



Myths of Modern Individualism: Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan, Robinson Crusoe (Canto original series)

By Ian Watt

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In *Myths of Modern Individualism*, the renowned critic Ian Watt treats Don Juan, Don Quixote, Faust, and Robinson Crusoe as "individualists," pursuing their own views of what they should be. The original Counter Reformation myths saw the individualism of Don Juan, Don Quixote, and Faust as a problem to be quelled by death or mockery. However, the Romantic period, a time more favorably disposed toward myth, saw their dissension not as unacceptable disorder, but rather as admirable and heroic behavior. This incisive study traces attitudes toward these figures and the Romantic product Robinson Crusoe from disapproval to awe to skepticism, examining them as icons of such problems as solitude, narcissism, and the claims of the self versus the claims of the community. Pointedly, none of these figures marries or has a lasting relationship, save for the selfless devotion of a single male servant. Watt argues that the myths of Don Juan, Don Quixote, Faust, and Robinson Crusoe remain the distinctive products of Western society, embodying the most basic values of modern culture.

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Editorial Review

Review

"...in its capaciousness, intelligence, and wit, and in the barren, theory-obsessed and trivial desert of current criticism, it is something of a phenomenon: a triumph of a truly cultured imagination....Watt has crowned his career with a work of scholarship, literary brilliance, and moral urgency. It is, itself, individualistic and nobly humanist. It is what, after all, criticism is supposed to be." Rocky Mountain Review

"...an impressive investigation and elucidation in the fields of comparative literature and mythography. Watt's method is remarkably synthetic, combining formal textual analysis with intellectual history and socioeconomic background. His style is compressed yet clear, precise and painstaking. As revealed in this work. Watt's mind and learning are formidable." Magill's Literary Annual

"...his erudition and breadth of mind are fully evident as he traces these four figures from their origins through their transformations in the Romantic era to their most recent literary incarnations....This is intellectual and literary history at its best. Recommended for all collections." Choice

"Ian Watt occupies a special place among contemporary critics and historians of literature. He practices a 'synthetic' method: that is, he does not choose between the history of ideas, sociological analysis and formal or stylistic understanding. He masters them all. To this he brings a firm and limpid style, often tinged with irony, never contaminated by jargon." The New Republic

"In its way this is as original a work as Watt's famous first book, *The Rise of the Novel*. It is a work of great maturity, testimony to the intelligence and civility of its author." Frank Kermode

"Ian Watt's magisterial *Myths of Modern Individualism* is a critical account--historical, cultural, moral and aesthetic--of how four great Western myths have insinuated themselves into the actualities of modern culture. Like all of Watt's work this is a remarkable work of the historical imagination, sympathetic without being fussy, erudite but always deft, analytic but very warm and witty. This is a book everyone should read." Edward Said

"Where the book shines is in the depth and richness of scores of particular analyses, not only of historical relations and of individual works but of the complex lives of the authors who wrote the works. Watt has dug deep and come up with indispensable revelations about where we come from and where we are now as we 'individuals' grapple with our inescapable complaints about, yet, need for, 'society.'" The Boston Book Review

"This work deserves a wide readership. it is a rich cultural reading of the psychological types that have informed modernity, especially the cult of the individual....This work is a consummate study of the myths of individualism that have informed the personality type of modernity. Recommended." The Reader's Review

"...Watt is to be commended for the erudition and literary insights that inform his treatment of these four shaping myths of our modern individualistic ethic." Michael Shinagel, Harvard Review

"...one could hardly find a more trustworthy guide to their literary history than Watt. He develops all the crucial information about the origins of his four myths, he surveys the literary, religious, political, and social

influences exerted on their first or classic expressions, and he assesses the literary value, not merely the historical importance, of these expressions. His fairness is exemplary, and more than exemplary; he bends over backwards to be fair. One of the jobs that Watt does best is to remind us of certain things that literary historians often fail to mention.... He does attempt to trace the origin and development of a fascinating tendency on modern literature; and he does that admirably." Stephen Cox, Reason Paers

From the Back Cover

In their original versions, the ultimate fates of Faust, Don Quixote, and Don Juan reflect the anti-individualism of their time: Faust and Don Juan are punished in hellfire, and Don Quixote is mocked. The three represent the positive drive of individualism, which brings down on itself repression by social disapproval. A century later, Defoe's Robinson Crusoe embodies a more favorable consideration of the individual, but only if one refuses to take seriously Defoe's statement that Crusoe's isolation is punishment for disobeying his father. In this volume, Ian Watt examines these four myths of the modern world, all created in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, as distinctive products of a historically new society. He shows how the original versions of Faust (1587), Don Quixote (1605), and Don Juan (ca. 1620) presented unflattering portrayals of the three, whereas the Romantic period two centuries later re-created them as admirable and even heroic. Robinson Crusoe (1719) is seen as representative of the new religious, economic, and social attitudes. The four figures reveal the problems of individualism in the modern period: solitude, narcissism, and the claims of the self versus the claims of society. None of them marries or has lasting relations with women; rather, each has as his closest friend a male servant. Mephistopheles, Sancho Panza, Catalinon, and Friday are devoted till the end and happy in their subordinate role - the perfect personal servant. This suggests the self-centeredness of the four figures. Each pursues his own view of what he should be, raising strong questions about his character as a hero and also about the society whose ideals he reflects.

About the Author

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