CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY IN THE SECULAR POETRY OF JOHN DONNE

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CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY IN THE SECULAR POETRY OF
JOHN DONNE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps as a natural consequence of the classical revival of the Renaissance, the Age of Elizabeth is often recognized as the era in which classical mythology served as subject matter and/or embellishment for nearly all literary endeavors. In this broad neo-classical context the metaphysical poets have often seemed alien. John Donne in particular is thought to fall outside this general classical orientation. Many point to John Donne and say he broke the chain of classical continuity; they even say he rejected myth. This reputation is based partly on evidence from Donne's contemporaries. The fine passage in Thomas Carew's memorial poem is cited to suggest that, after Donne,

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will recall the goodly exiled train
Of gods and goddesses which in thy just reign
Was banished nobler poems; now with these,
The silenced tales i' th' Metamorphoses,
Shall stuff their lines, and swell the windy page,
Till verse, refined by thee in this last age,
Turn ballad-rhyme, or those old idols be
adored again with new apostasy.
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Though the casual observer will have to admit that Donne does not make use of classical mythology with monotonous and predictable frequency, he will realize that Donne does make use of the body of classical myth far more frequently
than is generally realized. In fact, it is not the quantity that is remarkable, but the almost unique way that Donne employs myth that is noteworthy. Perhaps Donne's unusual use of mythology can be explained through an understanding of Donne's nature and the literary milieu into which he was born.

Donne lived in the era which still glistened with the brightness of Spenser's mythological gems. However, Donne does not subscribe to the Spenserian use of mythological ornamentation. Milton Rugoff notes that the nature of Donne's images from mythology "is the most convincing evidence of his revolt against that [the Spenserian] tradition."\(^1\) Clay Hunt contends that Donne "banished from serious poetry the 'train of goddesses.'"\(^2\) Hunt states further that "those decorative allusions to classical myth, which seemed so normal a poetic vocabulary to most of his contemporaries in the 1590's, are almost completely absent from Donne's poetry outside of the 'Elegies.'"\(^3\)

Douglas Bush does not deny the existence of mythological references in Donne but points out that they are not obvious. Donne's contemporaries, he maintains, made

\(^3\)Ibid.
them obvious, but Donne revolted against that convention. Further, Bush says, "the monarch of wit did react powerfully against the idealistic and idyllic mythology of the Elizabethan lyricists." 4

Sir Herbert J. C. Grierson, the great editor of Donne's poetry, has contended that Donne switched from the Renaissance use of classical references to more "scientific, philosophic, realistic, and homely" imagery.5 Grierson did admit, however, that Donne used mythological imagery in a limited way.

J. B. Leishman states, "I can hardly remember any reference to classical mythology in Donne's poetry, from which we may conclude that to him it had become stale and commonplace, and that it had no longer what it seems to have had for many of the earlier Elizabethans, the freshness of a new discovery."6 Yet Leishman reveals in a footnote that Donne did refer to various classical deities.

Allen R. Benham, in his explanation of Donne's theory of poetry, says, "He apparently was nauseated by


the conventional current poetry." Instead of an extensive use of classical mythology, Benham notes, Donne used materials from contemporary geography and astronomy.

In this same vein Robert P. Tristram Coffin and Alexander Witherspoon observe that Donne "casts away the calm myth and image of the classics." Instead, they continue,

along with alchemical analogies and scientific approaches of the past, Donne fills his lines with the unheard-of keen and close observation of life that is of this very moment, now. He knows how a fish sees a net as a 'windowy' thing; he knows coins; he knows navigation; he knows law, having studied it and having been a preacher to lawyers; he knows medicine; he knows minute facts of meteorology and husbandry and business; he knows how a man's mind can be in two places at once.

Almost all of these statements are extravagant. Some of them are the result of what must be called perfunctory observation. And some of them contain built-in contradictions. The admission by most of these critics that John Donne made allusions to classical mythology is significant.

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8 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
These observe, however, that Donne used mythology only in a limited manner. This manner is not defined distinctly. The limitation appears to be due to Donne's lack of use of classical material as main subject matter in his poetry. Yet all of these critics seem at least vaguely aware that when Donne does make use of classical mythology he turns it into something uniquely his own. Douglas Bush seems to be groping for this point in the statement below:

The whole body of Donne's poetry contains much more mythological allusion than one remembers, but his best or best-known pieces have hardly any. Instead of warm and diffuse Italianate word-painting, Donne's mythology bears the individual stamp of his wit, realism, ratiocination, learning, concentration of feeling and expression, and sometimes deliberate harshness and ugliness.

Bush is more perceptive than most critics in the matter of Donne's imagery. In an attempt to articulate the differences he feels, he cites these lines:

And to make blinde men see,
What things gods are, I say they'are like to thee.

In contrast he cites another pair of lines:

Hee that charm'd Argus eyes, sweet Mercury,
Workes not on her, who now is growne all eye.

Bush concludes, "The first line might occur in any Elizabethan poet, but not the second." Donne could have made use of Phoebus, "but what he remembers is 'Busie old foole, unruly Sunne.'" Bush also notes that to Donne

"Venus is not the lover of Adonis but the patroness of 'Lovers sweetest Part, Variety.'" When most Elizabethan poets were treating Cupid as "the sportive god of love in idleness," or even railing "at him with affected anger," Donne was entangling him in "nets of witty or passionate reasoning," Bush observes. As a summary to these observations, Bush continues, "Donne's sparing or 'perverted' use of mythological allusion implies of course a conscious revolt against this as against other conventions." 12

These statements seem to add emphasis to the view that perhaps Donne is not anti-mythic as he has often been judged. Perhaps his unconventional use of myth has blinded the eyes of most perfunctory readers and caused them to believe that Donne shuns myth. The question is not whether Donne used mythology extensively or even whether he used it at all, but how he used it. In an age in which writers held the classic models in high esteem and emulated them, not always to perfection, Donne was a rarity. He ignored the copyings of Renaissance writers and broke the tradition of close direct influence of classical writers and slavish use of classical myth. Donne was the master of myth rather than its slave. At his best he employed myth to his advantage as integral to his poetic effort instead of using it as mere decoration or in traditional classical repetition.

12 Ibid., pp. 232-233, passim.
A relatively recent critic, Arnold Stein, also holds this view. As Stein puts it, Donne turned "old materials of poetry into new and individual purposes of expression."\(^{13}\) Stein also believes that Donne's "most prominent actions as poet are individual and experimental: no one has ever regarded his poetic aim as the recovery of past wisdom."\(^{14}\) Moreover, Stein further states that Donne rejects the "externals of myth" but maintains that this fact alone is not sufficient reason to pronounce Donne "antimythic."\(^{15}\)

Perhaps a reason for Donne's attitude toward the use of myth can be found in the period in which he lived and wrote. By the time Donne began writing, a mere allusion to myth was usually enough to bring forth an attitude or elicit feeling or a set of images in a reader. His contemporaries were aware of definite connotations from the scant mention of a mythological deity, place, or hero. Donne could presuppose that his readers possessed a considerable acquaintance with the classics since this body of knowledge had been made available to almost anyone who wanted it. One writer observes that "to the Elizabethan audience . . . the mythological reference was probably familiar; for some knowledge was presented to even the


\(^{14}\) Ibid., p. 186.

\(^{15}\) Ibid.
illiterate Elizabethans” through masques, revels, and pageants. He further notes, “Mythological characters appeared in these pageants accompanied by their familiar symbols: Jove had his thunderbolts, Fortune had her wheel, and Venus appeared with her doves.” If Donne was “in revolt,” it is not so much that he is in revolt against the classical machinery as such as that he was in revolt against the hackneyed reiteration of the myths and more especially against the stock responses which they elicited.

The modern reader of Donne is perhaps blinded by the sheer virtuosity of Donne’s imagery. And he may be dazzled by what often seems the remarkable modernity of Donne’s imagery. It is commonplace to read that, in effect, Donne did not shun any area from which to draw his imagery. His debts range from the materials of contemporary geography, astronomy, literature, history, religion, and medicine to the developments in social relations. For example, in "Satyre IV" Donne reveals his wide interest by allusions to Calepine the lexicographer, Surius the German historian, Aretino, Dante, and Albrecht Durer. In making these varied allusions Donne reveals himself as a true child of his age: he lived in a transition time when men seemed to be searching

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for new ways of expressing ideas. "It was an age," says one commentator, "of bewilderment, of hunger and fear in the midst of plenty, of both scientific and spiritual revolution, an age when the old order of medieval certainties was crumbling and the new order was not yet stabilized." 17

It is not unreasonable to suggest that the modern reader becomes so engrossed in the more obvious aspects of Donne's imagery--its virtuosity, its varied nature, its element of "wit"--that he fails to take into account that Donne employs a considerable body of classical imagery. When this fact finally intrudes upon the consciousness, it brings with it the sense that while the classical allusion is, indeed, there, it is being employed in a rather special way.

It is the purpose of this thesis to examine the classical allusion in Donne's secular poetry to show that the body of such allusion is more extensive than is generally conceded. More important, this study will evaluate rather than merely catalogue the allusions in order to show how Donne employs such allusion and in what way his poetic practice as to the employment of classical

allusion is different from the practice of his contemporaries. It will be demonstrated that, with very few exceptions, Donne uses the standard myth or allusion as a foundation or departure point from which he then goes on to synthesize the myth and turn it into poetic material that is of special significance to his theme.

This thesis is divided into three major areas, and includes also introductory and concluding material. Chapter II deals with Donne's references to the pre-Olympians, the Olympian gods, and to the lesser gods, and includes notation evaluating each allusion as Donne's own unique poetic endeavor. Chapter III discusses allusions to the Cupid myth and indicates that Donne as a major love poet is not sparse in his inclusion of references to the ancient myths of love. Chapter IV reviews Donne's observations concerning myths of the life cycle. A large body of the poet's work makes reference to myths of resurrection, death, and motivation and control of life experiences.
CHAPTER II

ALLUSIONS TO THE CONVENTIONAL PANTHEON

Citation of Donne's reaction against profuse and perfunctory mythological allusions has been commonplace since the time of Thomas Carew's tribute. In light of this it is somewhat ironic that Donne's use of myth is not sparse. In his "Songs and Sonets," "Elegies," "Epithalamions," "Epigrams," "Satyres," "Letters to Severall Personages," and various single poems he refers to a variety of mythological material. He not only alludes to the gods in general but makes use in a rather conventional fashion of specific gods and goddesses. For instance, he alludes to the pre-Olympian beings Chaos and Prometheus and makes allusions at times to the Olympians Jove, Venus, and Diana. He refers to a variety of lesser gods, including those specifically charged with poetic inspiration: these include the Muses, Apollo, and Helicon. Several of these allusions are little different from the classical conventions of the sonneteers.

Some of Donne's references, of course, are so general and so isolated in content that no significant conclusions can be drawn from them. Two of the "Elegies," his "Heroicall Epistle," and one verse letter should serve to illustrate Donne's rather casual references to a generalized and somewhat indeterminate pantheon.
In "Elegie IV: The Perfume" Donne bemoans the fact that he and his love were found out because her father had smelled his perfume. The poet had commanded his "silkes, their whistling to forbeare." Even though his "oprest shoes, dumbe and speechlesse were," his perfume had given him away. Donne exclaims that

Gods, when yee fum'd on altars, were pleas'd well, Because you'were burnt, not that they lik'd your smell.  
(11. 65-66)

In this allusion to the ancient practice of human sacrifice to the gods there is evidence of the poet's "wit." The element of surprise in an otherwise commonplace comment shocks many readers. In "Elegie XVIII: Loves Progress" Donne again alludes to the practice of sacrifice. His sarcasm and wit are evident again.

Men to such Gods, their sacrificing Coles Did not in Altars lay, but pits and holes.  
(11. 31-32)

Throughout this poem the poet is contrasting the celestial with the infernal regions by using several figures. He places the heavenly Cupid underground with Pluto and builds sacrificial fires to the gods in holes and pits instead of on exalted altars.

The two references just cited indicate at least three noteworthy aspects of Donne's use of "classical" allusion. First, they indicate the abruptness with which Donne may inject such allusion into a context that would not seem to
call for it. Second, in the two allusions cited there is a kind of "reversal" in that, as opposed to standard classical allusion, it becomes immediately apparent that Donne is complimentary to neither the gods he cites nor to the persons or situations to which they are parallel. Finally, it is clear that even in references as general as these Donne converts the material of myth to his own uses. The placing of Cupid underground with Pluto, for instance, is not a conventional reference.

In his letter "To the Countesse of Huntingdon" Donne praises the Countess and notes that the planets are named for the gods of antiquity.

Taught by great constellations, which being fram'd
Of the most starres, take low names, Crab, and Bull,
When single planets by the Gods are nam'd,
You covet not great names, of great things full.  
(ll. 37-40)

The "Heroicall Epistle: Sapho to Philoenis" contains another of Donne's references to the gods, designed as an elaborate compliment. He says

Thou art so faire
As, gods, when gods to thee I doe compare,
Are grac'd thereby; And to make blinde men see,
What things gods are, I say they're like to thee.

Here Donne reverses what is the hackneyed comparison of the loved one with a god. The poet does not merely say "to look at you, my love, is to see the gods." Apparently Donne does not feel that he is profaning the gods by comparing them to the woman; instead, he is complimenting them. The image is,
in fact, a complicated one that works in two directions: both the woman and the gods are complimented.

In all four of the references cited Donne does not reveal the usual Renaissance exaltation of the gods of antiquity; instead, he makes them subject to himself, the poet, and makes use of them in a way that is almost unique in the poetry of his time. At times the gods of Donne are barely recognizable as the gods of mythology. Donne is always master of the allusion: the mythical reference does not take over the poem; it serves merely as a specific reference to better explain the point the poet is trying to make. Furthermore, if the figure does not come to Donne in the form and with the paraphernalia and characteristics he desires for his specific point, he apparently has no compunction about making changes.

Not all of Donne's mythological allusions are generalized or indeterminate. He reveals elsewhere that he is thoroughly conversant with the specific pre-Olympian and Olympian myths, and makes careful and pertinent use of them when he chooses. In some poems Donne reveals a special fondness for the classical myths of creation and especially for the concept of Chaos. One critic maintains that Donne's use of the concept of Chaos in "Elegie XII"

bespeaks a careful study and understanding of the Greek idea of the origin of the universe, for the Elegie is called "His Parting from her," and the idea of the great general disturbance at the parting of
the elements from each other as they dwelt in Chaos, in order to form the universe, suggests more acute pangs of severance.¹

This same understanding of Chaos is revealed by the poet in his verse letter "To Sir Henry Wotton" where he again pictures a confusion before the earth took its form.

As in the first Chaos confusedly
Each elements qualities were in: the 'other three.
(ll. 29-30)

Another allusion to Chaos appears in "Elegie VIII: The Comparison."

Thy head is like a rough-hewne statue of jeat,
Where marks for eyes, nose, mouth, are yet scarce set;
Like the first Chaos, or flat seeming face
Of Cynthia, when th'earth's shadows her embrace.
(ll. 19-22)

The not-yet fully created earth is indicated by such words as "rough-hewne," "mark for eyes," and "yet scarce set." In "A Nocturnal upon St. Lucies day" Donne says

oft did we grow
To be two Chaosses, when we did show
Care to ought else; and often absences
Withdrew our soules, and made us carcasses.
But I am by her death, (which word wrongs her)
Of the first nothing, the Elixer grown . . .
(ll. 24-29)

Grierson rightly calls this a "difficult stanza in a difficult poem."² However, Donne seems to be following the

¹Beatrice Johnson, "Classical Allusions in the Poetry of John Donne," PMLA, LXIII(December, 1928), 1107.
conventional concept of Chaos, which existed as the "first nothing" before creation. The whole poem is replete with words which indicate darkness, stillness, and formlessness. At one point he says love formed him, "A quintessence even from nothingness,/ From dull privations, and leane emptiness .../ Of absence, darknesse, death; things which are not." All of these negatives seem to indicate a knowledge on the part of the poet of mythology's stories of creation and indicate also Donne's awareness of love as a major motivating force. There is nothing particularly unusual about Donne's making use of the concept of Chaos. References to Chaos in Elizabethan poetry are numerous. But Donne obviously found the relationship between love and Chaos intriguing, and it fitted his concept of wholeness and unity of lovers.

With the pre-Olympian myths as with others Donne shows an almost uncanny ability to convert the myth into something that uniquely suits his purpose. In "Epithalamion" to the Earl of Somerset the poet writes

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could a Promethean art
   ... unto the Northerne Pole impart
   The fire of these inflaming eyes. ...  
(II. 113-115)
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About this and similar citations Beatrice Johnson makes the following comment:

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... Donne uses terms of Greek Mythology with a skill or adeptness which is amazing. His use shows both an analysis of the meaning of the myth and a
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synthetic conclusion as to its significance in his application of it to the particular matter in hand. For instance, . . . "Could a Promethean art either unto the northern pole impart the fire of these inflaming eyes," . . . show[s] the ability to assimilate a thought and to present it again, in a new and surprising form essentially his own, 3

As might be expected, the Olympian gods form the nucleus for a large portion of mythical allusion in Donne's poetry. Seven of the twelve Olympians are mentioned specifically by Donne. These include Jupiter or Jove, Phoebus or Apollo, Diana or Cynthia, Pluto, Venus, Mercury, and Mars.

Donne's allusions to Jove, the chief of the gods, are, for the most part, fairly conventional. The references suggest that Donne in his secular poetry found in Jove, the concept of an all-powerful deity, a convenient one. While there are at times strong suggestions of irony in his references to Jove, for the most part Donne treats the god with respect and allows him the dignity and the power that are usually associated with him. Among the more conventional references to Jove that show his power and status is one found in "Loves Deitie." Here Donne refers to the fact that "every moderne god" will now extend his "vast prerogative" as far as Jove. The poet is referring ironically to the powers given to the god of Love. Donne is almost

3 Johnson, p. 1107.
asking for the powers to be withdrawn because of the possible growth of his own love affair and the possibility that Cupid's power may increase and be equal to the mighty Jove's "prerogative." Donne was apparently flirting with the notion that Jove could be equalled or displaced, but in the final analysis the poet does not allow himself to profane Jove's dignity.

At another juncture, in "Elegie XVI," the poet affords a quick glimpse of the conventional classical Jove as omnipotent. Donne speaks to his mistress and asks her to remain at home while he goes away. He mentions the wrath of her father and asks his lady to refrain from startling her nurse "with midnight startings, crying out, oh, oh ... O my love is slain ... ," lest they be found out. He requests that she dream him "some happinesse" and try to help them have opportunity later for a successful love affair:

\[
\text{except dread Jove} \\
\text{Thinke it enough for me to'have had thy love.} \\
(11. 55-56)
\]

Donne reveals yet another aspect of Jove as he mentions the mighty eagle, the god's symbolic bird, and compares himself and his lady with these traditional birds of Jove and Venus by saying, "and wee in us find the' Eagle and the Dove." Another allusion respectfully views Jove as giver and sustainer of life. Donne calls Jove Fate and
says in his "Elegie upon the untimely death of the incomparable Prince Henry,"

Fate have such a chaine, whose divers links
Industrious man discerneth. . . .
(11. 71-72)

The two allusions cited immediately above indicate that Donne was not only familiar with the omnipotent and respected figure of Jove, but he was also acquainted with paraphernalia associated with the god.

A rather "witty" and unusual comparison is drawn by Donne in a description of his lady friend in "Elegie VIII."

Like Proserpines white beauty-keeping chest,
Or Joves best fortunes urne, is her faire brest.
(11. 23-24)

Donne seems to be playing with two separate images at once. He compares his mistress' beauty to Proserpine's "chest" of beauty and to the "Urne" or container of Jove's "best fortunes." The poet is not only alluding to a container by using the word "chest," but he also uses a synonym for the word "brest." The "chest" or container is probably the container or chest which Proserpine was reputed to have given to Psyche after Venus had requested her to bring back from Hades some of Proserpine's beauty. Donne is apparently making reference to the box or chest and at the same time he refers to a part of his lady's anatomy which to him is beautiful.
Another reference to Jove appears in what Grierson terms "one of the most difficult of Donne's poems. With his usual strain of extravagant compliment Donne has interwoven some of his deepest thought and most out-of-the-way theological erudition and scientific lore." The poet interchanges Christian and pagan material and presents an unconventional treatment of Jove.

Temples were not demolish'd, though prophane:
Here Peter Jove's, there Paul hath Dian's Fane. [sic]
So whether my hymnes you admit or chuse,
In me you've have hallowed a Pagan Muse.
(ll. 13-16)

The reference above serves to indicate Donne's apparent disregard for conventional, pedestrian treatment of Jove; instead, the poet develops the image of the Christian Peter as having the face of Jove and thus profanes the Christian "temples" by inclusion of pagan materials.

Donne's references to the Olympian Apollo or Phoebus are also fairly conventional, which is rather surprising considering the importance of the sun in much of Donne's love poetry. In "Elegie XII: His parting from her" Donne tries to comfort his friend as he is leaving. He tells her that though they are parting they can "love by letters still and gifts,/ And thoughts and dreams," and they can ignore winter and drown night and hope for a new day.

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Though cold and darkness longer hang somewhere
Yet Phoebus equally lights all the Sphere.
(II. 85-86)

This passage is significant not only as an example of contemporary "scientific" imagery but also as evidence of Donne's microcosm-macrocosm concept. The poet stresses that though there is gloom elsewhere, there is light in the sphere or miniature universe which he and his lover occupy and are apparently the epitome of.

In his "Epithalamion made at Lincolnes Inne" the poet departs from a conventional use of the fading sun to indicate declining years and acknowledges the lovers' delight that winter brings shorter days and longer nights. The image is a traditional one of Apollo's horses galloping down the hill in the West.

The Sun still in our halfe Sphere sweates;
Hee flies in winter, but he now stands still.
Yet shadowes turne; noone point he hath attain'd,
His steeds nil bee restrain'd,
But gallop lively downe the Westerne hill.
(II. 54-58)

The only other significant allusion to Apollo appears in the "Epithalamion" for the Earl of Somerset. Donne refers in a conventional way to the myth of Apollo and his son:

Thou, which to all which come to looke upon,
Art meant for Phoebus, would'st be Phaeton.
(II. 144-145)

The Olympian Diana appears in two contrasting passages of Donne's poetry. A traditional Diana is indicated in "Elegie XIII" as Donne requires his lover to imagine the
darkest possible scene.

Should Cinthia quit thee, Venus, and each starre,
It would not forme one thought dark as mine are.  
(ll. 7-8)

Without the goddess of the moon and the goddess of love,  
the poet apparently foresees only a negative, dark gloom.  
The passage cited indicates Donne's acknowledgment of  
Diana's traditional attributes of brightness and shining  
resplendancy. The second passage compares the face of the  
poet's mistress to the  

flat seeming face  
Of Cynthia, when th'earths shadowes her embrace.  
("Elegie VIII," ll. 21-22)

Through Donne's unique imagery the traditionally beautiful  
goddess Diana is given a rather perverted countenance as  
the poet inserts another of his scientifically based  
images; in this instance he is merely describing the moon  
itself as the earth's movements seem to change its shape.  
Here again Donne is converting the material of myth to his  
own use, apparently employing his "reversal" technique and  
is complimentary neither to the goddess nor to the woman  
he is describing.

The remaining Olympian gods are rarely cited by the  
poet except for Venus and occasionally Pluto, who will be  
mentioned in subsequent chapters dealing with Donne's use  
of mythology when writing of love and death. However, a  
few isolated references to Mercury and Mars in their
traditional guises should be cited to complete the analysis of Donne's references to the Olympians.

Mercury is described in one source as one who could often "play the trickster and the thief."^5 Donne apparently acknowledges this aspect in the epigram "Mercurius Gallo-Belgicus,"

Thou art like
Mercury in stealing, but lyest like a Greeke.

In "The Progresse of the Soule" Donne describes the killer of Argus ironically as "Sweet Mercury." Mars is mentioned in the same poem: "Who findes in Mars his Campe no corps of Guard." (l. 203) The poet alludes to the traditional role of Mars as god of war and at the same time inserts a unique expression to say that the soul in its progress is barred by nothing, not even the armed corps of Mars.

Donne does not ignore the large group of lesser gods of antiquity. Included in this considerable body of allusion is Donne's poetic treatment of the myths of poetic inspiration. Although Apollo is considered to be the god who inspired poets and musicians, Donne chose not to refer to this guise of the god. On the other hand, he includes numerous references to the Muses and one allusion to the spring of Helicon.

^5Daniel S. Norton and Peters Rushton, Classical Myths in English Literature (New York, 1952), p. 34.
One scholar has perhaps best summed up Donne's attitude toward the word "Muse":

The term Muse . . . [is] interpreted as the state of mind conducive to creating. Perhaps calling upon some power outside himself for the energy to perform tasks or duties, establishes for Donne . . . the very state of mind necessary to the act of creating, the contemplative mind being thereby freed from all disturbing elements, and produces a silent psychology of effectiveness.

Even the most perfunctory reader can readily identify many traditional references to the Muse of poetry. As the poet discusses his own poetry and personal inspiration he not surprisingly includes numerous references to his Muse. At one point in "Satyr I" Donne admits: "With the Muses I conferre." This seemingly pleasant acquaintance with his Muse is not always in evidence however. In a verse letter, "To Mr. Rowland Woodward," Donne says that his Muse is now in a state of "chaste fallowness" and is "barren." He bemoans the fact that his Muse no longer inspires him. In another verse letter, "To Mr. B. B.," Donne blames the lack of inspiration on himself, "My Muse, for I had one, because I'm cold, Divorc'd herself." Perhaps the poet is revealing his negative attitude toward his own work, or maybe he is modestly belittling his poetry to invoke sympathy in his correspondent. Donne seems usually to hold himself rather than the Muse responsible for vain poetic efforts. That

6Johnson, p. 1102.
he recognizes distinctions in the tone and decorum of inspiration is clear in the allusion in "Satyre V":

Thou shalt not laugh in this leaf, Muse, nor they
Whom any pitty warmes.

(11. 1-2)

By the time of Donne it had become conventional in formal verse satire that the Muse would have to change her tone for the satiric mode.

In other passages alluding at least by implication to the Muse Donne strikes a somewhat bantering and even cynical note toward poetic inspiration. In his verse letter "To Mr. T. W." Donne writes recognizing his friend as a fellow writer: "All haile sweet poet." Further, he says, I "doe thee envie" as a poet; "O wouldst thou, by like reason, pitty mee!" Satirically Donne attaches importance to his notice of the appearance of the new poet, the Mr. T. W., who is also inspired by the Muse of poetry.

I, that ever was
In Natures, and in Fortunes gifts, alas,
(Before thy grace got in the Muses Schoole
A monster and a beggar,) am now a fool.

(11. 13-16)

In this passage Donne seems to espouse a negative attitude toward his own efforts as a poet. However, through this rather common type of negative expression by implication at least he indicates that he is aware of his own worth as a poet. Moreover, the satiric note evident in the letter "To Mr. T. W." merely calls attention to the fact that a
lesser poet is being read by a greater poet. Later, in the same letter, Donne reveals the motivation for his satiric attack on Mr. T. W.'s work: "For, but thy selfe, no subject can be found/ Worthy thy quill, nor any quill resound/ Thy worth but thine: how good it were to see/ A Poem in thy praise, and writ by thee." (ll. 21-24)

In yet another passage Donne exhibits the same satiric tone. In the poem "To Mr. J. L." the reader may observe that Mr. J. L. has become too ambitious and maybe a bit pompous and proud. Donne also reveals through a conventional allusion to the Muse a man who is not working at his craft as he should:

Some houres on us your frends, and some bestow
Upon your Muse, else both wee shall repent,
I that my love, she that her gifts on you are spent.
(ll. 12-14)

Donne's satiric intent in these recently cited allusions should not obscure the fact that Donne takes the Muse and poetic inspiration quite seriously and his satire is directed at poetasters and bad poetry, not at poetry itself. The very method and conventions of formal verse satire indicate a strong classical influence on Donne.

In "The Harbinger to the Progress" the poet indulges in a fairly common seventeenth-century practice of writing eulogies for the notice of patrons and prospective patrons. In a kind of poetry that must almost of necessity follow
conventional patterns we find Donne alluding to the Muse in rather conventional fashion. In a reference to Elizabeth Drury he says,

And since thy Muse her head in Heaven shrouds,  
Oh let her never stoope below the clouds.  
(II. 36-37)

In yet another reference to the dead Elizabeth in "Of the Progresse of the Soule," Donne says,

Immortall Maid, who though thou would'st refuse  
The name of Mother, be unto my Muse  
A Father, since her chaste Ambition is,  
Yearely to bring forth such a child as this.  
(II. 32-35)

Donne asks from the marriage of the dead Elizabeth and his Muse that other children besides the "Progresse" be born. The poet strikes a fulsomely sentimental note as he asks that "Men may extend thy progeny" that "These Hymnes thy issue, may encrease so long." The tone is much the same in the lengthy "Obsequies to the Lord Harrington," where the poet says at the death of the brother of his patroness the Countess of Bedford:

Doe not, faire soule, this sacrifice refuse,  
That in thy grave I doe interre my Muse.  
(II. 255-256)

The Heliconian Spring, often considered a personified source of poetic inspiration, appears in a traditional fashion in the verse letter "To Mr. S. B."

O Thou which to search out the secret parts  
Of the India, or rather Paradise  
Of knowledge, hast with courage and advise
Lately launch'd into the vast Sea of Arts,
Disdain not in thy constant travailing
To doe as other Voyagers, and make
Some turnses into lesse Creekes, and wisely take
Fresh water at the Heliconian Spring.
(II. 1-8)

In the passage cited here Donne reveals a more sympathetic attitude than that expressed above to the new poets, Mr. J. L. and Mr. T. W. On the whole, however, the references are conventional if not perfunctory. The mode of the verse letter and the patronage system in general perhaps make it inevitable that this should be so.

In addition to allusion to the Muses, Donne refers to another group of deities in a rather conventional way. The Sirens attracted Donne's attention much as they came to him from myth:

I Sing not, Siren like, to tempt; for I
Am harsh.
("To Mr. S. B.," ll. 9-10)

Again in "Elegie XVIII" Donne compares the temptations of the Sirens to the sounds which he hears from his mistress' lips: "There Syrens songs . . . do fill the ear."
(ll. 55-56) In his "Song: Goe, and catch a falling starre," Donne calls the temptresses by another traditional name: "Teach me to heare Mermaides singing." (l. 5)

Besides these fairly frequently recurring allusions, Donne's poetry includes references to many individual lesser gods including Atalanta, Boreas and Orithyia, Morpheus, Flora, Hesper, Proserpine, and Cupid. The most
significant of these allusions should be cited as examples of Donne's use of minor classical deities.

The goddess Atalanta is referred to in "Elegie XIX." Atalanta is remembered as one who possessed great athletic ability, particularly speed in footraces. In one race with a possible suitor, Hippomenes, the young man dropped three golden apples (called balls in some versions) which were given to him by Venus. When Atalanta stopped to pick them up, she lost the race and her hand in marriage to Hippomenes. The following passage probably refers to that event:

Gems which you women use
Are like Atlanta's balls, cast in mens views,
That when a fools eye lighteth on a Gem,
His earthly Soul may covet theirs, not them.
(II. 35-38)

Donne puts his stamp on the reference by placing an emphasis on women and Atalanta; he even changes the reference to allow Atalanta to cast the apples to distract men.

Donne's familiarity with the abduction of Orithyia by Boreas, the god of the wind, is revealed in "Elegie XVI" as he implores his mistress to be true to him while he is away from her. Perhaps the poet feels that if she is untrue he can be as harsh as Boreas reputedly was:

Thy (else Almighty) beautie cannot . . .
. . . tame wilde Boreas harshness; thou hast reade
How roughly hee in peeces shivered
Faire Orithia, whom he swore he lov'd.
(II. 19ff.)
Doniphan Louthan notes this passage as "one of his [ Donne's] rare allusions to classical mythology" in which "Donne cites the case of Boreas, who raped the nymph Orithia." The poet is trying to be realistic about his lady's beauty, which, as Louthan notes, "cannot move/ Rage from the Seas"—it can neither influence "the sea's rage, nor remove it, nor can her beauty tame the wild wind."  

A traditional treatment of still other lesser gods, Morpheus and his brother Phantasus, appears in the verse letter "To Mr. Rowland Woodward."

If as mine is, thy life a slumber be,
Seeme, when thou read'st these lines, to dreame of me,
Never did Morpheus nor his brother weare
Shapes soe like those shapes, whom they would appear,
As this my letter is like me, for it
Hath my name, words, hand, feet, heart, mind and wit.

(Il. 1-6)

In his "Epithalamion made at Lincolnes Inne" the poet follows the conventional pattern of the sixteenth and seventeenth-century writers who "frequently praised Hesperus not only because he was the lamp of love but also because his coming showed that the long day of public celebration was past and the married couple might soon be alone together."  

Donne says,

8Ibid.
9Norton and Rushton, p. 214.
The amorous evening starre is rose,
Why then should not our amorous starre inclose
Her selfe in her wish's bed?
(Il. 61-63)

Another citation of Hesper appears in a conventional reference in "The Second Anniversary: Of the Progresse of the Soule." (I. 198)

Finally, perhaps there is significance in the fact that Donne mentioned the goddess Flora in at least two instances. The poet includes a conventional reference as he says to the "Daughters of London" as they prepare the bride for her wedding in "Epithalamion made at Lincolnes Inne,"

Conceitedly dresse her, and be assigned
By you, fit place for every flower and jewell,
Make her for love fit fewell
As gay as Flora, and as rich as Inde.
(Il. 19-22)

Reinforcing his traditional view of the goddess, Donne personifies the countryside as the goddess in "Eclogue" where he describes the area at Christmas time: "Flora' herselfe doth a freeze jerkin weare." (I. 8)

In retrospect, Donne's reaction against profuse and perfunctory allusions to classical mythology is evident in his references to the conventional pantheon. This is not to say, however, that Donne's references are unique, but neither are they entirely traditional. The inclusion of myth is not sparse, but this is not the important fact. What is more significant is that Donne usually makes use
of mythical material only to enhance or make more specific his thematic intent. Throughout this chapter Donne is seen to include ample pertinent references not only to a generalized and somewhat indeterminate pantheon but also to pre-Olympian and Olympian myths. In addition, the poet indicates his personal evaluation of poetic inspiration by numerous references to myths of the poetic Muse. Finally, Donne includes both conventional and highly personal imagery alluding to myths of several lesser gods. It will be seen in succeeding chapters that recurring allusions to certain classical myths form a composite that is significant in sheer weight of numbers and important especially in carrying much of the thematic freight of the poem.
CHAPTER III

ALLUSIONS TO THE CUPID MYTH

One highly regarded seventeenth-century scholar states that the subject matter of Donne's poetry is confined almost entirely to various aspects of love and religion.\(^1\) Even granting the first half of this statement, it is easy to overlook the fact that the bulk of Donne's secular poetry is love poetry. Many would rank Donne among the greatest love poets of all time. It is not surprising then to find that the ancient myths of love figure prominently in Donne's imagery. This body of imagery looms so large that an entire chapter of this study must be devoted to it.

Many poems dealing with love include as imagery the traditional figure of Cupid, the conventional personification of Love. That the Cupid myths are used extensively by Donne, or any other love poet, is not surprising. Bush indicates that "In the whole body of lyrical verse Cupid exceeds all other deities in the frequency of his appearance—his nearest rival is his mother—and under the dominion of the bow-boy goddesses became nymphs or

\(^1\)Joan Bennett, *Five Metaphysical Poets* (Cambridge, 1964), p. 32.
pretty mistresses, the gods elegant shepherds or admiring courtiers."²

The fact that Donne adapts the Cupid myth to his own use is important in understanding the poet's imagery. He does not merely retell the myth as an ancient tale, nor does he use it as an ornament, but he incorporates it into his poetry in such a way as to make it an integral part, unrecognizable as a separate myth. It is synthesized with his own experience and observation.

It matters little whether or not Donne took his mythological material from Roman or Greek sources. He is reputed to have known Latin well and must surely have had a sound "classical" education. Geoffrey Keynes, a Donne bibliographer, notes that Donne had as one of his "lighter books . . . an Italian translation of Virgil's Aeneid, Venice, 1538."³ Others reveal that Donne was thoroughly acquainted with Ovid, but do not say whether or not he read original language editions or modern translations. Bush refers to Donne's reflection of Ovid's "amatory attitudes."⁴ At another juncture Bush states, "What attracted the young Donne was Ovid's amatory attitudes in Amores."⁵

²Bush, p. 228.
⁴Bush, p. 232. ⁵Ibid., p. 102.
Donne was probably aware of the two traditional views of Cupid. The Romans saw the god of Love as a "frolicsome boy" who carried a bow and a quiver of arrows, and "greatly enjoyed piercing the hearts of both gods and mortals whom he wished to inspire with love." Cupid carried two sets of arrows: one was gold tipped and inspired love, the other was lead tipped and repelled love. The Greeks saw Eros (Cupid) as a young man, "far more serious and dignified than the character whom we think of under the name Cupid."

The "little winged Cupid with the dangerous bow and arrows . . . is obviously the source of the metaphor when he [Donne] asserts that making constancy a virtue has done immedicable [sic] harm to Love." The poet has lamented "How happy were our Syres in ancient times, who held plurality of loves no crime!" Now, he says, modern convention dictates that he must love only one;

Here love receiv'd immedicable harmses,  
And was dispoiled of his daring armes.  
A greater want then is his daring eyes,  
He lost those awfull wings with which he flies;  
His sinewy bow, and those immortall darts

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7 Ibid., p. 178.
8 Rugoff, p. 98.
Wherewith he is want to bruise resisting hearts.  
("Elegie XVII: Variety" ll. 56-62)

Here it suits Donne's purposes to employ a fairly conventional rendering of the myth to suggest that love has in later times been warped from what it was originally intended to be.

In the opposite vein, the other Cupid, the more mature and dignified god of Love, is depicted in Donne's "Aire and Angells." Here the poet asks "the god of Love . . . to find out who or what is the 'lovely glorious nothing.' And the god shows Donne his fair mistress."

And therefore what thou wert, and who,  
I bid Love aske, and now  
That it assume thy body, I allow,  
And fixe it selfe in thy lip, eye, and brow  
(ll. 11-14)

The view of the god which Donne employs here is a serious one. The poem was written to show, as the poet does in "The Extasie," that man is a body as well as a soul, and to show the relationship between love and spirit.

My soule, whose child love is,  
Takes limmes of flesh, and else could nothing doe,  
More subtile then the parent is,  
Love must not be, but take a body too.  
("Aire and Angells," ll. 7-10)

It is quite apparent that the traditional concepts of love personified and the mythological machinery that goes

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9Bennett, p. 23.
with them were too firmly established and too convenient for Donne to abandon altogether. But nowhere does Donne employ the conventional concepts in a pedestrian and perfunctory manner. Each of Donne's allusions to Cupid or the god of Love is an example of the poet's studied use of imagery. Donne gives a personal identification to each image and uses each one imaginatively, never suiting his subject to the image but changing the image to reflect the tone and emotion expressed, implied, or demanded in each instance. The practice of most Elizabethan poets to take "an imaginary episode in love" and embroider "fancies upon it" was firmly established and accepted. However, this practice apparently did not appeal to Donne. Instead he used "fancies" or images as an integral part of his poems and not as "embroidery."

Donne did not always feel compelled to use the same image in the same form, tone, or with the same meaning in all of his poetry. One of the more striking and original changes that Donne makes is to remove Cupid from his celestial stance and place him instead among the infernal deities. A good example of this treatment is found in "Elegie XVIII: Loves Progress." In this poem Cupid is dethroned as a heavenly god and is placed among the infernal gods:

Search every sphere
And firmament, our Cupid is not there;
He's an infernal god, and underground
With Pluto dwells, where gold and fire abound.

(II. 27-30)

The same derogatory attitude is taken toward Cupid in "Loves Exchange." Donne addresses the god of Love and deplores the fact that other gods are bestowing gifts on mortals every-day, but Love is not giving as freely and is therefore a "devill," who will not even make a fair bargain in exchange for the soul.

Love, any devill else but you
Would for a given soule give something too.
At Court your fellowes every day,
Give th'art of Rimming, Huntsmanship, or play.

(II. 1-4)

A variation of Donne's use of the Cupid myth as part of the material of death and the infernal is evident in "Elegie IX: The Autunnall." Here the poet personifies love as an "Anachorit" merely waiting for death. The poem is addressed to an older woman. The poet says love is "Here, where still Evening is," and she is "loves timber" while youth is "his under-wood." In describing the aging woman, he says,

Call not these wrinkles, graves; If graves they were,
They were loves graves; for else he is no where.
Yet lies not Love dead here, but here doth sit
Vow'd to this trench, like an Anachorit.
And here, till hers, which must be his death, come,
He doth not digge a Grave, but build a tombe.

(II. 13-18)
Another of Donne's original changes occurs in the image of Cupid as a usurer or loan arranger. The poet exhibits an almost mocking tone as he displays Cupid as a business man who is dealing in loans of time.

For every houre that thou will spare mee now,
I will allow,
Usurious God of Love, twenty to thee,
When with my browne, my gray haires equall bee.
("Loves Usury," ll. 1-4)

As he winds up his plea, the poet expresses his willingness to submit to the god for his time received.

If when I'm old, I bee
Inflamed by thee,
If thine owne honour, or my shame, or paine,
Thou covet most, at that age thou shalt gaine.
(ll. 17-20)

The poet says he is willing to give up only that which he does not want or need. Finally, he says, in my old age, when I'm past loving, "Love I submit to thee." In this passage Donne is hardly yielding in a conventional fashion to the deity of lovers.

This discussion would not be complete without evidence of Donne's references to the traditional figure of a blind Cupid. However, even when revealing this image the poet makes changes to suit his purposes. In "Loves Exchange" the poet implores love in a caustic tone:

Give me thy weaknesse, make me blinde,
Both wayes, as thou and thine, in eies and minde.
(ll. 15-16)
Donne goes beyond the traditional figure of the visually blind Cupid and adds his satiric note that the god is also mentally blind. Then in "Elegie XII: His Parting from her" the poet makes two allusions to Love's blindness.

Isn't because thou thy self art blind, that wee Thy Martyrs must no more each other see? (ll. 15-16)

Later in the same poem Donne reinforces the figure of the blind Cupid, but at the same time gives vent to his emotions as he verbally attacks the god and blames him for misfortune in a love affair:

Yet Love, thou'rt blinder then thy self in this, To vex my Dove-like friend for my amiss. (ll. 29-30)

A careful reader cannot help noting that Donne is aware of each carefully placed satiric note accompanying the figure of Cupid. Donne seems to be voicing awareness of his deliberate, unique treatment of the god by making a declaration against the conventional imagery of the god of Love found in the poetry of court poets of his day. In "Epithalamion" for the Earl of Somerset Donne laments the use of Cupid's image:

Our little Cupid hath sued Livery, And is no more in his minority He is admitted now into that breast Where the Kings Counsels and his secrets rest. (ll. 87-90)

The remaining major portion of Donne's Cupid imagery contains overtones of irony whether the poet is extolling
the deity of love who elicited devotion from his subjects or whether he is picturing a unique Cupid as a tyrant who inflicted pain and despair upon lesser beings. In either case, whether Donne is displaying a traditional or unique Cupid, the poet's virtuosity of imagery is always apparent.

In "Womans Constancy" the poet cynically pictures Love as a fierce, powerful god to whom he owes devotion, but he indicates that he is not frightened when he desires to give up vows made in a moment of weakness.

\[
\text{Oathes made in reverential feare} \\
\text{Of Love, and his wrath, any may forswear.} \\
\text{(Il. 6-7)}
\]

Then in "Loves Deitie" Donne voices a belief that the deity of Love is capable of controlling lovers' destinies. However, he does not believe that men before being influenced by Love could love one who "did scorne." The poet indicates devotion as he begins the poem by stating a strong belief in the destiny produced by the god.

\[
\text{But since this god produc'd a destinie,} \\
\text{And that vice-nature, custome, lets it be;} \\
\text{I must love her, that loves not mee.} \\
\text{Sure, they which made him god, meant not so much,} \\
\text{Nor he, in his young godhead practiced it;} \\
\text{But when an even flame two hearts did touch,} \\
\text{His office was indulgently to fix} \\
\text{Actives to Passives.} \\
\text{(Il. 5-12)}
\]

In a final ironic cry in which he inserts his unique expression, Donne says
Love might make me leave loving, or might trie
A deeper plague, to make her love me too.
(II. 24-25)

The significance of the two passages cited lies not in Donne's picturing Cupid as a deity but rather the poet's inclusion of irony in an otherwise solemn declaration. In the first poem Donne includes such words as "Oathes" and "reverential" and then shows a willingness to ignore the import of the words as well as the binding nature of a vow. In the last poem the traditional figure of the god of Love as a supreme deity of lovers is sustained. However, Donne's use of the Love imagery is his own as he builds a poem which implies and demands understanding and compassion for an unrequited love. In Edmund Gosse's words, in this poem the poet "gives expression to his torture."  

Donne did not neglect altogether the solemn aspect of the deity's image. In his sadness, the poet asks in "Twickenham Garden":

Love let mee
Some senslesse peece of this place bee.
(Il. 15-16)

Another solemn note is struck as the poet voices a refrain in "The Will." Several times he says "Thou, Love, hast taught me . . ." various things. The poet blames Love for causing him to love an unworthy lover, which will ultimately cause the destruction of all three,

Thou Love taughtst mee, by making mee
Love her, who doth neglect both mee and thee.

11Ibid., p. 72.
To 'invent, and practice this one way, to 'annihilate all three.

(I. 52-54)

A foreboding tone accompanies the lover's plea as Donne writes of a solemn as well as desperate situation.

Finally Donne acknowledges Cupid's deity status but places certain demands on the god as he requests a return to ancient practices of love. The poet in "Elegie XVII" opposes what he terms "modern censures" in contemporary attitudes toward lovemaking, and at the same time he voices a desire for the enthroning of the ancient interpretation of the god who was not manacled by tradition and at whose feet the poet prefers to pay homage.

Onely some few strong in themselves and free Retain the seeds of antient liberty, Following that part of Love although desprest, And make a throne for him within their brest, In spight of modern censures him avowing Their Soveraigne, all service him allowing.

(I. 62-67)

With a final mark of ironic "wit," the poet subjects himself to contemporary mores and says, "Wee'l love her ever, and love her alone."

Donne alludes to another deity of Love to whom lovers owe devotion and at the same time reiterates his plea for "plurality of loves." The poet ironically adjusts the Venus myth to suit his philosophy in "The Indifferent" as he requests his lover to adhere to his belief that he can love anyone and everyone. To emphasize his position Donne
tells of a conversation with the goddess of Love:

Venus heard me sigh this song,
And by Loves sweetest part, Variety, she swore,
She heard not this till now; and that it should be
so no more.
She went, examin'd, and return'd ere long,
And said, alas, some two or three
Poore Heretiques in love there bee,
Which thinke to establisch dangerous constancie
But I have told them, since you will be true,
You shall be true to them, who're false to you.

(I. 19-27)

Venus, traditionally the patroness of true and constant love, is taken by Donne as his cohort in the unique expression of an ironic philosophy of love which advocates the exaltation of the destructive force of "variety."

The picture of Love as a tyrant is in direct contrast to the deity who appears often as solemn and other times as almost playful in Donne's imagery of the god as a deity to whom lovers paid homage and devotion. In "The Broken Heart," the poet bemoans his finding of a new but unrequited love; he invokes a listener to realize what can happen to one who has been subdued by Love.

Ah, what a trifle is a heart,
If once into loves hands it come!
Us Love draws,
Hee swallows us, and never chawes;
By him, as by chain'd shot, whole rankes doe dye,
He is the tyran Pike, our hearts the Frye.

(I. 9-10, 13-16)

In the same poem the poet pictures the conventional "bow-boy" who pierced hearts, and thus caused agony in lovers:
Love, alas,
At one first blow did shiver it as glasse.
(II. 23-24)

In "Elegie XII: His Parting from her," the poet pleads with love as he anticipates the prospect of leaving a loved one.

Was't not enough that thou didst dart thy fires
Into our blouds, inflaming our desires,
And made'st us sigh and glow, and pant, and burn,
And then thy self into our flame did'st turn?
(II. 35-38)

In expressing a last ardent desire to outwit the god of Love Donne gives an opposing view: he inserts an ironic twist and not only blames Love for causing the love affair, but also for causing the separation; thus the poet succeeds in including a unique and unconventional attitude toward the god:

Do thy great worst, my friend and I have armes
Though not against thy strokes, against thy harmes.
Rend us in sunder, thou canst not divide
Our bodies so, but that our souls are ty'd,
And we can love by letters still and gifts.
(II. 67-71)

Throughout the four passages cited above Donne sustains a view of Cupid as the tyrant of lovers who causes their pain and torment. He does not portray either the arrows of Love which inspired love nor the arrows which repelled love. Instead he reveals a bitterness for unrequited love or other such evidences that Cupid is a deity bent on tyrannical practices.

The poet, in a desperate cry, implores that if he must suffer at the hands of the tyrant Love then let his
agony be an example for prospective lovers.

Love is enrag'd with mee,
Yet kills not. If I must example bee
To future Rebels; If th' unborne
Must learne, by my being cut up, and torne:
Kill, and dissect me, Love.
("Loves Exchange," ll. 36-40)

Again in "A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies day," the poet reveals the sad state Love has made of him. In this case the poet himself addresses prospective lovers and asks them to note the condition he is in.

Study me then, you who shall lovers bee
For I am a very dead thing,
In whom love wrought new Alchimie.
For his art did express
A quintessence even from nothingness,
From dull privations, and lean emptiness:
He ruin'd mee, and I am re-begot
Of absence, darkness, death; things which are not.
(ll. 10, 12-18)

Donne's Cupid, in retrospect, appears as a many-faceted figure. He is portrayed in many of his conventional guises: he is the "bow-boy," the blind guide of lovers, and the deity to whom lovers owe devotion. In contrast, Cupid appears also as a figure enhanced by Donne's unique imagery. The god is a devil from infernal regions as well as a tyrant who inflicts pain and agony on his subjects. Each allusion to Cupid seems to have somewhat the same significance. No reference to the god can justifiably be pulled out of its context and allowed to stand as an example of Donne's use of mythology. Each allusion must be considered separately within the confines of individual poems as part
of Donne's total imagery. This same requirement must be kept in mind in studying all of Donne's mythological imagery.

In the next chapter another large body of mythological imagery is examined with an understanding that each allusion has significance as an expression of either Donne's unique or his conventional portrayal of myths concerning death, resurrection, and the life cycle.
CHAPTER IV

ALLUSIONS TO MYTHS OF DEATH, RESURRECTION, AND THE LIFE CYCLE

Donne's interest in and concern for death, resurrection, and the life cycle is evident, as expected, in his sermons and religious poetry. And, not surprisingly, the poet's secular poetry contains a large body of allusion to myths of these same subjects. Again, as in handling other mythological material, Donne, like any good poet, assimilates the myth and turns it to his uses and infuses it with new life. One source indicates that many poets "whether . . . ancient or modern" view myths as "not static and fixed." This statement can describe Donne's handling of myth since he did not limit his use of mythology to traditional retelling of events. Instead, he incorporated these materials into his own exposition of life. The allusions were subordinated to Donne's poetry and served the poet only as a means of picturing a specific image and are almost unimportant apart from the poetry.

1Norton and Rushton, p. 1.
The organization of this chapter consists of two main divisions of the subject. The first segment examines Donne's concern with the myths of death and resurrection, and the second examines the poet's allusions to myths of the life cycle. Donne uses the myth of the Phoenix to symbolize both death and resurrection. Originally as Egyptian mythological bird, the Phoenix symbolized death as it burned on a pyre, and it symbolized resurrection as a new bird emerged from the ashes. Donne also makes reference to other material of mythology concerning death, including allusions to Pluto, Proserpine, and the river Styx. Donne's allusions to myths of the life cycle consist of references to personified abstractions of experience which were worshiped by the Romans, including Fate, Justice, Destiny, and Fortune.

John Donne's concern for and use of mythology concerning death and resurrection can be accounted for in many instances by his personal suffering and sickness and by the early death of members of his immediate family. This concern may also reflect a strong melancholy, if not morbid, streak in Donne's nature. Donne's verse had a "prevalence of the facts of death and disease" which was partly due to

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an "intellectual interest in physiology." But also, the subject of death was prevalent because Donne lived in "a time when death lurked around every corner, the gift of plague, famine or violence." It is not surprising then that Donne alluded to mythology concerning death.

Donne occasionally personifies death as a point of emphasis in a manner that is more medieval than classical.

Th'earths face is but thy Table; there are set Plants, cattell, men, dishes for Death to eate In a rude hunger now hee millions drawes Into his bloody, or plaguy, or sterv'd jawes

In other instances Donne deals directly with classical mythological beings related to death and the underworld. A random sampling indicates that he mentions Pluto, the Greek king of death and the underworld; Proserpine, whom the Romans called queen of the dead; Lethe, the river of forgetfulness in Hades; and Taenarus, often called "the back door to Hades." Donne also alludes indirectly in a pertinent religious poem and in a satirical poem to the river Styx, which mythology reports to circle Hades and across which the dead are ferried to Hades. Donne also refers numerous times to the mythical bird, the Phoenix, which has developed in the Christian tradition into a symbol of both death and resurrection.

Donne includes references to the classical Hades by utilizing various conventional machinery of the underworld. In his "Elegie XVIII: Loves Progress" Donne acknowledges that Pluto plays the role of the god of the nether world. The poet is trying to disarm Cupid as he says:

Cupid is . . .
... an infernal god and under ground,
With Pluto dwells.

In "Elegie XIII: Julia" Donne employs the esoteric Roman name for Pluto and seeks to describe, in a vitriolic tone, his friend Julia. The poet includes as a description of her all the undesirable qualities and aspects he thinks Orcus possesses. He speaks of her mind as

. . . that Orcus, which includes
Legions of mischiefs, countesse multitudes
Of formlesse curses, projects unmade up,
Abuses yet unfashion'd, thoughts corrupt.

As the poet describes his lady friend in "Elegie VIII: The Comparison," he sees her as a counterpart to the beautiful queen of the dead.

Like Proserpines white beauty-keeping chest,
. . . is her faire brest.

As part of his description of his friend Julia, Donne likens her breath to the foul odor which was said to emanate from the cave at Taenarus which was often imagined to be one of the entrances to Hades.  

Ibid.
Her breath [is] like to the juice in Tenarus
That blasts the springs, though ne'r so prosperous

(11. 19-20)

Lethe, the river of forgetfulness and oblivion, is mentioned in a conventional fashion as Donne chides his friend in his letter "To Mr. J. L." for forgetting his past and his friends. As the friend progresses in status and in his travel, he apparently forgets old friends.

Your Trent is Lethe; that past, us you forget.

(1. 6)

Another reference to Lethe appears in "The Second Anniversary" as Donne grieves that the world has forgotten Elizabeth Drury after her death.

Yet now a new Deluge, and of Lethe flood,
Hath drown'd us all, All have forgot all good,
Forgetting her, the maine reserve of all.

(11. 27-29)

Both references to Lethe allude to the classical concept that the river produces forgetfulness. The poet makes a personal use of myth as he utilizes Lethe as imagery to chide those who have forgotten someone he considers important. Another river of the Hades body of myth, the river Styx, which is said to flow around Hades nine times, was alluded to by Donne at least twice. In his religious poem, "Hymne to God the Father" (which should be included because of its apropos reference), Donne looks to the end of his

Ibid., p. 249.
life with fear. His conflict with and fear of death seem to "spring from his agonized consciousness of sin." The poet describes his fear with allusions to the river he must come to at death and the thread of life held by the mythical Fates.

I have a sinne of feare, that when I have spunne
My last thred, I shall perish on the shore. (ll. 13-14)

Another possible indirect allusion to the river Styx is found in Donne's note in "upon Mr. Thomas Coryats Crudities" as the poet criticizes Coryat's book:

A cellar gulf, where one might sail to hell. (l. 6)

Perhaps because he found it useful in reflecting some of his most cherished concepts of love, Donne found that the myth of the Phoenix had a special appeal. Ultimately the myth is oriental but has been incorporated into the Graeco-Roman myths. Basically, the Phoenix was considered to be a bird of red and gold plumage which lived in Arabia and sat near a special tree. Only one of the species was alive at any one time. Some say it lived 500 to 1,000 years. At the end of its life span, the Phoenix built itself a nest of spice and aromatic woods, settled on it, and set fire to it. From the ashes of this fire arose a

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new Phoenix. Some stories say a new bird arose and took the remains of the old bird to the temple of the sun at Heliopolis in Egypt. Others say the same bird arose, regenerated by the fire which it created, and lived eternally young for another cycle of years.

The singularity of the bird is noted many times by Donne. In "The First Anniversary" the poet makes a social comment on mankind of his time.

For every man alone thinkes he hath got
To be a Phoenix, and that then can bee
None of that kinde, of which he is, but hee.  
(11. 216-218)

Donne exhibits a special fondness for using the Phoenix imagery in his love poems since a major portion of the body of allusion deals with the love relationship. In "The Canonization" the poet exalts the lovers he is describing. He compares their mysterious state to the riddle of the Phoenix as in their love making the two become one. This idea is inherent in one variation of the myth which indicates that the old and new Phoenix are joined and become one on the funeral pyre. Death and resurrection are involved in the same act. Donne relates,

The Phoenix riddle hath more wit
By us, we two being one, are it.
So to one neutral thing both sexes fit,
Wee dye and rise the same, and prove
Mysterious by this love.  
(11. 23-27)

A seventeenth-century belief that through the sexual act life was shortened a day sheds light on Donne's use of the
Phoenix. The bird not only symbolizes the synthesis of two individuals into one but also reflects the idea of death as a part of the sexual relationship. One interpretation puts it that this process is to Donne a "mystic unity that love has made of him and his mistress." This is a valid appraisal, but the critic must also consider the sexual unity of the two lovers and the dual meaning during Donne's lifetime of the words die and death.

In his "Epithalamion" on the marriage of Lady Elizabeth and Count Palatine Donne alludes to the Phoenix six times in a variant on the myth that is typical of Donne. The poem is addressed to St. Valentine. The poet praises the saint for his ability to join two Phoenixes: "For thou this day couplest two Phoenixes." (1. 18) The two Phoenixes are then ascribed to have powers not delegated to the original ancient bird.

One bed containes . . .
Two Phoenixes, whose joyned breasts
Are unto one another mutuall nests,
Where motion kindles such fires, as shall give
Yong Phoenixes, and yet the old shall live. (11. 22-26)

To Donne the two lovers could represent Phoenixes because of the emotional fires they would kindle. As he ends the marriage song, the poet reveals ultimately how he can reconcile calling the two beings by the name of a being

\[\text{Norton and Rushton, p. 307.}\]
which was singular. In the process of love making, as he explains in "The Canonization," the man and wife become one.

And by this act of these two Phenixes
Nature againe restored is,
For since these two are two no more,
Ther's but one Phenix still, as was before. (II. 99-102)

By his use of references relating to personified abstractions of experience worshiped by the Romans, Donne revealed an interest in myth of the life cycle. In the concepts of Fate, Destiny, Fortune, and Justice Donne saw imagery which would aid him in his poetic endeavor. Myths had grown around these abstractions as man had attempted to find meaning in life and its processes. Donne did not hesitate to make a reference to these familiar and essentially classical concepts when he recognized their value in his revelation of meaning in or explanation of the life cycle.

The ancients saw Fate as three sisters or goddesses called Parcae or Fates. The three were Clotho, who carried the spindle and spun the thread of life; Lachesis, who carried the scroll or globe and decided the length of life; and Atropos, who carried shears and cut the thread of life at death. One source reveals that "no mortal can escape the life allotted to him by the Fates, nor can any god compel them to alter their decrees." 

Donne's allusions to Fate as to any other mythical material are essentially his own.

(10)bid., p. 155.
To the poet Fate is a figure which can assume many faces. In "Satyre V" Fate's office is filled by "Faire law."

Donne characteristically alters the concept he expresses by portraying Fate as parcelling out stations in life, an action not usually associated with Fate:

\[
\ldots \text{shee} \nonumber \\
\text{Speakes Fates words, and but tells us who must bee} \nonumber \\
\text{Rich, who poore, who in chaires, who in jayles. (ll. 71-73)} \nonumber 
\]

Fate becomes the decider of victory between two armies in "The Extasie."

\[
\ldots \text{'twixt two equall Armies, Fate} \nonumber \\
\text{Suspends uncertaine victorie. (ll. 13-14)} \nonumber 
\]

Donne ridicules religious persecution as he refers to the personified Fate in "Satyre III," and at the same time the poet is utilizing a favorite literary device: to say that someone usurps the role of another:

\[
\text{men do not stand} \nonumber \\
\text{In so ill case here, that God hath with his hand} \nonumber \\
\text{Sign'd Kings blanck-charters to kill whom they hate,} \nonumber \\
\text{Nor are they Vicars, but hangmen to Fate. (ll. 89-92)} \nonumber 
\]

The poet berates churchmen and kings who persecute those who do not adhere to their faith. They have assumed one of the duties of Fate and bring death to religious opposition.

Donne's view that Fate is grudging, unjust, and capricious at times falls in the general classical conventions about Fate. In "The Calme" the situation is described as a desperate one, where "Fate grudges us all." Donne
says in his verse letter "To Sr. Henry Wooton,"

In this worlds warfare, they whom rugged Fate,
(Gods Commissary,) doth so thoroughly hate,
As in'the Courts Squadron to marshall their state:

If they stand arm'd with seely honesty,
With wishing prayers, and neat integritie,
Like Indians'gainst Spanish hosts they bee. *

(ll. 10-15)

The poet is telling his friend that Fate apparently chooses favorites; others she destroys. Herbert Grierson comments in his definitive work on Donne's poetry that the inclusion here in parentheses of Fate's being "Gods Commissary" is significant. He recalls Donne's references in "The Progresse of the Soule":

Fate, which God made, but doth not controle.*

(l. 2)

Great Destiny the Commissary of God
. . . hast mark'd out a path and period
For every thing;  

(ll. 31-33)

Grierson notes that, "the idea that Fate or Fortune is the deputy of God in the Sphere of external goods . . . is very clearly expressed by Dante in the Convivio, iv. II, and in the Inferno, vi. 67f." In these references, Grierson observes, Dante speaks of Fortune, which in its "original conception at the opposite pole from Fate . . . is ultimately included in the idea of Fate." Further, Grierson

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*Grierson, The Poems of John Donne, II, 150.

Ibid., p. 151.
notes, Boethius explains the problem, as translated by
Grierson, that "Ultimately the immovable Providence of God
is the cause of all things; but viewed in the world of
change and becoming, accidents or events are ascribed to
Destiny." [13] Grierson concludes, "This is clearly what
Donne has in view when he calls Destiny the Commissary of
God or declares that God made but does not control her." [14]

In a verse letter "To Mr. Rowland Woodward," Donne
alludes to the same grudging, unjust, and capricious Fate.
Here he alludes to the Biblical story of Moses' inability
to enter the land of Canaan and at the same time reveals
Fate as a counterpart of God on earth. The concept of Fate
as "Gods Commissary" is not treated as lucidly as it was in
the letter "To Sr. Henry Wooton."

And with us (me thinkes) Fate deals so
As with the Jewes guide God did; he did show
Him the rich land, but bar'd his entry in. (11. 19-21)

Fate is pictured as one being in charge of earthly events.

In "A Funerall Elegie" written in memory of Elizabeth
Drury, Donne recognizes Fate in the role of sustainer of
life on earth. He describes Miss Drury as a mortal capable
of power similar to that of Destiny but one who is too modest
to employ her power. Donne sees her as one who willingly

[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
places herself under the jurisdiction of Fate and Destiny and not one who accepts her role as their equal and God's Commissioner.

Fate did but usher her
To yeares of reasons use, and then inferre
Her destiny to her selfe, which liberty
She tooke but for thus much, thus much to die.
Her modestie not suffering her to bee
Fellow-Commissioner with Destinie. (11. 91-96)

This passage is significant as an example of Donne's unique handling of conventional mythical material.

A more conventional view of Fate as the controller of life is given in "Obsequies to the Lord Harrington . . ." as the poet laments the early death of his subject.

And had Fate meant to have his vertues told,
It would have let him live to have beene old. (11. 69-70)

Destiny as part of the concept of control of life experience is referred to by Donne less often than is Fate. In "Song" or "Sweetest love, I do not goe," the poet reveals Destiny as an intercessor for his lover:

Let not thy divining heart
Forethinkes me any ill,
Destiny may take thy part,
And may thy feares fulfill. (11. 33-36)

The Destiny which controlled life's events is suggested as director of Donne's love affair in "Elegie XII."

The fault was mine, impute it to me,
Or rather to conspiring destinie,
Which (since I lov'd for forme before) decreed,
That I should suffer when I lov'd indeed. (11. 21-24)
The being Destiny is ominous to the lover Donne as he says, in "A Valediction: of the booke,"

I'll tell thee now (deare Love) what thou shalt doe
To anger destiny, as she doth us. . . . (11. 1-2)

While describing "hangers-on" at court, Donne mockingly reiterates his belief that Destiny is an earthly controller of human events:

But as Glaze which did goe
To'a Masse in jest, catch'd, was faine to disburse
The hundred markes, which is the Statues curse;
Before he scapt, So'it pleas'd my destinie
(Guilty of my sin of going,) to thinke me
As prone to all ill . . .
As vaine, as witlesse, and as false as they
Which dwell at Court, for once going that way.
("Satyre IV," 11. 8-13, 15-16)

These references to Destiny indicate that, in effect, Donne often uses the terms Fate and Destiny as synonymous. Both abstractions are revealed in the role of controller and guide of life experiences.

The concept of Fortune, symbolized by the Goddess Fortuna, and more a Roman concept than a Greek one, is closely akin to Fate and Destiny, but maintains some distinction. Her symbol was often a wheel. In some accounts she was blind. The majority of Donne's references to her fall into two basic segments. The poet portrayed Fortune as the natural enemy of men and as an unpredictable and capricious goddess.
Donne's concept of Fortune as one to be feared is apparent in "Elegie XII: His parting from her," as the poet says,

Let our arms clasp like Ivy, and our fear
Freeze us together, that we may stick here,
Till Fortune, that would rive us, with the deed
Strain her eyes open, and it make them bleed. (ll. 59-62)

At another juncture in the same poem Donne implores his lover, as he is leaving her, to remain the same lovely creature he now sees. He warns her of the power of Fortune over the life process and asks her to declare herself Fortune's enemy.

Be then ever your self, and let no woe
Win on your health, your youth, your beauty: so
Declare your self base fortunes Enemy. (ll. 89-91)

And, finally the poet portrays Fortune in her traditional guise as the blind goddess and at the same time reveals her as a cruel being who withholds sight from him.

I'am borne without those eyes to live,
Which fortune, who hath none her selfe, doth give.
("To the Countesse of Salisbury," ll. 79-80)

The unpredictable and capricious goddess is equated with the antique Roman idea of Fate or the three Fates as the poet says in "The Storme,"

England to whom we'owe, what we be, and have,
Sad that her sonses did seeke a forraine grave
(For, Fates, or fortunes drifts none can soothsay,
Honour and misery have one face and way.) (ll. 9-11)
In this ironic statement the poet is recognizing the traditional Roman concept that the power of Fate or Fortune cannot be overcome.

Even though the poet adequately reveals the traditional views and characteristics of Fortune, he typically reserves the right to go so far as to question even the existence of Fortune. In his verse letter "To Sir H. W. at his going Ambassador to Venice," the poet inserts doubt:

For mee, (if there be such a thing as I)  
Fortune (if there be such a thing as shee) . . . .  
(11. 34-35)

Finally, the conventional figure of Justice appears in at least one significant reference. Donne views this personified experience as an unfeeling tyrant capable of controlling or causing human events in "Elegie XII: His parting from her."

So blinded Justice doth, when Favorites fall,  
Strike them, their house, their friends, their followers all.  
(11. 33-34)

It is not surprising to discover that Donne viewed Fate, Fortune, Destiny, and Justice as being at times synonymous and at other times as having seemingly disparate characteristics within their individual entities. The fact is that tradition did not bring Donne a set portrait of each of these classical concepts. Apparently new legends surrounding each figure continuously appeared in various regions and in various literature.
As a whole, Donne's body of allusion to myths of death, resurrection, and the life cycle are important as evidence of the poet's striving to present his concepts of life's experiences through mythical imagery. Ideas concerning death and resurrection, especially as expressed through the Phoenix imagery, provide a look at Donne's ability to assimilate myth and synthesize it with his own unique expression as is apparent in his love poems dealing with the union of two persons who become one in the act of love making. Likewise, references to myths of the life cycle provide evidence of Donne's unique use of mythological material. An example is the poet's portrayal of the Roman abstractions of experience which direct men's lives. These abstract beings are shown in various differing roles, but often the four (Fate, Fortune, Destiny, and Justice) are portrayed as synonymous. In addition to his unique assimilation of myth, Donne includes traditional references to classical myth concerning death (such as allusion to myths of Hades), as well as conventional references to myths of the life cycle.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The evidence of this thesis indicates that, as Grierson says, in Donne's poetry there is "far less . . . of the superficial evidence of classical learning with which the poetry of the 'University Wits' abounds . . . ."\(^1\) Unlike many of the poetic practitioners of his time Donne rarely used mythology as he found it, and neither did he make mythology a pivotal point from which to write. However, this is not to say that Donne used little mythological allusion. Myth did play a more significant part in Donne's writings than most perfunctory readers and some astute critics have admitted.

Even though Donne did not retell myths or allow mythological material to dominate his poems, he was apparently open-minded in his attitude toward mythology as a possible source of gaining a means of stating his themes and ideas. The master of varied allusion, Donne was willing to use any area of learning and experience as a possible source of imagery. As one critic puts it, the poet's images are drawn from his own interests:

Everything that played an important part in his life or left its mark upon his mind occurs in his poetry, not as subject-matter, but as imagery.

It might be presumptuous to maintain that Donne's use of classical allusion reveals his attitude toward myth as a source for literature. But his employment of classical allusion was extensive and indicates his thorough familiarity with the classical background. His use of such allusion would seem to indicate too that his supposed revolt against it has been exaggerated.

Douglas Bush notes in *Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry*: "It has been evident throughout this book . . . that, other things being equal, the mythological poems which are alive are those in which a myth is invested with a modern significance, whether personal or social, and the dead ones are plaster reproductions of the antique."³ Bush must surely have had Donne in mind, among others, in making this statement. Donne did not retell antique stories but invested mythological allusions with new life in a contemporary setting.

Donne's allusions to classical mythology are legion. The poet refers in numerous passages to the conventional pantheon of antiquity including the pre-Olympians, the Olympian gods, and many lesser gods. Even though many

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²Bennett, p. 32.
allusions are fairly conventional, Donne rarely fails to include a unique image at some point and apparently the poet did not feel compelled to use the same image in the same way every time he used it. In "Elegie XII" the poet says,

Though cold and darkness longer hang somewhere
Yet Phoebus equally lights all the Sphere.

At first glance Donne appears to be referring only to the sun god in his traditional role. However, Donne also gives evidence of his interest in the microcosm-macrocosm concept by likening himself and his lover to the entire universe. In addition to references to the gods, Donne's poetry contains abundant material concerning at least two large bodies of myth. The Cupid myth is an important part of Donne's love poetry; and myths of death, resurrection, and the life cycle are important parts of the poems dealing with life's processes. As is evident in references to the gods, Donne's poetry here contains both traditional and unique imagery. For example, the Phoenix appears in its traditional guise but also is integrated with Donne's portrait of two lovers and is used as an aid to portray Donne's explanation of the union of the lovers. Also, Donne's Muse is portrayed in some poems as a traditional inspiration of poetry and in one poem appears as a fitting mate for the dead Elizabeth Drury to produce poetic offspring. The poet varied his Cupid imagery also: Cupid was
an infernal god; Cupid was the god of Love; Cupid was a young bow-boy. And, at one point, the Fates were masters of life processes and could give, sustain, and take life.
On the other hand, Donne was Fate and could control his own life. Although J. B. Leishman indicates that "We may conclude that to him it [mythology] had no longer what it seems to have had for many of the earlier Elizabethans, the freshness of a new discovery," perhaps for Donne the freshness came from his own discovery of a new use for myth. The poet never hesitated to alter a myth and infuse it with his own personal imagery. One critic illustrates Donne's virtuosity of imagery as she comments on a passage in "Satyre IV: The Court" where Donne said:

I, more amas'd than Circes Prisoners, when
They felt themselves turne beasts, felt my selfe then
Becoming Traytor, and mee thought I saw
One of our Giant Statutes ope his jaw
To sucke me in;

(11. 129-133)

The critic comments that this selection

Implies that he [Donne] not only knew myth, but that it had become real to his own experience. The myth does not say that Odysseus' men were "amaz'd," nor does it imply the idea connotative with that word in the sixteenth century. They were chagrined and repentant after they found what they had made of themselves through their eating. Donne, by power of his vivid imagination, knew that they must have felt mystified or bewildered while the change from man to beast was taking place.  

4Leishman, p. 32.  
5Johnson, p. 1108.
Throughout this study Donne's imagery is examined not to list simply his usage of mythological material, nor to indicate the poet's attitude toward myth, but to illustrate a unique use of imagery. There is no question about the fact that Donne knew myth and included it in his poetic efforts. The poet did include conventional allusion to mythology, but more often he assimilated mythological material with his poetic subject matter. Rarely, if ever, did the poet use myth as mere decoration. Instead, Donne employed each allusion as an integral part of the imagery of each poem.
APPENDIX

OTHER ALLUSIONS TO MYTHOLOGY

Men in Mythology

Midas, the king of Phrygia, who is best remembered
for his unquenchable desire for gold, is alluded to in his
familiar guise:

And Midas joyes our Spanish journeys give
We touch all gold, but find no food to live.
("Elegie XX," ll. 17-18)

Pyramus and Thisbe are noted:

Two, by themselves, each other, love and fears
Slaine, cruell friends, by parting have joyn'd here.

Niobe, the mother whose fourteen children were killed,
is mentioned in an epigram titled with her name:

By childrens births, and death, I am become
So dry, that I am now mine owne sad tombe.

Hero and Leander are alluded to in an epigram and one
other poem. The epigram notes the drowning of the lovers
and the burning of them by love's fire.

Both rob'd of aire, we both lye in one ground,
Both whom one fire had burnt, one water drown'd.

The home of the pair of lovers is mentioned as Donne describes
his lady love in "Elegie XVIII: Loves Progress,"

And the streight Hellepont betweene
The Sestos and Abydos of her breasts,
(Not of two Lovers, but two Loves the Neasts)
(ll. 60-62)
Monsters and Other Beings of Mythology

Donne likens his friend Julia to the Chimaera, which was a fire-breathing monster whose forepart was a compound of the lion and the goat and whose hind part was a dragon.

This she Chymera, that hath eyes of fire, Burning with anger
("Elégie XII," ll. 15-16)

Another view of the Chimaera is in "A Valediction: of the bookes":

Chimeries, vaine as they, or their prerogative
(ll. 45)

Argus, the one-hundred-eyes being, is alluded to by Donne in "The Will" and in "The Second Anniversary: The Progresse of the Soule." In a bit of irony Donne wishes to bequeath his eyes to one who does not need them:

Here I bequeath
Mine eyes to Argus.
(ll. 2-3, "The Will")

Donne indicates his familiarity with the fact that Mercury was the one who was able to lull Argus to sleep and slay him:

Hee that charm'd Argus eyes, sweet Mercury
("The Second Anniversary," l. 199)

In one of his epithalamions, or marriage songs, Donne alludes to the Satyrs:

And wee
As Satyres watch the Sunnes uprise.
("Epithalamion" to Lady Elizabeth, ll. 103-104)
In "Elegie IV: The Perfume" the poet uses the symbol of courage, daring, and the sun heroes, the Unicorn:

The precious Unicornes, strange monsters call (l. 49)

Other Mythological Allusions

The volcanic mountain of mythology, Aetna, into which the gods hurled the giants and titans is used as a figure in a vituperative speech to the poet's lady friend as he describes her:

Thine's like the dread mouth of a fired gunne,

. . . or like to that Aetna
Where round about the grasse is burnt away.

("Elegie VIII: The Comparison," ll. 41-42)

The Rhodian Colossus is used to describe the huge porter who guarded the gate of Donne's beloved's house in "Elegie IV,"

The grim eight-foot-high iron-bound serving man

. . . doth as wide
as the great Rhodian Colossus Stride.

(ll. 31, 33-34)

The mysterious Delphic Oracle is used to describe Donne's Mistress's lips which probably utter ambiguous phrases:

and there
wise Delphick Oracles do fill the ear.

("Elegie XVIII, ll. 55-56)

The Elixer, or youth potion of the gods, and Ambrosia, the food of the immortals on Olympus, are alluded to by Donne. The poet, in speaking of woman, says "Elixarlike,
she makes not cleane, but new." ("To the Countesse of Huntingdon," l. 28) The elixer potion is mentioned in "Loves Alchymis" and "A Nocturnall upon St. Lucies Day." Ambrosia is used as a descriptive term in "Elegie XVIII: Loves Progress."

Bachanalls, or feasts in worship of Bacchus, are alluded to in "Satyre II,"

Carthusian fasts and fulsome Bachanalls
Equally I hate.
(11. 106-107)

Donne refers to the whole age in which mythology grew in stature, the age when men lived like gods. The poet compares his lover's young life to the Golden Age:

Were her first yeares the Golden Age! That's true. ("Elegie IX," l. 7)
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