

explorations



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REVIEW

Ewa Młynarczyk. 2023. *Literary Appropriations of Myth and Legend in the Poetry of Alfred Lord Tennyson, William Morris, Algernon Charles Swinburne and William Butler Yeats*. Warsaw: Institute of English Studies, University of Warsaw.

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Ewa Młynarczyk's book is situated within a rich critical tradition: as John Vickery notes in his well-known essay, research on the history of world literature clearly indicates the existence of a close and at the same time complicated relationship between literature and myth, so the seemingly simple question about the nature of this relationship brings a number of complex answers involving various conceptualizations of literary myth, searching for the mythological roots of literature, treating myths as sources of literary inspiration, and analyzing various types of transformations or reinterpretations of myths by various writers (Vickery, 67-69). Młynarczyk's book is one of many voices in the discussion on the transformation of mythical motifs and the ways of functioning of mythical characters in various literary works. The research area chosen by the author is English poetry of the Victorian era (selected works by Tennyson, Morris and Swinburne) as well as the early works of William Butler Yeats ("The Wanderings of Oisín" from 1889 and single poems from the collections *The Rose*, published in 1893, and *The Wind Among the Reeds*, published in 1899). The author defines the book's two main premises in the following way:

Firstly, world myths and legends are regional manifestations of the underlying universal patterns, and as such lend themselves to a comparative study. Secondly, the specific realisations of these common themes are context-dependent, and thus, they may take on different shades as they are adapted and modified by the storyteller/poet retelling the myth (Młynarczyk, 221)

The work is divided into six parts. It opens with a Preface which briefly discusses the basic concepts of myth criticism: Carl Jung's archetype, Northrop Frye's mythos, Claude Lévi-Strauss's mytheme and Roland Barthes's empty signifier. The preface is followed by an introduction devoted to nineteenth-century research on myth, with particular emphasis on the achievements of comparative philology and comparative anthropology.

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The analytical part consists of three chapters: "The Quest," "The Otherworlds" and "The Outcast." The first chapter, devoted to the motif of wandering, is based on a theoretical foundation derived from the critical works of Northrop Frye and Joseph Campbell's classic text *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. The chapter focuses on the functioning of the motif of wandering understood both as movement in space and a spiritual journey in search of one's own identity. The works analyzed in the first chapter are *The Earthly Paradise* by Morris, "Thalassius" by Swinburne, "Merlin and the Gleam" and "Ulysses" by Tennyson, and "The Song of Wandering Aengus" and "Fergus and the Druid" by Yeats.

The second chapter is devoted to the theme of the afterlife. Młynarczyk points out that while the motif of wandering is associated with movement, progress, and achieving one's goals, the afterlife is a place associated with a kind of paralysis of the spirit, and at the same time it reflects the escapist tendencies present in the poetry of the nineteenth century. The author discusses Tennyson's "The Hesperides" and "The Lotus Eaters", Swinburne's poems "The Garden of Proserpine," "Hymn to Proserpine," "Hesperia," "Prologue" and "Stallion the Dane" from Morris's *The Earthly Paradise*, and Yeats's "The Wanderings of Oisín". The afterlife as a place of respite and desired escape from reality is presented by Swinburne; for Tennyson, Morris and Yeats, existence in the afterlife is sterile and empty.

The third chapter is devoted to the theme of social alienation which is the result of the ordinary mortal's contact with supernatural forces. Endowed by the gods with immortality (Tityos) or the gift of predicting the future (Tiresias), the heroes of Tennyson's and Swinburne's poems pay a high price for it, becoming outcasts. A similar fate befalls the characters from the works of Morris ("The Hill of Venus") and Yeats ("The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland"), who are condemned to alienation resulting from their contact with the afterlife. Młynarczyk points out that such alienation reflects, to some extent, the existential situation of the poet whose visions are often rejected by the society in which he lives.

The book ends with concise conclusions. Młynarczyk states that for the poets analyzed in the work, myth functions as an empty signifier (Barthes) filled by each of them with individual content. She notes that for Tennyson and Morris the use of myths and legends had a therapeutic function, allowing the poets to work through their own emotional states. Swinburne and Yeats used myths to deal with the spiritual crisis that resulted from the crisis of faith brought about by the development of science in the Victorian era. Ewa Młynarczyk notes that in Yeats' case, interest in Celtic mythology, Irish legends and folklore can be interpreted in Jungian terms and treated as an element of building Irish national identity. Most importantly, for all the poets discussed in the work, myth is an inexhaustible source of various incarnations that allow them to combine personal and universal - because mythical - content.

The interpretations of literary works proposed by Ewa Młynarczyk are insightful and convincing. They indicate her significant analytical skills and her profound knowledge of the nineteenth-century British poetry. The book will be of interest to scholars and students of English literature as well as general readers seeking to gain a deeper understanding of interrelations of myth and poetry.

REFERENCES

Vickery, John B. 1982. "Literature and Myth." In *Interrelations of Literature*, edited by Jean-Pierre Barricelli and Joseph Gibaldi, 67-89. New York: The Modern Language Association of America.

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