

SEP 19 1980 PN56.M95J3

THE ITYS MYTH
A STUDY OF THE ITYS MYTH IN CLASSICAL,
MEDIEVAL, RENAISSANCE AND ENGLISH
LITERATURE OF THE 17TH, 18TH, 19TH
AND 20TH CENTURIES

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS
PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
OF WESTERN CONNECTICUT STATE COLLEGE

by

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The Itys myth, the story of Procne and Philomela, metamorphosed into the swallow and the nightingale, has survived in written literature for thirty centuries. The myth appears in Homer's Odyssey three thousand years ago and classical scholars wrote their versions of the legend from remembered Greek drama. Rediscovery of classical literature in the Renaissance ensured the continuation of the ancient story through the following centuries to the poetry of Eliot and Pound in our time.

The extraordinary endurance of the myth is explained in terms of human psychology as its violent themes of incest, murder, and cannibalism are shown to be of never-ending interest to early as well as to modern man.

The myth is described in its various forms and is examined for genre, content, and function. A brief outline of mythology, its development and function, is followed by a chapter on cannibalism in ancient and modern societies and its relation to sacrifice and religion. Metamorphosis is discussed in terms of the Itys myth. The crimes of rape, murder, incest, and cannibalism are discussed on a psychological basis.

The Itys myth is sought in art and is found only in a fragment of a Greek frieze illustrating the legend, and in illustrations in books containing the myth.

The myth is then studied for style, content, and function in Greek and Roman, Medieval, and Renaissance literature, and in English literature from the sixteenth century to the present day. Authors in different periods of history interpreted the story according to their special interests, and in retelling it emphasized different aspects of the legend, reflecting their literary purpose and contemporary poetic convention.

Greek and Roman writers assumed their audiences to be familiar with the myth and presented it as known history, to entertain, and to heighten the intensity of feeling in their tragedies. The Itys myth was used for teaching morality and Christian ethics in the Middle Ages: to illustrate the Sin of Wrath in Dante's Inferno, and in subsequent centuries in England to provide moral commentary, romantic decoration of poetry, and appropriate mood for elegiac verse. Shakespeare strengthened the dramatic intensity of Titus Andronicus with the myth as he explored the meaning of human suffering and death. In our century, Eliot and Pound put their allusions to the Itys myth in context with early Greek history: thus they remind us of our common heritage and blend present with past in a continuum of literary history.