

## Traces of Postmodernism and Posthumanism in the Construction of Body and Identity in Greek Mythology

Yunan Mitolojisinde Beden ve Kimliğin İnşasında Postmodernizm ve Posthumanizmin İzleri

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### ABSTRACT

This paper intends to explore how the notions of the body and identity are conceptualized, represented, and experienced in Greek mythology by pointing out the parallelism between Greek mythology and postmodernism since postmodern concepts and theories of the body and identity politics can be traced back to myths. Myths offer enchanting narratives about the creation of the universe, the nature of existence, and natural events, alongside fantastical tales of deities, extraordinary beings such as monsters, superhuman heroes, magical transformations, and polymorphous metamorphoses. Classical mythology is also fascinated with etiology, the study of first causes, and the origins of the conditions in our lives. In this sense, how mythical bodies emerge and identities take on certain shapes and develop in various ways gain importance. Myths are full of boundary-breaking forms of existence, transgressive and subversive identities, fluid beings, indeterminate origins, and hybrid bodies, through which we are transported into alternative visions. They defy all kinds of rigid categories, unalterable formations, and the hierarchical order of existence. Similarly, postmodern bodies blur the boundaries among different forms of beings and they are characterized by fluidity, hybridity, multiplicity, fragmentation, discontinuity, and uncertainty. In this sense, this paper sets out to argue that myths align with postmodern and posthumanist understanding of body and identity and mythic thinking is integral to human intellectual dimension and has influenced the emergence of bodies and identities in postmodern texts.

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## Introduction

Myths are universal, and as Tournier (1977) argues in *Le Vent Paraclet*, humanity is innately mythological. Since mythic thinking and imagination are inherent aspects of our intellectual life, myths have been revisited, recycled, and recontextualized for various purposes in different literary periods. This paper emphasizes the connection between myths and postmodern literature, highlighting the continuity of human thought that has shaped certain attitudes toward the body and identity. The main motivation for this study is the observation of how bodies and identities are perceived, constructed, and represented in myths, and how these elements might have been

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inherited by postmodernism due to striking parallels between postmodernism and ancient Greek myths.

Several works examining the relationship between myths and postmodernism highlight the concept of “cyclic repetition,” arguing that postmodern texts either parody or stylize original myths through their reinterpretations and recontextualizations (Olizko and Danilova, 2018). Some authors rework and revise myths within the postmodern context to deconstruct culturally and ideologically established ideas and reconstruct traditional stories through the lens of postmodernist values, identities, and issues. Postmodern writers often remix existing myths, blending them with literary elements, genres, or other cultural narratives to create literary hybrids. Like the works of writers such as Angela Carter, Jeanette Winterson, Madeline Miller and Salman Rushdie, these retellings often focus on marginalized voices to explore perspectives overlooked, underrepresented or underprivileged in traditional narratives, particularly regarding gender/sex, body and sexuality. However, there appears to be a lack of works specifically arguing that myths and postmodernism share similar notions of body and identity. This paper centralizes the argument that postmodernism draws on ancient myths because of their creative, transgressive, subversive, and transformative capacities, which challenge established orders, fixed definitions, rigid categories, and limitations. This perspective may help explain the similarities between myths and postmodern and/or posthumanist notions of body and identity.

Myths provide versatile materials for postmodern writers who are very much captivated by the mythical universe and engaged in recycling, reimagining, and reworking ancient myths that fit very well into the postmodern thinking. Mythic and postmodern thinking are similar in that they dethrone the centrality of reason and logic and delve into the exploration of the irrational, the illogical, and the realm of the marvelous along with repressed fantasies and desires. In addition, what the modern man has been trying to achieve through science and technology is very much similar to what myth-making men aimed to reach through their imagination, which shows that the ambition to overcome and transcend bodily limitations and the boundaries of existence has always existed in mankind. Roland Barthes (1957), Claude Lévi-Strauss (2001) and Michel Tournier (1977) highlight the capacity of myths to critique, deconstruct and challenge societal and cultural norms and concepts (Panek, 2012). They also suggest that myths can serve as a means to explore alternative realities and to promote new ways of understanding the world and ways of being.

In mythic understanding, all kinds of identities and physical forms are perceived as fluid, and open-ended, devoid of finality, closure, and certainty. As Doan (1994) suggests, postmodern narratives, much like myths, “interrogate, trouble, subvert and tamper with gender, identity and sexuality” (p. 154). Postmodernism denounces and condemns “the ideals of representation, truth, rationality, system, foundation, certainty (...)/ as well as the concepts of the subject, meaning, and causality” (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 256). Hassan (1993) describes postmodern culture as the culture of “unmaking” that embodies the principles of “decreation, disintegration, deconstruction, decenterment, displacement, difference, discontinuity, disjunction, disappearance, decomposition, de-definition, demystification, detotalization, delegitimation” (p. 282). Both in postmodern and mythic frameworks, what has been established as true, real, or fixed as shaped by hegemonic discourse and characterized by essentialist and reductionist perspectives, has been critically challenged and problematized. Consequently, all the constraints and limitations imposed on the definitions of what is possible, natural, normal and ordinary are removed in both narratives.

Both postmodernism and mythology exercise imagination to delimit the boundaries of the body and expand its capacities. Thanks to the mythic imagination, bodies are represented as flexible and adaptable, able to transform from one shape to another, with the capacity to assume different variations. Since myths embody “the oppositional spirit” of postmodernism in “resisting or deconstructing common assumptions of culture” (Bordo, 1992, p. 160), they depict characters and

their bodies outside the dominant value systems and the established orders of law. Mythological thought is opposed to dualistic and “hierarchical thinking” (Bordo, 1992, p. 161) and thus, the rejection of the body in favor of the mind, reflecting a deep-seated fear or disdain for the material body in male-dominated cultures, is not a phenomenon that can be observed in mythological narratives. Since the mythological mindset is anti-Cartesian, anti-essentialist and non-determinist, myths shape bodies and identities in ways that transcend binary and hierarchical frameworks of thought. Postmodernism likewise defies binary oppositions which are based on illusions of purity, essentialism, and the rigidity of categories such as body, self, and identity. Corporeality is central to both postmodernism and myths, and for various reasons, bodies have always been crucial and visible in both. Hence, like myths, “Postmodernism, both as cultural practice and critical discourse does seem to be characterized by an enduring obsession with the body” (Longfellow, 1990, p. 180).

Myths and postmodernism also share a focus on accommodating and celebrating the plurality of identities and multiplicity of bodies. Consequently, both can be described as featuring an “explosion of bodies and beings” (Bordo, 1992, p. 160). In order to liberate imagination to produce different alternatives and versions through the proliferation of the normal and the natural, postmodern narratives celebrate magical realism and fantasy. Myths also embody elements of magical realism, as they do not seek logical or conventional explanations for denaturalized bodies. Instead, they encourage alternative ways of being, existing, and thinking. Proliferation is one of the key concepts in both postmodernism and myths where it is not possible to pin down or standardize a certain form of body or existence. Johan Daisne coined the term *Magisch-realisme* in 1943 and described it as follows: “Dream and reality constitute the two poles of the human condition, and it is through the magnetism of these poles that magic is born” (Herman, 1996, p. 125).<sup>1</sup> Dreams, as manifestations of human creative imagination, provide novel perspectives for perception, thought, emotion, and understanding. The function of magical realism in postmodern and mythical narratives is to describe the human and the non-human as well as the familiar events in such a way that a fresh vision of life and a fresh outlook on existence can possibly emerge. For this purpose, postmodern and mythic aesthetics make use of defamiliarization not to “invent completely a new world” but to invert “elements of this world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and apparently ‘new’, absolutely ‘other’ and different” (Jackson, 2008, p. 4).

Salman Rushdie (1981) suggests that magical realism, generally seen within the postmodern framework since it intersects with postmodern themes, is the “commingling of the improbable and the mundane” (p. 1). In myths, since the borderline between fact and fiction, and the real and the unreal is removed, we accept mystery and magic as an ordinary part of everyday life. Furthermore, the distinctions and boundaries between the natural and the supernatural, and the ordinary and the magical are violated and trespassed in myths. “The distinction between natural and supernatural, in fact, broke down; and when it had done so, one realized how great a comfort it had been—how it had eased the burden of intolerable strangeness which this universe imposes on us” (Lewis, 1944, p. 11). In this sense, myths should not be seen as mere representations of the impossible, the marvelous and the fantastic but rather as the manifestations of different versions and possible expressions of the real. Jackson (2008) supports the very same idea when she argues that the fantastic elements in postmodern narratives should not be viewed as irrational or unreal; rather, they highlight the arbitrary nature of what is considered real and possible (p. 12).

According to Leal (1995), magical realism is an “attitude towards reality” that includes the “discovery of the mysterious relation between man and his circumstances” (p. 131). Magical realist narratives offer “new mythical and magical perspectives on reality” (Dombroski, 1997, p. 522) and

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<sup>1</sup> This quotation is translated by Luc Herman from Johan Daisne’s *De Trap Van Steen en Wolken* (1942, p. 357).

give visibility to the invisible forces that are at work in the world to increase the capacity to see and write about all different dimensions of reality. This is in tune with mythology and postmodernism, which assert that reality is not singular, universal or objective. By making use of magic and fantasy, myths and postmodern narratives offer the “interrogation of the nature of the real” (Jackson, 2008, p. 5) and seek liberations from the regulating and restrictive literary conventions of realism, which is necessary to construct possible worlds and alternative forms of beings by transcending the fixed and unified notions of reality, subject and identity. The magic realist elements utilized in the construction of postmodern and mythic bodies and identities display “resistance to fixity” and attack “a closed, unified, or omniscient vision” (Jackson, 2008, pp. 2-8). They also serve to dissolve differences between species, genders, and ranks, allowing for new interactions among them as cultural, social, religious, and sexual taboos, and norms are lifted.

Keeping all these in mind, the following sections examine different bodies in myths in order to illustrate how they resonate with the construction and perception of postmodern bodies. The parallels between mythic and postmodern bodies are primarily explored in terms of resistance to fixity, hybridity, fluidity, multiplicity, uncertainty and engagement with biopower.

### **Parallels between Mythic and Postmodern Bodies**

Mythological bodies are not constructed in terms of biological determinism or cultural essentialism; similarly, mythic identities make no claim for authenticity or singularity; they are rather polysemic. Since the mythological beings are not forged into fixity, bodies and identities are constantly open to revision and reconstructions. Similarly, postmodern identities and bodies are characterized by uncertainty, instability, indeterminacy, fluidity and fragmentation. The terms such as hybridity, ambiguity, “heterogeneity,” “discontinuity, displacement,” incoherence, and “destabilization” also signify postmodern “academic accessorizing” that reflects the epistemological and ontological “foundationlessness” in postmodernism (Bordo, 1992, p. 161). The postmodern self is motivated and driven by “the need for an escape from the restrictions of the unitary self” (Taylor, 1989, p. 463) since identities do not have core essence and accordingly, bodies are not represented as a coherent and unified whole. To Allan (1997), the postmodern self is a “non-essential, transient self, a fragmented self that has no essence, only images” (p. 3). Likewise, in the myths, the corporeal dimension of the body, lacking inherent essence, is foregrounded.

Mobile and nomadic identities prevalent both in mythic and postmodern texts construct “transformative subjectivities that express and exhibit the *multiple aspects* of identity, the different locations from which we see and think” (Bordo, 1992, p. 164). Because of the fluidity of the body and the self, Collins (1988) defines postmodern identities as *multiple, fluctuating, and situational* (pp. 255–259). The same applies to mythic identities. Teresias, the famous blind seer, is one among many that represents fluid bodies in Greek myths that challenge the limitations and boundaries of identity. He was transformed into a female body and spent 7 years of his life as a woman before he was turned into a man again. In myths, femininity and masculinity, femaleness and maleness are not regarded as fixed and unchangeable qualities inherently given. Rather, they are aspects of identity that are “changing and changeable” and “transformable” (Birke, 1999, p. 45). Such representations of the human body spotlight the self-surpassing and self-overcoming nature of the human.

Instead of exposing the essential nature of gender/sex identity, performative aspects of identities and bodies are foregrounded both in myths and postmodernism. Judith Butler (1999a) proposes that “Performativity is thus not a singular *act* for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition” (p. 241). The continuous reiteration of culturally determined bodily acts, accepted norms, and conventions create the effect of the natural and the normal in

shaping certain sexual and gender identities. Butler suggests that performativity challenges the idea of unchanging and innate identities through subversive bodily acts that bring about gender trouble by exposing the artificiality of sex/gender and body. “In the place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity” (Butler, 1999b, p. 418). Myths and postmodern narratives reveal the social, cultural and ideological constructedness of sex/gender and bodies since the conception of the “natural” is a dangerous “illusion” of which we must be “cured” (Bordo, 1992, p. 169). They also reject the idea that the inner core or essence determines, regulates and organizes our bodies and identities; they rather emerge as a result of “the dramatic effects” of bodily performances since there is no natural body, sex or gender that exists prior to the process of genderization (Goffman, 1956, pp. 122–123; Butler, 2006, p. 177).

Athena’s and Dionysus’ performances challenge and complicate conventional understandings of sex, gender and identity. Athena is not associated with traditional female or domestic roles; rather, she is a warrior who engages in battle and embodies qualities typically considered masculine. As an accomplished war strategist and an inventor of ship and agricultural tools, as well as a foundational figure in mathematics, her intellectual and physical prowess surpasses that of nearly all male deities. Dionysus, on the other hand, is perceived as feminine because of the effect of his bodily performances in various aspects of his worship, his androgynous appearance and the emotional, and ecstatic qualities of his cult. He is often depicted wearing flowing robes or garments made of fine materials and his elaborate adornments and extravagant outfits reflect his female attributes. Additionally, his close association with the cult of Cybele, a mother goddess connected to fertility and nature, further emphasizes his feminine qualities.

Transvestism, generally known as crossdressing, that is, dressing in the opposite sex’s clothing, is very common in Greek myths which share with postmodernism the celebration of queer bodies and identities. There is an abundance of instances in which various heroic figures and deities crossed gender lines. The most famous examples include the tales of Achilles’ and Dionysus’ cross-dressings (Irving, 1990, p. 150). In order to protect Dionysus from the tyranny of Hera, he was dressed up as a girl. Similarly, Achilles, one of the greatest heroes, was disguised under the appearance of a maiden named Phyrria in order not to join the Greeks for the Trojan War. The mythic crossdressers transgress conventional gender norms and through acts of subversive gender expression, they disrupt the perception of femininity and masculinity as inherent categories, thereby elucidating their socially and culturally constructed nature. This is in alignment with postmodern attitude towards sex and gender.

Myths offer numerous examples illustrating that the earliest manifestations of queer culture and practices can be traced back to myths. They gave expressions to non-heterosexual desires by “unleash[ing] the flows of desire on [the] body as a deterritorialized field” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1996, p. 417). Queer activities and representations are not treated as forms of perversion, sickness or abnormality in mythic and postmodern cultures. On the contrary, queer bodies are recognized as integral components of sexual diversity. Aronowitz and Giroux (1991) assert that postmodernism sets forth to describe how borders are reshaped by “redraw[ing] the very maps of meaning, desire, and difference” (p. 81). Postmodern culture seeks to reorder and recontextualize in order to expand the boundaries of bodily existence, a perspective that is also reflected in mythic conceptualizations of the body.

A prominent trope that interrogates the notions of fixity, stability, and the naturalness of the body is the motif of metamorphosis in Greek mythology. Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (1958), a collection of fifteen Latin narrative poems, is considered the first literary work to explore corporeal transformations. Ovid retells over two hundred fifty Greek myths through vivid depictions of bodily metamorphoses with an emphasis on the ever-changing nature of creation and being. Through

shape-shifting, all the ontological boundaries among the species are crossed over and different modes of existence are merged into one other.

Now I shall tell of things that change, new being  
 Out of old since you, O Gods, created  
 Mutable arts and gifts, give me the voice  
 To tell the shifting story of the world  
 From its beginning to the present hour. (Ovid, 1958, p. 3)

The exploration of transformation in Ovid's poems illustrates the dynamic relationship between humans and nonhumans, where one can morph into the other. This theme encompasses a wide range of metamorphoses, including radical forms of posthuman evolution, such as humans becoming one with the earth or transforming into animals, insects, trees, flowers, and even lifeless objects like streams, stones, and constellations. Likewise, a transformed human can revert to their original human form, or an individual may take on the identity of a deity (Na, 2022, p. 44).

Mythic metamorphosis, particularly the corporeal metamorphosis, has immensely influenced the way bodies and identities are constructed and represented in postmodern texts (Na, 2022, p. 43). Metamorphosis, in the biological sense, refers to the notable and sudden transformation of an animal's body structure through cell proliferation and differentiation following birth or hatching. The metamorphoses of humans in myths and postmodern narratives are treated as an artificial process that is brought about by external forces such as a mythical deity or an ambitious scientist, who uses enchanting magic or advanced science and technology to perform extraordinary transformations. In this sense, many classical myths and postmodern narratives explore the re-crafting of bodies. Postmodern characters can change their sexed bodies for new gender orientations or abruptly transform into other forms of beings or take on the qualities of hybrid mixedness. Thus, the postmodern endeavor to construct and represent bodies as malleable and alterable forms can be traced back to myths that demonstrate that physical borders are flexible and can be reterritorialized. Bodies and identities in the boundary-breaking narratives of myths and postmodernism destabilize and confuse the fixed epistemological and ontological limits by celebrating "ultimate mobility and perfect exchange" (Haraway, 1991, p. 168).

The ability or the potential to change sexed/gendered bodies conveys symbolic and imaginative significance in myths. Sex/gender division has always been the most essential division in mankind, which fundamentally shapes every aspect of life including culture, politics, economy as well as perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes. The mobility of bodies serves as a tool of transcending societal expectations, cultural and ethical norms and religious teachings by offering a diverse range of possibilities and the richness of experience. Postmodernism also makes use of bodily transformation, transvestism or queer identities to attack the idea of purity and authenticity. Postmodernism strongly advocates that concepts like "natural" and "normal" are ideologically determined and can be redefined. As Donna Haraway (1999) puts it, "Bodies have been as thoroughly denaturalized as sign, context, and time. Organisms are made; they are constructs of a world-changing kind" (p. 207). In postmodernist thought, there is no such thing as a biologically natural body; all the bodies are naturalized constructions and they are culturally, historically, ideologically and subjectively engineered. In this sense, bodies are not born but made. Similarly, in myths, the body is not "conceptualized as a fixed, unitary, primarily biological reality" but "as a historical, plural, culturally mediated form" (Bordo, 1993, p. 288).

Mythic imagination that rejects pure bodies and pure identities and confines the species within their own distinct and proper ontological territories resonates with postmodernist thought. Donna Haraway (1991) maintains that "[...] the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached. The last beachheads of uniqueness have been polluted [...]" (p. 151). She argues that the

distinctive features that keep the species apart from each other are not valid any more since they are no longer particularly unique to any one species due to advancements in technology, science, and cultural norms. With cyborgs that problematize traditional ideas of purity, distinctiveness, and rigid classification along with human exceptionalism, Haraway advocates for a more intricate and integrated view of identity that allows for interdependent and fluid relationships among humans, animals, and other forms of existence. This encourages a serious reevaluation and reconsideration of humanity in a world where ontological boundaries are in a constant state of flux.

Bodily constructions in myths “leave[s] room for changes and mergings with other bodies, where bodies are held together not by a stable body image and a gendered identity, but by forces of connection and interaction between” different bodies (Lindenmeyer, 1999, p. 48). The absence of the difference between the self and the other is indeed mitigating, liberating and rewarding. The characters in myths live on the thresholds. They embody liminality, creating spaces of hybridity where heroes exist neither in the realm of humanity nor in that of divine pantheons. “This paraxial area could be taken to represent the spectral region of the fantastic, whose imaginary world is neither entirely ‘real’ (object), nor entirely ‘unreal’ (image), but is located somewhere indeterminately between the two” (Jackson, 2008, p. 12). Ontological liminality destabilizes the hierarchy among the species along with the primacy of men. The mythic and postmodern notion of a man negates the man “as the king of creation”, presenting instead a vision of man “as the being who is in intimate contact with the profound life of all forms or all types of beings” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1996, p. 404). Fusions between species create a new existential order and diverse forms, enriching bodily experiences across different identities and expanding the scope of life. This can lead to a deeper and broader understanding of nomadic existences and beings.

The postmodernist celebration of mixedness, blending, and amalgamation of different forms of beings is notably reflected in myths. It is common for deities to engage in sexual intercourse with mortals, resulting in offspring that possess a fusion of human and divine qualities, giving rise to superheroic characters. The greatest hero of the Trojan War, Achilles, born of the Titan goddess Thetis and a mortal king Peleus, embodies both mortality and immortality simultaneously within the same body. Other figures that inhabit a liminal space include semi-demi gods like satyrs, half-goat, half-human beings, and nymphs that are neither fully deities nor entirely human, but existing in the intermediary realm between divinity and humanity. Pan, the son of Hermes and a god of shepherds and nature, is born with the ears, horns, legs and a tail of a goat. Minotaur, the monstrous offspring of Pasiphaë and a splendid bull sent by Poseidon, is half-bull and half-man. Sirens, sea nymphs, are winged women that appear in different combinations of women and birds. The Sphinx is a creature with the head of a woman, the body of a lion, a serpent's tail, and the wings of an eagle. There are numerous such examples in myths that incorporate what can be termed postmodern hybridity. Hybridity and liminality emerge as the two defining characteristics of postmodernism. Similar to myths, postmodern hybridization is closely related to pluralism, eclecticism, ambiguity, indeterminacy, impurity, and subversiveness. In this context, the hybrids of postmodernism draw on the hybrids of myths, which typically emerge from a blend of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic features.

The blurred, flexible, and uncertain boundaries between the dead and the living, as well as between various forms of life underscore Stacy Alaimo's theory of trans-corporeality (2010). This concept posits that all living beings possess an inherent balance and symbiotic relationships with one another, illustrating profound interconnectedness across different forms of existence (p. 3). Thanks to the quality of trans-corporeality, changing from one form of existence into another is quite acceptable in myths. There are several examples that show this transitivity among the species. Animate beings can turn into the non-animate, human beings are transformed into gods, animals, plants or monsters, and similarly, Gods into human beings or animals. Pygmalion's marble statue



Galatea was turned into a living woman. Atlas was turned into a mountain by the severed head of Medusa. Niobe, the daughter of Tantalus, was turned into a stone which eternally cries out of grief for the murder of her children. Narcissus was eventually turned into a flower, the narcissus. Some of the mortals were brought back to life from death or granted immortality. Heracles, Telemachus, Penelope, and Semele were all transported to the realm of immortality. Pelops who was killed and served as a meal to Olympian Gods by his father Tantalus is also brought back to life. All these examples point out the fluidity and dynamic nature of life that challenges traditional notions of identity and categorization, suggesting that existence is characterized by constant movement and transformation.

### **Body Politics in Myths and Postmodernism**

Mythology and postmodernism exhibit similar body politics, wherein bodies function as a site of resistance against hegemonic forces and power relations are rearranged. Actions concerning bodies can be life-saving efforts aimed at resisting or evading various forms of oppression, victimization, and violence or they can be performed to exercise power and authority over unbending and unyielding characters or to provide protection, comfort and safety under a certain disguise or to punish overreachers. During the epic war between the Titans and the Olympians, the victorious Olympians change themselves into animals in order to avoid the most terrifying and hideous monster Typhon. Zeus transforms himself into a ram, Artemis a cat, Hermes a stork, Hera a cow, Apollo into a crow, Aphrodite a fish, and Dionysus a goat. Pan's transformation is more innovative, and he turns the lower part of his body into a fish and upper part into a goat. Zeus is also in the habit of transforming his lovers into animals to protect them from Hera's jealousy and cruelty. For instance, the mortal Io has been transformed into a cow, and Callisto into a bear. Female figures, on the other hand, use shape-shifting to protect themselves against male sexual advances or male violence. The tale of Metis is first recounted in Hesiod's *Theogony* and her shape-shiftings are undertaken for protective reasons in an attempt both to avoid Zeus's sexual advances and to save herself from being swallowed by Zeus (Irving, 1990, p.184). Like Metis, Daphne, a mountain nymph, changes herself into a laurel tree to resist against Apollo's seduction. Procne and her sister Philomela are turned into birds, a nightingale and a swallow by Gods to protect them from Tereus who raped Philomela.

In addition, both myths and postmodern texts utilize bodies as a space where disciplinary power is exercised to establish domination and mastery, which Michel Foucault calls bio-power. Foucault (1979) asserts that the hegemonic or ruling political power regulates the subjects through "an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations" (p. 140). Biopower operates according to the principle of the *anatomo-politics of the human body* and it is not only exercised on the individual body but also directed at the *bio-politics of the population* which refers to the body of a certain species (pp. 139-143). Some forms of shape-shifting in myths bear the quality of biopower since it is employed as a controlling, correcting, regulating and disciplining mechanism for the passivation, subordination or the normalization of subjects through their bodies (Foucault et al., 2003, pp. 242-243). Circe, the famous sorceress, turns men into swans for their destructive behaviors and sexual abuses. Medusa, once a beautiful and young maiden, is transformed into a Gorgon, a snake-headed woman by Athena for vilifying and contaminating her temple by her sexual intercourse although it is an act of rape that takes place in Athena's temple and Medusa is just a victim of this sexual crime. Scylla, once a beautiful nymph, has been transformed into a dreadful monster, a long-necked, six-headed beast by the envy-ridden goddess, Circe, when Glaucus chooses Scylla as his prospective wife. These preliminary examples demonstrate how biopower operates to regulate, and govern bodies and identities in myths, resonating with the ways power functions to manage and control life, health, and the body in postmodern societies.



Bodily transformations of male figures illustrate the power dynamics at play, where their control over female bodies becomes a means of exerting dominance. Zeus makes use of metamorphoses quite frequently, especially for the satisfaction of his sexual desires. To get Hera, for instance, he changes himself into a rain-soaked cuckoo. Moreover, in order to punish her mother Rhea when she dares to forbid him to marry because of his excessive lust, he transforms himself into a vicious serpent and violates her who has already transformed into a serpent against her son's threat of sexual violence. Poseidon also transforms his shape quite often in order to perform his seductive activities and he appears to Medusa as a bird and to Demeter as a stallion. Poseidon has sexual intercourse in the shape of a dolphin, and a bull as well. His acts of shapeshifting also have a determining impact on his offspring who are born into different bodily forms including a wild horse Arion by Demeter, golden-fleeced ram by Theophane and Pegasus, a winged horse, by Medusa. Forced and nonconsensual sexual activities encompass a range of experiences, including sexual assault, rape, coercion and manipulation. These acts illustrate the intersection of male sexuality and violence, revealing how women are often reduced to objects to be possessed and controlled. Similarly, the relationship between male sexuality and male violence is examined in postmodern narratives, which intertwine masculinity with aggression and suggest that dominance and control are integral to male identity. Postmodern discourse critiques both the objectification of female bodies and the normalization of violent behavior as a means of asserting masculinity.

### **Resonance between Mythic and Posthumanist Bodies**

Some prominent features found in myths align with various aspects of posthumanism. Posthumanism is usually regarded as both a continuation and an expansion of postmodern thought, especially in its emphasis on the fluidity of identity, its examination of the fundamental boundaries defining humanity, and its critiques of the principles of modernity and Enlightenment humanism. Posthumanism, like postmodernism, rejects the notion of a fixed human essence and anthropocentric perspectives. Ihab Hassan (1977) spotlights the deconstructive function of posthumanism in the contemporary age and presents the concepts of *posthuman* and *posthumanism* as the next phase in humanism in *Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture*. It is crucial to acknowledge that the very structure of humanity, including its desires and outward manifestations, has been undergoing drastic changes, necessitating a reimagining and redefinition of what it means to be human. Hassan traces the roots of posthumanism in mythology and employs the myth of Prometheus to signify and explain the rise of posthuman society. To Hassan, the most pertinent aspect of the Promethean dialectic in the context of posthumanism involves the interplay between imagination and science, myth and technology, as well as earth and sky—two realms that converge. In this sense, Prometheus's primary function is to go beyond binary oppositions such as human vs. divine, trickster vs. hero, imagination vs. science, myth vs. technology, man vs. machine, one vs. many and earth vs. sky: "Prometheus is himself the figure of a flawed consciousness struggling to transcend such divisions as the One and the Many, Cosmos and Culture, the Universal and the Concrete" (Hassan, 1977, p. 838). Myths serve a similar function to posthumanism since they embody the convergence of imagination and science as "agents of change, crucibles of values, modes not only of representation but also of transformation, their interplay may now be the vital performing principle in culture and consciousness – a key to posthumanism" (Hassan, 1977, p. 838).

There exists a close relationship between myths and science. Both myths and science arise from the need to explain natural phenomena and human nature and thus seek and offer frameworks for understanding the world, creation and existence. Early civilizations often relied on myths to explain events they did not understand, such as natural disasters or celestial movements. The Greeks, for instance, used the myth of separation and reunion of Demeter and Persephone to explain seasonal changes. As Rachel Carson argues, both science and myths try to grasp the reality of living, that is, "the what, the how, the why of everything in our experience" (p. 91). Many scientific ideas and

concepts indeed have origins in mythological thought. Latour (1988), in *Science in Action*, examines how the production of scientific knowledge is akin to myth-making processes. Science and myth function as complementary forces, stimulating and inspiring each other to generate a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of reality and knowledge about the world, life and human. In this sense, myth and science are two faces that reflect the same reality.

As a scientific endeavor, ancient people were keen on playing with the idea of what if we could multiply the number of certain organs or bodily parts in one single body and this fantasy is still popular among posthumanists who embrace infinite diversity and all its potential combinations. Since ancient times, humankind has been pursuing the ambition to expand the possibilities of the body. In this sense, mythological deities act as creative sculptures and talented artists of plastic arts, who are engaged in innovative and productive processes of crafting in which multiple, subversive and transgressive bodies and identities can be re/constructed. As a result, the human mind creates extraordinary beings with plural organs like hundred-handed giants and cyclopes. Likewise, Typhon, one of the most frightening monsters, has one hundred serpentine heads through which he can spit fire and speak in the voices of both human beings and animals. Such examples display that myths are based on liberated imagination that can generate multiple visions and plural perspectives about different versions of beings, existences, bodies and identities since ontological plurality is a well-established trope in myths as in postmodernism. Posthumanism extends this pluralism through science and technology to include non-human entities, suggesting that various forms of existence should be acknowledged and valued.

Such examples demonstrate that ancient people held dynamic and complex ideas regarding interspecies biology and biotechnology, which were sometimes realized through imagination or magic and at other times through craftsmanship. These practices can be viewed as preliminary attempts at human enhancement. Mythological characters' undertakings that include radical experimentations and creative innovations, leading to a wide range of bodily expressions are early pursuits for genetic engineering and robotics. Such narratives reflect posthumanist thought in myths as they advocate hybridity and challenge established notions of fixed identities and bodies. Recrafting and refashioning bodies lead to the breakdown of the notion of the coherence and stability of the self along with the rearrangement of power structures and reconstructions of identities. Myths are full of inspiring ideas that serve as catalysts for the development of progressive and revolutionary reproductive technologies that can be seen in posthumanist projects. One of the most ambitious projects posthumanists undertake is the possibility of mothering men; that is, creating male body as a birthing body. It would not be wrong to suggest that some posthumanist reproductive technologies are borrowed or at least inspired by ancient myths. Cronus may be the first to have experimented on the possibility of constructing the male body as a birthing body with the capacity of pregnancy and delivery. He swallowed five of his newly born babies and carried them in his belly like a pregnant woman. Zeus showed a great interest in performing the task of procreation and went through the experience of pregnancy twice. Zeus gave birth to the goddess Athena out of his head since he swallowed Metis up when she was pregnant with her first baby. On another occasion, Zeus's as-yet unborn child was saved from the ashes of his mother Semele and placed inside his thigh where he carried the child for three months and the baby Dionysus, known as the twice-born god, was delivered by Zeus. Hera, after the birth of Athena, tried another form of reproduction called *parthenogenesis* and procreated Hephaestus without a male partner. Aphrodite also owed her birth to parthenogenesis. Aphrodite, as a word, means "out of foam" since she was born out of the white foam created by the genitalia of Uranus which was castrated and thrown into the sea by his son Cronus. Hermaphroditus, a double-sexed child of Hermes and Aphrodite, is the first hermaphrodite, which means a person born with both male and female genital organs. All these examples demonstrate what Stuart Hall refers to as "postmodern excess" (Drew, 1998, p.177) that can be observed in several cases of hermaphroditic reproduction, polymorphous sexuality, and

androgyny in ancient myths. They also clearly indicate that myths go beyond all the normative biological restrictions and consider multiple sexed/gendered bodies and identities as culturally and biologically intelligible.

Posthumanist imagination is also very obvious in Gods' experimentations not only with the bodily forms but also with ways of creation. Adonis, for instance, is not born out of his mother's womb but the tree the mother Smyrna is transformed into. Mankind as a race is faced with the threat of total extinction several times and Zeus repopulates the earth by recreating men either out of stones or by transforming animals into human beings. Once, he transforms ants into human beings when Hera kills almost all the inhabitants of the island named after Zeus's lover, Aegina. All such examples in myths indicate that the parameters of biological reproduction are expanded by removing the constraints on the natural process of childbirth.

Starting with the late 20th century, the mythological versions of postmodern bodies gained visible and tangible forms. Donna Haraway (1991) describes our age as a mythic time in which we have all become cyborgs. "By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs" (p. 150). A cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and physical reality, to be more exact, "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (Haraway, 1991, p. 150). Haraway (1991) presents the cyborg as a means of breaking down divisive binaries and turning upside down all the privileged positions in the dichotomous structures including "culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, [...] right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man" (p. 177) to achieve the elusive posthuman state of being. Like postmodern cyborgs, all forms of beings and existences in myths are envisioned in terms of disassembly and reassembly: "The cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self" (Haraway, 1991, p. 164). Human beings can be dismantled into different bodily forms and reassembled in different combinations since there is no natural material design that can be imposed on the body to pin down the self and identity into fixity.

The primordial images of cyborgs initially appeared in myths with their transgressive and subversive potential, signifying the coexistence of hybrid qualities in the physical body. Haraway (1991) explains that her "cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities" (p. 155). Cyborgs emerge in myths exactly where the boundary between human and fauna or human and flora is transgressed. Mythological characters like those in the postmodern narratives are not "afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines" (Haraway, p. 154). A cyborg, both as an idea and as a concrete form, is an ideological construction that unsettles fixity, destabilizes stability and de-solidifies what is rigid and stiff to confuse solid boundaries so that the flowing, blending and intermingling of one form into many others can be possible. Cyborgs in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century "have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines" (Haraway, 1991, p. 153). In doing so, they point out the complexities of identity and invite us to reconsider traditional classifications and categories such as human/machine, male/female, and natural/artificial by prompting discussions about what it means to be human. They also offer critical reflection on the implications of living in a world where boundaries are continuously negotiated and redefined, ultimately enriching forms of existence and living.

Through cyborg images, the notion of unachievable perfection assigned to deities and heroes is also problematized. There are several stories where Gods and great men are depicted in terms of their inferior qualities, weaknesses, faults and wrongdoings and turn into tragic figures who end up in catastrophes as vulnerable, pitiable, and laughable beings. The anthropomorphic and zoomorphic representations of divinities undermine the notions of greatness, perfection, infallibility and

invincibility by blurring the boundaries between the profane and the divine, the mortal and the immortal, the fallible and the infallible. This aligns with the posthumanist call to abandon anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism by uprooting both human beings and divine figures from their centralized and privileged positions, demonstrating that the value status of humanity diminishes with the emergence of posthuman subjects.

As already discussed, in postmodern literature, numerous characters exemplify not only “the deaths of Man, of the Subject” (Bordo, 1992, p. 159) but also the demise of fixed and natural identities, giving rise to discontinuous, indeterminate, subversive, transgressive, and plural bodies. Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and Jeanette Winterson’s *Stone Gods* (2007) serve as specific examples that illustrate bodies and identities paralleling those found in myths. Sophie Fevvers, the main character in Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*, embodies the postmodern notions of the body. She exhibits fluidity, ambiguity, hybridity, and transformation—traits also found in mythological figures. Fevvers claims to have been hatched from an egg, transcending the biological boundaries of existence. Upon reaching puberty, she transforms into a bird-woman with her colorful, magnificent wings sprouting from her shoulders. Her body also defies established norms of beauty and conventional femininity; she is “more like a dray mare than an angel” (Carter, 1993, p. 9), “as large as life” (p. 13), with a face “broad and oval as a meat dish” (p. 9). It is difficult to pin down exactly who Fevvers is, as she is always open to revision and redefinition. Thus, she is ambiguously celebrated as the “lady of the hub of the celestial wheel, creature half of earth and half of air, virgin and whore, reconciler of fundament and firmament, reconciler of opposite states through the mediation of your ambivalent body” (Carter, 1993, p. 81). Her constitution and bodily expressions highlight the lasting influence of mythological constructs on postmodern identity formation.

Other characters in the novel also manifest postmodern bodies. Several anthropomorphized animals, such as The Princess, a dancing tiger, the Professor, an ape, and Sybil, a prophetic pet pig, integrate into human society and communicate in human language. Educated apes, who dress, study, read, and write, exhibit qualities of humanness (Carter, 1993, p. 108). Human and animal traits are not unique to their respective species; rather, they are commonly shared. Thus, human beings display animal qualities, while animals exhibit human characteristics. The postmodern hybridity, diversity and multiplicity of forms can also be observed in Madame Schreck’s museum, filled with freak characters, including “Dear old Fanny the Four Eyes, the Sleeping Beauty, and the Wiltshire Wonder, who was not three feet high, and Albert/Albertina, who was bipartite” (Carter, 1993, p. 66). Due to magical realism, all these bodies exist within the realms of the normal, the ordinary and the possible, rejecting the essentialist and reductionist perspectives.

Similarly, Winterson’s *Stone Gods* (2007) depicts a technologically designed society where the constant reconstructions and modifications of bodies occur through biotechnology, cosmetic surgeries, and genetic modifications. Winterson introduces various posthuman bodies, including Robo Sapiens, a fusion of human and machine that can feel and think, technologically enhanced bodies, queer bodies, and radioactive mutants. Billie/Billy Crusoe and Spike/Spickers, a fe/male robot, exemplify these gender transformations. In both *Nights at the Circus* and *Stone Gods*, characters are defined by “assemblages” that include human/machine, human/animal, and human/monster, resulting in bodies that are neither completely human nor entirely nonhuman by surpassing the limits of biological determinism.

## Conclusion

Myths, by presenting multiple forms of bodies and identities within both inter- and intraspecies realms, pave the way for a postmodern reconsideration and redefinition of what it means to be human, divine, animal, vegetal, or inanimate. The conceptualizations and representations of the body and self in mythology and postmodernism share significant similarities. Both frameworks

challenge the Enlightenment ideals that underpin humanist notions of identity, which typically center on a singular conception of humanity. In both discursive practices, bodies are conceived not merely as biological entities but as products of imagination, highlighting the discontinuities and uncertainties inherent in our existence. Mythological constructions of bodies and identities mirror the postmodern cultural and ideological “inclination towards the unstable, fluid, fragmented, indeterminate, ironic and heterogeneous, [for that] which resists definition, closure and fixity” (Bordo, 1993, p. 38). Multiplicity, plurality and hybridity are highly celebrated in the configurations and performances of bodies and identities which emerge as a result of the mixture of different species. Bodily fusions and mergings, interspecies crossings and transmissibility are fundamental concepts in both mythology and posthumanism. The cross-transitions among human, flora and fauna bring down the hierarchy in the order of existence and the cultural and ideological hegemony of the existing styles for sex/gender and body is delegitimized. When considering these similarities and parallels, one can conclude that myths have significantly influenced the development of postmodern imagination and thought. Human modes of thinking, understanding, and perception have evolved significantly throughout history. This evolution of thought is indicative of shifting experiences and the acquisition of knowledge. Nevertheless, mythic thinking, manifested through storytelling, symbols, and archetypes, persists as a profound aspect of human cognition. Postmodern and posthumanist themes are certainly present in ancient myths since it is not the world itself that is considered postmodern but the way we think and understand, and the attitude towards concepts such as the subject, self, body and identity along with the way they are represented is postmodern. In this sense, postmodernist and posthumanist ideas serve as clear indications that mythic thought and intelligence remain intrinsic to the human mind, shaping our understanding and perception.

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### **Disclosure Statement**

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