

Mortals of Greek Mythology in Modernist Poetry

by Frances Isler



While the gods of Greek Mythology certainly make for fascinating myths, it is their mortal counterparts and their human flaws and fatalities that create legendary stories. My personal gateway to the art of storytelling came in the form of learning these stories. Then, I found in a class on British modernist writing that modernist poetry not only shares my interest in these mortal figures, but often features them as key figures in their works. My critical project explores and analyzes how mortals in Greek mythology are represented in modernist poetry through sections divided by my chosen characters; Leda, Helen, Achilles, and Icarus. It is significant that mortals, individuals not unlike ourselves, appear in modernist poetry because as Andrew Hoberek writes in his article “But- what can anyone do about it?: modernism,

superheroes, and the unfinished business of the common good,” modernist literature has the tendency to “[celebrate]... individualism and critique of institutions” (Hoberek 1). Therefore, how these mortals are characterized and the tropes in literature they tend to represent reflect not just the perceptions of those characters, but individuals of modern Western society who are similar. Their presence in modernist poetry begs the questions: Who is a modern Leda? How might a modern Icarus act? As I have learned in nearly every literature class, how we perceive characters- their impulses, desires, wishes, and actions is the foundation of how we both judge and treat them, both in literary spaces and in real life. The ways in which modernist poets have shifted focus on my chosen characters, a modern Icarus for example, who I label further in this paper as the Defenseless Dead, may appear in the form of an unexplicable victim of suicide or drunk driver accident, and a modern Leda, the Unwilling Player, may take on the form of a teen mom who was forced into her role through sexual violence. I argue that through the modernist focus on individuality, the tropes these characters have become are applicable to our contemporary world of literature because modernist poets took the creative liberty of redefining who the mortals of Greek mythology are by exploring the potential of their individuality.

Modernism

As mentioned before, a key aspect of Modernism is the focus on individualism. Scholar Michael Levenson in his book, *Modernism*, relays a modernist theory on the presence of individuality in literature. He writes that modernist literature becomes “a vessel for individuals, a history of named characters,” which highlights “the transaction between sociality and individuality, and then the reassembly of individuals within the confines of private space” (Michael Levenson 63). Modernist poetry, for the purpose of this paper, is a “vessel” of “named characters,” mortals of Greek Mythology, which gives place for reality within the mythic. For an individual, even fictional, to be “[reassembled]” in “the confines of private space,” there is a sense that in order to be self actualized as a person, there needs to be a breaking down of parts. Referring back to the impulses, desires, wishes, and actions a dynamic character has, to break down Helen’s desires, for example, not only allows for a variety of interpretations of her character, but it gives her an aura of personhood that becomes easier to empathize with. Empathy is perhaps the great weapon of modernist individuality. How could we not feel for these characters after W.B. Yeats, W.H. Auden, and William Carlos Williams all construct poems that showcase the characters Leda, Helen, Achilles, and Icarus in ways that exceed, differentiate, or expand on their original myths? The manners in which they go about characterizing these Greek mortals exemplify Levenson’s statement that “individuals [in modernist literature] remain the focal points of the narrative, but they lose many prerogatives of agency” (Levenson 63). While they become their own stories, rather than playing smaller roles in someone else’s story, these characters’ wants are created for them. Their entire personality is an extension of a modernist interpretation, thus, as they warp into tropes of literature, they also build a legacy of how their character will be portrayed and perceived since the modernist era of literature. For instance, *The Song of Achilles* (2011) by Madeline Miller showcases a much more empathetic view of

Achilles, whom I have labeled The Soldier Son, which could not have been possible to conceive without Auden's rendition of Achilles in "The Shield of Achilles" first.

Leda: The Unwilling Player

I begin with Leda as she is famously the mother of Helen, the focus of the Trojan War, and therefore a catalyst to the entire "game" of mortals in settings with immortal influences. Continuing with the game analogy, I have landed on Leda as the "Unwilling Player" because of her significant yet powerless position in myth. Guy Norfolk writes in his article, "Leda and the Swan – And Other Myths About Rape," that it was "in the Italian Renaissance, when the story [of Leda] developed erotic overtone," and that "what is interesting about all these artistic interpretations is that they depict Leda's attitude as highly ambiguous at best. Thus, Leonardo da Vinci's interpretation, far from depicting a scene of rape, looks more like a Victorian photograph of a doting couple and the sculptures illustrated appear to show Leda in a state of erotic compliance" (Guy Norfolk 1). Leda, like her daughter Helen after her, are constantly the objects of a literary battle of tug-of-war over whether either woman is a seductress or a victim of rape. While most scholars such as Guy Norfolk and H.P. Rickman are in agreement that Leda is indeed the victim of rape, hence Norfolk's title, Ken Dowden recalls the myth more matter-of-factly rather than including emotional connotations alongside the actions within the myth. Dowden writes that the "most striking is the myth that Zeus in the form of a swan copulated with Leda, who subsequently produced an egg containing Helen" (Ken Dowden 1).

However, "Leda and the Swan" by William Butler Yeats takes on a less than subtle position on the myth. Norfolk writes that "Yeats describes Leda's helplessness and terror in the face of a sudden assault. It is an unambiguously brutal rape after which the victim is indifferently discarded" (Norfolk 1). Yeats also illustrates Leda as "the staggering girl" who is both "helpless" and "terrified." The emphasis on her status as a girl and inability to defend herself builds an image against the pointed title of seductress that art and literature often depict her as. Yeats' Leda is a girl, a figure of innocence who could not possibly either seduce or trap a god or stop a god from using her. As Rickman writes in "The rape of Leda," in Yeats's poem, there is no empathy and, excepting only the 'terrified fingers', no reference to emotions" (H.P. Rickman 2). He leans into this almost declarative view of Leda's story both as a method of depicting her in an empathetic light and as a way of constructing Zeus as the real villain.

What feels more deliberate than Yeats' description of Leda is his manner of describing Zeus. He does not write the god as glorious, or even name him for that manner, but instead refers to him by his treatment of Leda. He writes that she was "mastered by the brute blood of the air" and that "the indifferent beak could let her drop" once the scene has finished. Leda's mortality, a detail "indifferent" to Zeus, is highlighted in comparison to Zeus' mastery and control of the scene. Yeats is able to make clear the power dynamics, a detail often skewed with the portrayal of Leda as a seductress, within the poem without ever having to name the god. Leda, then, is not a woman with the power to trick gods, or even the mother of the woman who sparked the Trojan War, but the "staggering girl" (Yeats) who trembles in terror of her situation of being the

unwilling player. Yeats' matter of fact tone aids in Leda's character shifting from an ambiguous seducer to a definitive girl who has no say in her role in a god's game. The way he in which he not only confronts the issue of Leda being a victim of sexual violence but pins the blame on Zeus solely molds Leda into a trope that is recognizable to modern and contemporary literature and media. For example, in doing a literary analysis of singer and songwriter Hozier's song "Swan Upon Leda," it is clear that Hozier's rendition of the story follows a more empathetic view of Leda as Yeats constructed her. He goes along with Yeats' definition of her as a "girl" by writing that "a crying child pushes a child into the night" (Hozier). The image of Leda being a child herself further pushes the notion that she does not have agency in her role in this scene. Also, the ambiguity of the line, Leda being referred to as a "child," allows for Hozier to encapsulate anyone who might fit the narrative of Leda that Yeats formed. He ends the song with writing that "the gateway to the world," Leda, or anyone who gives birth in this case, "have never belonged to men" (Hozier). He goes beyond Yeats' foundation of Leda as the unwilling player because not only has Hozier made Zeus the clear villain, as Yeats did, but he states that no man should take agency or ownership over the process of birth.

Helen: The Shapeshifting Scapegoat

Helen, being the product of the 'divine' rape of Leda, finds herself in a similar circumstance as her mother when regarding her legacy and title. It is her multifaceted character that, instead of being celebrated as a marker of a dynamic character, makes her the perfect shapeshifting scapegoat. Bettany Hughes, author of "Helen the Whore and the Curse of Beauty," writes that while "we now tend to think of Helen as a passive figure, a feeble thing swept along to Troy on the tide of Paris' libido... a close study of representations of Helen through the centuries yields a feistier figure. She is a woman who is at times applauded, but more often damned, for being sexually active -- and is, furthermore, branded a whore" (Bettany Hughes 37). She, like her mother, is at the center of a sexual scandal, and therefore, their sexuality and agency over their sexuality are the topic of debate among scholars. Hughes continues on Helen's reputation by writing that "Helen's sexual peccadilloes were doubly dreadful because they were perceived as hastening men not just to a woman's bed but to their deaths" (Hughes 38). Now she is beyond being branded as a "whore," but is the seductress of death as well. Male warriors are now no longer blamed for their own aggression, violence, or deaths because Helen serves as a scapegoat for any evildoing within the Trojan War.

Helen not only is known as being sexually promiscuous, but according to Hughes and Yeats, she inspires violent behavior. While W.B. Yeats' Helen in his poem "No Second Troy" is really Maud Gonne, he still argues that Helen as a character is not entirely innocent in her role within the Trojan War. He writes that she teaches "ignorant men most violent ways," suggesting that she not only is at the center of the war, but actually encourages the violence. He continues on the image of Helen as the culmination of the potential for death when he writes she has "beauty like a tightened bow." It is perhaps the power she holds or the threat of violence that makes her all the more enticing. While she supposedly leads men to their brutal deaths, she also

holds the figurative key to the status of glory and nobility. This Helen is defined by being either the gateway to fame and sexuality or as the instigator and seductress of death.

However, as Hughes explains that Helen's reputation is often twisted and multifaceted, Helen is not always the seemingly sadistic mastermind of the Trojan War. In fact, Diane Juffras writes in "Helen and Other Victims in Euripides' 'Helen'" that "if Helen can suffer thus, how can the workings of the gods ever be understood" (Diane Juffras 51). She, despite being an offspring of a god, Zeus of all gods, is not protected from mortality. Moreover, she not only does not reap the rewards of her divine lineage, but instead faces the curse of her beauty as a factor that is out of her control. While Hughes writes that "the more beautiful a woman, the more likely her exterior attributes displayed a duplicitous nature" (Hughes 39), Yeats rebutes the statement in his poem in the line "Why, what could she have done, being what she is?" Both acknowledge her involvement in the Trojan War, but Yeats defends Helen's actions by pointing out a crucial detail, which is that Helen's beauty is not something she inherently asks for or works towards. Hence, if the cause of the war is her beauty, something she cannot control, how could she have controlled the war itself? Yeats' Helen is present in contemporary conversation whenever a woman or girl is told she had been "asking for it" when they are victims of sexual violence. He implicitly argues, especially in conjunction with his poem "The rape of Leda," that even if Helen is the pinnacle of violence, she was introduced into the world via a violent sexual encounter, and therefore, who can put all the blame on her? Juffras pushes the sympathetic view of Helen further in detailing how "Helen learns that her mother and her brothers have killed themselves in shame over her behavior" (Juffras 49). Juffras illustrates how Helen, even if the cause of violence, is not safe from loss herself. She suffers too from the impacts of the Trojan War, as well as carries the guilt of responsibility. Finally, Helen Morales best summarizes Helen's legacy as it appears in literature in the article "Rape, Violence, Complicity: Colluthys's *Abduction Of Helen*" by detailing the ways in which Helen's role shifts depending on what narrative is being told when she writes "the abduction of Helen or the rape of Helen or the seduction of Helen" (Helen Morales 63). Not only does she adhere to the mold of the story, but as she is born of Leda after she is raped, the cycle continues with her daughter as Morales comments that "Hermione is her mother's daughter" (Morales 72). She again shapeshifts from daughter to mother, a matter of which she cannot control how the cycle of abuse is upheld. Helen, with her ever changing reputation throughout literary history, is recognized in Yeats' modernist poem as the shapeshifting scapegoat as she supposedly incites violence by being the epitome of beauty. A contemporary artist, Lorde, builds on Yeats' foundation of Helen's reputation in her song "Helen of Troy." She compares herself to Helen throughout the song, beginning with the lines "One minute I was killing them all, and the next, the brown suit wouldn't let me perform... typical" (Lorde). This description of Helen, a shapeshifter of sorts who has to "[play] it coy" (Lorde) in order for the "city," or music industry to metaphorically "fall" for her, has a direct lineage to Yeats's Helen. Just as he uses Helen to describe another woman, pushing the narrative of her shiftiness, Lorde also uses the trope Helen has become, but she twists the definition to be more of an umbrella term for all contemporary women instead of pinning the definition to one specific

woman as Yeats did. In the chorus she repeats the lines “let’s hear it for the girls living in the modern world” (Lorde) which suggests that Helen is not a rare case of beauty that triggers violent action, but that all modern girls face at some point the same fate of becoming a shapeshifting scapegoat that modernist poet Yeats carved out. By incorporating all modern girls though, Lorde is able to further add to the discussion Yeats began of who is actually responsible for the violence against women. Because she does not include details of physical attractiveness, she argues that there is nothing about these modern girls that incite violence, and therefore that the only blame to be cast should be on the perpetrator(s) alone, which builds off of Yeats’ original depiction and argument.

Achilles: The Soldier Son

At the end of the day, Trojan War hero Achilles is mortal. Scholars such as Jonathan Burgees, Robert J. Rabel, and J.T. Sheppard tend to focus on Achilles and his imperfect, *nearly* immortal status. For example, Sheppard in his article “Zeus-Loved Achilles” showcases the young soldier as he is recalled most often- a story of “grief and death, inscrutable, inevitable, for the hero noble” (Sheppard 123). In many ways, the prophecy of a young death is not unlike the certainty we face that death is “inevitable,” even if we are a “hero noble,” as Sheppard writes. The promise of death acts as a wave of reality within the mythic. Sheppard also details how “Achilles, in his anger, answered with a threat of his own withdrawal from the war” (116). His stubbornness here is a reminder of his childlike characterization. He acts out and lets his emotions guide him much like a child would, which further sustains the image of him as a son before a soldier. Again like a child, he is arrogant. In Rabel’s article “Apollo as a Model for Achilles in the Iliad,” he focuses on Achilles’s “hubris,” which is why “Apollo provides the appropriate warning for Achilles to remember his mortality” (Rabel 430). He overestimates his ability and equates supernatural power with total immortality, which Burgees describes as “Achilles’ imperfect invulnerability” (Burgees 218) in his article “Achilles’ Heel: The Death of Achilles in Ancient Myth.”

Another interpretation of Achilles portrayed in these articles is less focused on Achilles as the childlike yet strong soldier, but as the rageful mortal nearly on par with the gods as either a rival or as an enemy. Sheppard paints Achilles as the subject of Zeus’ affection. He is the “most hateful... of Zeus-nurtured Princes” (Sheppard 116), seemingly unworthy of this nurturing, and yet favored nonetheless. Sheppard goes on to write that “the Man whom Zeus loves dearly is worth many men—even as now He hath done honour to Achilles” (Sheppard 121). This reading of Achilles certainly feeds into the understanding of how he is both seen as the noble hero and the pinnacle of hubris. It is no wonder that a mortal favored by the god of gods, Zeus himself, should forget his place or mortal status. As mentioned before, Zeus is not the only god Achilles interacts with at an almost equal level. Rabel suggests that Achilles’ feud with Apollo may stem from their shared tendency to “exercise the power of divine anger” (Rabel 431). Here, he is not a son to a grieving mother, as Auden later depicts him, but born to Thetis, who Burgees describes as “uncomprehending or heartless” (Burgees 220). Achilles morphs into a figure simultaneously

worthy of sympathy and character to scrutinize. He is the product of his environment and the maker of his own flaws, the noble and tragic hero and the cause of his own death, the mentee and enemy of the gods. Achilles, like most people, is a complex character. He has talents, flaws, enemies, and friends, which is why it is a crucial detail that he is portrayed as a mortal son in Auden's poem because it is a reflection of the modernist focus on the individual.

The image of Achilles as a headstrong and overconfident warrior mostly aligns with W.H. Auden's description of Achilles in his poem, "The Shield of Achilles," as "iron-hearted man-slaying," who ultimately cannot overcome his own mortality. However, Burgees offers an alternate ending to Achilles's downfall:

"Achilles is depicted in a kneeling position, he reaches rather casually to pull the arrow out. I wonder if this indicates that it is an aggravating wound he has received, not a fatal one. One would think that death through a uniquely vulnerable location would be swift and overwhelming. The lack of intensity in the schema suggests to me that Achilles is not dying but rather dangerously distracted and therefore vulnerable to a second and lethal wound" (228).

This interpretation of Achilles's death allows the argument to be made that Achilles's death is not caused by a fatal character flaw like hubris, but that his death is an example of how even the greatest of soldiers are still human. Whether to provide comfort or to act as a warning, Burgees' interpretation aligns with Auden's more sympathetic view of Achilles as a fallen soldier and son. In Auden's rendition, Achilles is not rageful or all powerful, as he is usually remembered in the myth, but instead he is characterized as a son who is capable of injury and death. Even as he is the "strong iron-hearted man-slaying" soldier who does indeed live up to those epithets, he is also Thetis's "son...who would not live long" (Auden). In fact, his mother "[cries] out in dismay" (Auden) over her son, much like any mother who might receive the news of her son's death in war. This level of emotional realism, and Auden's portrayal of Achilles as unable to escape death in war despite his power, depicts a story much more relatable and therefore easy to sympathize with. Auden's focus on the moment of a grieving mother and a soldier's inevitable death make the violence of war not just mystical or prophetic, as it appears in the myth, but a scene grounded in reality.

Achilles in contemporary literature and media appears in a much more gentle light. The novel *The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller is more closely related to Auden's rendition of him in that she focuses on his character as a teenager growing up, his romantic relationship with Patroclus, and even the talk of his ghost from Patroclus' point of view, which all work to make an Achilles that is easy to empathize with. Auden's attention to his sense of individuality and the more mortal, gentle side allow for authors like Madeline Miller to create an Achilles that is able to experience a childhood and a romance alongside the endeavors of war he endures. In a song called "Achilles Come Down" by Gang of Youths also casts Achilles in an sympathetic view in which the bridge of the song depicts Achilles contemplating an implied suicide, where the voices of a supposed Apollo and Patroclus battle to win Achilles' attention. This tension created in the final lines of the bridge in which these lines, "Be done with this now and jump off the roof (be

done with this now and get off the roof)” (Gang of Youths) are sung at the same time allows the audience to place themselves in the emotional state Achilles is in as he feels the burden of the war weigh on him. The band plays into his status as a soldier, but instead of focusing on his role as a glorious hero, they depict the deeply intense emotional turmoil he suffers as repercussions of the war. The repetition of the line as well as the title “Achilles come down” (Gang of Youths) adds a level of ambiguity to *how* Achilles will go down. The song seems to argue, much like Auden, that the *how* is not as significant as the seemingly inevitable fact that Achilles will die. This song pushes further into Auden’s depiction of Achilles as a son who is grieved by his mother as the audience is witness to Achilles coming to terms with his own mortality.

Icarus: The Defenseless Dead

Icarus is perhaps one of the most well known mortals of Greek Mythology in terms of how he has taken on the role of the disobedient son, the over ambitious youth, or the physical manifestation of hubris. On the first point, scholars David Quint, author of “Fear of Falling: Icarus, Phaethon, and Lucretius in Paradise Lost,” and Theodore Ziolkowski, author of “Crete in history and myth,” both seem to agree that Icarus is a disobedient son. Ziolkowski details how “Icarus did not fare so well: disregarding his father's advice, the headstrong youth flew too close to the sun and suffered the inevitable consequence of death by plunging into that part of the Mediterranean thereafter named after him” (Theodore Ziolkowski 12). Quint goes even further, comparing Icarus to Milton’s Satan when he writes that “like the mythic Icarus, Satan has disobeyed his father and aspired too far” (David Quint 860). His death, the crashing into and drowning in the sea always seem to be an inevitable fate for scholars. Quint writes that Icarus is not only a “mad flyer,” but “condemned to a terrifying fall in untold, oceanic depths” (Quint 852-858). Not only is his fate seemingly sealed, but his short life is, as Quint writes “to be identified with Chaos itself” (Quint 859). He is exceedingly disobedient and the embodiment of disorganization, however, he is not confined to this definition. Ziolkowski expands on the way Icarus is described by writing that “Icarus since the Middle Ages was adopted as the warning image for any life carried to its dangerous extremes...Icarus has been regarded as an image for the artist striving to achieve the unattainable” (Ziolkowski 12). His hubris, while a direct pull of his character from the original myth, is a foundation for how later writers depict him.

Two literary artists, W.H. Auden and William Carlos Williams certainly use Icarus in a manner similar to Ziolkowski's definition. While they both also touch on Icarus as a figure in literature, they focus on his lack of presence as he appears in art. Auden, in his poem “Musée Des Beaux Arts,” writes that while someone might have “heard the splash, the forsaken cry,” it was “not an important failure” (Auden). He is never the centerpiece of the active narrative, even in a poem specifically about him, such as “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” by William Carlos Williams. Here, Icarus’ death is merely “a splash quite unnoticed,” and his suffering is “sweating in the sun that melted the wings' wax insignificantly” (Williams). What stands out most from these lines is Icarus as a passive character. In art and in these two poems there is no depiction of his overly ambitious nature or stubborn decision making as to *why* he disobeys his father. Auden

and Williams, instead of taking the creative liberty to give Icarus the power of being decidedly mischievous or haughty, make Icarus the model of a silent sufferer, which as Auden begins his poem, “[about] suffering they were never wrong” (Auden). His motives are decided for him by scholars, and only after his insignificant death. Modernist poets then mold Icarus into the trope of the defenseless dead, as his individuality is stripped. His death is not even recognized, let alone grieved by crowds, and instead of being mourned, he becomes a symbol of arrogant erratic behavior and stubborn decision making of which he cannot even defend himself for. Hozier follows in the footsteps of Auden and Williams in his song “Sunlight,” which mentions Icarus’ story, but only references him by name briefly. After saying he’d be “the Icarus” to “your certainty,” he writes “strap the wing to me, death trap clad happily, with wax melted, I’d meet the sea under sunlight, sunlight, sunlight” (Hozier). Hozier continues in the modernist tradition of assuming how Icarus might have felt moments before his death by implying that Icarus would be “death trap clad happily” (Hozier). He is able to insert himself in the mindset of Icarus and give him emotionally charged action, which Auden and Williams only hover over, but again there is an assumption of motive- that Icarus was not only knowingly flying to his death, but that he did so happily. While he is able to give Icarus more than a surface level reading of his character, this guessing game of *why* he might be happy to fly too close to the sun in Hozier’s rendition for example, still enacts upon the trope Auden and Williams molded of Icarus as the defenseless dead.

Conclusion

Modernist poetry and its creators center their characters on the modernist theory of individualism. Their focus on individuality, a character’s desires, relationships, motives, and emotional schema morph static, one sided characters into dynamic tropes that have been influential building blocks for contemporary literature. Hence, it is significant that mortals of Greek Mythology, widely known among scholars and in literature, should appear as the subjects of modernist poetry because how a modernist poet elaborates on a certain character shapes how that character is both a fully thought out individual on their own and a symbol of a larger scope of characters and people in fiction and reality. The ability to empathize with certain character tropes, an ability that roots in the nurturing of individuality, not only allows for reality to house itself in what used to seem strictly mythic, but it allows for contemporary figures to find their place among ancient stories. The ways in which Auden, Williams, and Yeats choose to depict Leda, Helen, Achilles, and Icarus have cast a shadow on contemporary literature and media in a manner that has reconstructed both how we now interpret their characters and how we perceive ourselves within the media in which they are present. The poetry of modernism has elevated mortals of Greek mythology to a status of immortality through their transcendence into literary tropes.

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