted high" (172); it was instead "Through the dear might of him that walked the waves" (173). In "Lycidas," the titular figure undergoes an apotheosis of his

own: “Henceforth, thou art the genius of the shore” (183). Though it is Christ’s “dear might” that elevates Lycidas in death, Milton cannot sever Christian ideology from the classical tradition, appointing Lycidas as the guardian spirit of England’s shores—a position rooted in classical contexts but reminiscent of a Christian guardian angel.

The uncouth swain closes his song to a field empty of all but “th’ oaks and rills” (186); the mythic figures he questioned, the shepherds addressed, the clergy he criticized, the divine speakers he embodied—they all vanish suddenly, and the reader is left with the simple image of a poet-shepherd walking into the sunset. This is hardly the portrait of a triumphant poet as he imprints a lasting mark on literary history, but Milton infuses this ending with subtle hints to his poetic prowess. Acknowledging that “He touched the tender tops of various quills” (188), the poet concedes that he has written a poem with impressive generic variations and a wide range of classical allusions; the setting sun indicates that his remarkable elegy was the product of a single day’s storytelling. When he says “Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new” (193), the swain humbly recognizes that he will go on to write verse more extraordinary still than the one his audience just heard.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Drawing from a shared body of knowledge, early modern authors and audiences used mythic allusions to contribute to an evolving national identity. The mythic allusions in early modern British literature operate as a semiotic system which allows people with a common cultural background access to collective application and interpretation of the classical tradition. Though countless scholars have looked at Shakespeare and Milton's engagement with the classical tradition and examined their separate contributions to early modern British identity, they have not yet explored thoroughly how these two authors incorporated Ovidian mythology into their literary works to signal their humanist education and to contribute to cultural development.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare alludes to and appropriates classical myth to craft an on-stage narrative that reflects and challenges his audience's experience. The play's Athenian setting reflects the ordered monarchy of England, and as it is juxtaposed against the fantastical wood, the audience could have seen their own landscape infused with magic and inhabited by mythical figures. These beings were British interpretations of classical myth, lending authority to certain English socio-political structures but carefully criticizing other social and cultural constructs such as patriarchal monarchy, chastity, and marriage. Shakespeare's representation of Theseus aligns England with an ancient, lawful city, and the playwright's adjustments to the myths surrounding the Athenian duke soften the hard edges of the classical hero. Imbuing the fairies of *Midsummer* with godlike qualities, Shakespeare creates palatable versions of pagan gods and goddesses for his Christian Elizabethan audience. Their interference with the mortal world mirrors Ovidian myths in which gods and goddesses meddle with humans and their environments, but it also reflects the way that a broad section of his Elizabethan

audience was at the mercy of the ruling nobility. More strikingly, the staging of Pyramus and Thisbe demonstrates the dynamic relationship between art and audience, which allowed Shakespeare's viewers, made up of a mix of social classes, to participate in the production of art and culture through their reception of and response to his own adaptation of classical myth.

Milton's use of mythology in "Lycidas" built on this idea that an audience's perception of art can alter the art itself. In the pastoral elegy, Milton alludes to mythic forms and figures, shifting them from their classical, pagan origins and molding them to fit a Christian perspective of the world. Like Shakespeare, Milton uses mythic allusions as points of familiarity for his readers, but he also emulates Ovid's desire to achieve immortality through artistic fame. And just as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* criticizes the Augustan regime, Milton's "Lycidas" expresses discontent with the English clergy and their detrimental effect on British society; both authors convey their concerns through a classical veil: Ovid using the transformative powers of mythic deities to both shame and glorify Augustus, and Milton relying on pastoral shepherds to represent corrupted church leaders. Choosing to write an ode in his native English, Milton assimilates the classical tradition with a developing English identity. Combining the classical from the Christian, Milton depends upon the authority of antiquity and the power of his own faith to secure his place in literary history and to establish a particularly British national identity.

Of course, Shakespeare and Milton were not the only early modern authors to incorporate classical mythology into their writings as a means of establishing British national identity. Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* weaves together classical and British mythology to depict a divided fairy land symbolic of the real-world Elizabethan political climate; Andrew Hadfield suggests the "transformation of Britishness to Englishness" culminates in the figure of Spenser's Mutabilitie, who then forces Jove and those he endorses to admit that their authority depends on

conquest (582). Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* alternatively incorporates pagan myth to convey Christian morals; the presence of myth in *Faustus* goes beyond the "neutral . . . purpose of aesthetic intensification and metaphoric extension" and instead takes on the "dramatic role" of luring the character Faustus to Hell (McAlindon 214). In contrast, Philip Sidney and Mary Sidney Herbert explored controversial ideas under the guise of adhering to a classical Renaissance aesthetic. Thus, in *Astrophil and Stella*, Sidney employs "transparently sexual references beneath the cloak of classical imitation" (Miller 512). Similarly, Mary Sidney Herbert's translation of Petrarch's *Triumph* illustrates her ability to use classical imitation as a form of subversion; according to Shachar Livne, the translation often "dims the Petrarchan signifiers" (452) in ways that foreground Herbert's own "rhetoric of modesty, which is simultaneously sincere and subversive" (443). When humanist-educated Renaissance writers like these alluded to and appropriated mythology in their works, they invited their early modern audience to engage with the classical tradition and identify the influence of an ancient culture on the development of their own national identity.

The appropriation of classical myth is a practice that continues to this day, but the purpose of mythic allusions and borrowings has mutated according to the cultural context of the texts in which they appear. Whereas early modern authors often employed mythic figures to underscore Christian values or lend authority to their developing culture, later literary depictions of the classical tradition have more often sought to undermine organized religion or lament the degeneration of modern society compared with its antiquated origins. On the heels of Percy Shelley's utopian political epic "Queen Mab" and William Blake's anti-patriarchal "Visions of the Daughters of Albion," Charles Swinburne's poetry invokes classical mythology as a rejection of Victorian Christian morality. In "Atalanta in Caldion," for example, Swinburne's attack on

the Christian God is “veiled behind a screen of classical mythology” when he condemns Jupiter’s actions (Schweizer 88). Though still reliant on the classical tradition for its transmission, Swinburne’s blasphemy becomes more apparent in “Hymn to Proserpine” in which the poem’s speaker, the last pagan of Rome, comments on the purging of pre-Christian deities at the hands of the “pale Galilean” (35). The poem honors Proserpine, and the poet asks the mistress of the underworld to allow him to slip into oblivion alongside the ancient gods and goddesses: “Let my soul with their souls find place, and forget what is done and undone” (102). Swinburne’s use of mythic figures to subvert Christianity is a reversal of early modern efforts to leverage the authority of the classical tradition in favor of their religious beliefs, but the practice of deploying myth as a means of social critique and cultural development endured into the Victorian era.

Modernist authors also turned to the classical tradition as they navigated the global events of the early twentieth century. Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and W.B. Yeats all participated in what Vassiliki Kolocotroni has called “Modern Hellenism” (2). Living in the liminal space between the two World Wars, W. H. Auden, like many twentieth-century writers, leaned into the classical tradition to “reanimate myth and the mythical past in order to make sense of the present” (Vit 27). Auden’s ekphrastic poem “Musée des Beaux Arts” comments on Brueghel’s *Icarus*; the poet observes “About suffering they were never wrong, / The Old Masters” (1-2), which perhaps indicates his belief that the Old Masters could portray suffering in a way that most people never see. He contrasts the seriousness of untimely death with sardonic images of dogs that “go on with their doggy life” (12) and a horse that “Scratches its innocent behind on a tree” (13), and he explains that in Brueghel’s depiction of Icarus falling from the sky, the other people in the portrait seem equally indifferent to the young boy’s plight: “everything turns away / Quite leisurely from the disaster” (14-15).

Auden's "The Shield of Achilles" is another ekphrastic poem which transmits ancient myth to modern meditations on sorrow. The poem begins with Thetis, Achilles' mother, looking over Hephaestus' shoulder as he etches Achilles' fate into his shield. When Achilles' mother looked "For vines and olive trees, / Marble well-governed cities" (2-3), she instead saw "A plain without a feature, bare and brown, / No blade of grass, no sign of neighborhood" (9-10). Though Achilles' fame endured, the poem's depiction of his life questions the futility of war even for the sake of glory. A faceless voice "Proved by statistics that some cause was just" (17), but "No one was cheered and nothing was discussed" (19). This poem, published in 1952, compares the worthy cause of the Trojan war to that of World War II. Thetis' pain at her son's destiny was perhaps meant to reflect the grief of mothers who lost their sons in war. Auden's two ekphrastic poems capture a sense of nihilism that pervaded society after the world wars; the poet's reliance on myth to express his hopelessness "synthesizes the past and the present" (Vit 28). Like his readers who were victims of their nation's politics, Thetis is not responsible for the distant horrors she sees on the shield. But perhaps Auden is calling his readers to action, imploring them to empower themselves and each other in the face of their own misery.

Recognizing the influence of antiquity in the works of Milton and Shakespeare can help us see how writers such as Swinburne and Auden owe a similar debt. British national identity was founded on the authority of antiquity, and British culture used that authority to justify and facilitate their imperialist influence on much of western culture. But the mutability of classical myth is represented in not just traditionally canonical literature but also young adult fiction, movies, and television. In the early 2000s, Rick Riordan published the *Percy Jackson* series in which demi-gods—or as they are called in the books, "half-bloods"—attend a camp where they hone their divine skills to fight monsters for the glory of their celestial parents. Chiron—the

centaur, here the Camp Half-Blood director—explains to Percy that the modern-day location of Mount Olympus is above the Empire State building. As Chiron puts it, “the gods move with the heart of the West” (72). When Percy does not understand, Chiron elaborates:

Come now, Percy. What you call “Western civilization.” Do you think it’s just an abstract concept? No, it’s a living force. A collective consciousness that has burned bright for thousands of years. The gods are a part of it. You might even say they are the source of it, or at least, they are tied so tightly to it that they couldn’t possibly fade, not unless all of Western civilization were obliterated. (73)

Chiron assures Percy that the gods do not die because the concept of western civilization has not died. The gods simply move to “wherever the flame was brightest...They spent several centuries in England” (72-3). The connection Chiron draws between mythology and modern western civilization is the very reason many authors from different time periods writing for unique audiences continue engaging with the classical tradition. The presence of myth in mainstream culture shows how indebted we are to both the classical myth makers and to the canonical authors who incorporated mythology into their works.

This thesis began by comparing mythology to a precious inheritance, passed down through and altered by the centuries. Shakespeare and Milton took this inheritance and compounded its value, integrating the classical tradition with the collective identity of one of the most influential cultures in history. Our modern interpretations of their works surely differ from their reception by early modern audiences, and this, too, contributes to the worth and influence of early modern culture and identity. In a sense, we resemble Shakespeare’s viewers, watching the staged satirical version of *Pyramus and Thisbe*; just as an Elizabethan audience added to the

cultural value of the myth in their reception of its adaptation, so audiences today continue to add to the meaning of early modern poems, plays, and stories when we witness their lasting impact.

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