

at a deeper level, only reinforce them. For example, he takes up Rabelais's mocking comedy and the notion that it encourages a subversion of orthodox norms and values. But Greenblatt argues that Rabelaisian laughter, by releasing aggression in a nonviolent form, admits the impotence of its own gestures of rebellion. "The gesture of insult is at the same time an acknowledgement of defeat," he says; it testifies to the enduring power of what is being mocked. Again, in an essay on Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, he brings out the surprising but deceptive modernity of Marlowe's social analysis by juxtaposing it with Marx's essay "On the Jewish Question." Like Karl Marx, Marlowe uses anti-Semitism to expose the underlying materialism of his society. In his play, the Maltese Christians bait the Jew Barabas, but the Jewishness which they revile exemplifies the market mentality of their own world. "Marlowe never discredits anti-Semitism, but he does discredit early in the play a 'Christian' social concern that might otherwise have been used to counter a specifically Jewish antisocial element." To both Marlowe and Marx, society is cursed by the power of money. The difference is that Marlowe had no expectations that it might ever be better. Indeed, his laughter at utopian solutions is no less harsh than his ridicule of sacred cows. Marlowe's politics were radical, Greenblatt writes, but also radically devoid of hope.

Greenblatt's Renaissance is thus powerfully politicized but also profoundly pessimistic. Because literature is locked so firmly into the structures of its historical moment, there is no way off the ferris wheel, nothing it can achieve beyond constantly if unwillingly testifying to the dominance of the powers that be. Yet this unavailing conclusion surely arises from the method itself. In Greenblattian history not much can be done other than endlessly to recycle social energy.

This ruptured radicalism tells us as much about the situation of academics in the 1990s as it does about Shakespeare's situation in the 1590s. It is certainly not surprising at this juncture to find so subtle and searching a critique of power being combined with so gloomy a conviction that nothing can ever be done about it. Toward the end of this volume, Greenblatt analyzes the political language of present-day America and finds it involved in the same dizzying circulations of power which criticize authority yet ultimately reaffirm it. If the America of Reagan and Bush gives way to possibilities for more profound change, Greenblatt's Shakespeare may, conceivably, be the first citizen to change along with it.

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## OTHER TITLES

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### Arts & Letters

**MYTHOLOGIES.** *Compiled by Yves Bonnefoy. Trans. under the direction of Wendy Doniger. 2 volumes. Univ. of Chicago. 1267 pp. \$250*

Once the surest way to write a bestseller was to write a cookbook. Today it may be to write a

book on mythology—or so the response to Joseph Campbell's *The Power of Myth* (1988), Robert Bly's *Iron John* (1990), and Rollo May's *The Cry for Myth* (1991) seems to suggest. In these works mythology resembles do-it-yourself psychotherapy. The individual is instructed to create his own religion or to "follow his bliss" or to take the hero's voyage through the underworld of his own problems.



This, however, is not the way Bonnefoy, a poet and professor at the Collège de France, presents his subject. *Mythologies* is less about the relations of individuals to myths (sacred narratives) than about the relationship between societies and the mythologies (systems of myths) that sustain them. Nor do any

of the 395 articles collected here retell the familiar legends that once formed part of our cultural literacy. As Wendy Doniger, who supervised the translation, writes, "One has Robert Graves for that."

In essays that range from Africa to Lapland, from the Americas to the Near East, the interest is as much in methodology as in mythology—in, as Doniger says, "how to understand a mythology, what questions to ask, what patterns to look for." Indeed, behind the work of the nearly 100 contributors (including anthropologists, archaeologists, historians, linguists, and philosophers) lies the shadow of two figures not present: Georges Dumézil (1898–1986) and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–). Dumézil and Lévi-Strauss overturned an earlier understanding of myth, shaped by Sir James Frazer and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. This older view presented mythology as a primitive mode of thinking, left behind as societies evolved and became "modern." Lévi-Strauss argued that so-called primitive and modern beliefs do not differ structurally but represent alternative ways of organizing family kinships, social life, and material production. Dumézil proposed that the almost infinite variety in mythology could be reduced to a small number of myths arranged in different combinations and that these myths reflect the laws of human mental activity in society.

*Mythologies* shows what happens when a younger generation of scholars apply Dumézil and Lévi-Strauss to a dazzling array of topics, ranging from the placenta in West African rituals to the significance of the number seven among the indigenous Indo-Chinese. Yet when the Swiss scholar Jean Molino discusses nationalism and socialism as mythic thinking "in

which it is no longer gods but ideas that guide," then our own supposedly demythologized "modernity" suddenly looks like a mythological creation. As Bonnefoy observes, "Myths are never recognized for what they are, except when they belong to others."

**GOETHE: The Poet and His Age. Volume I: The Poetry of Desire (1749–1790).** By Nicholas Boyle. Oxford. 807 pp. \$37.50

Poet, dramatist, novelist, painter, scientist, administrator—Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749–1832) has long enjoyed the reputation of an Olympian, the calm, lofty embodiment of an age that bears his name: the *Goethezeit*. But, Boyle, a professor of German at Cambridge University, reminds us of the turbulence that Goethe lived through in order to attain such classical composure. A child of the prosperous Frankfurt bourgeoisie, born almost a half-century before the French Revolution, Goethe would live to see every known certainty stood on its head. In a famous essay, "In Search of Goethe from Within" (1932), the philosopher José Ortega y Gasset argued that changing mores and social uncertainties propelled Goethe into ceaseless travel, literary experiments, and various occupations in order to find a sense of identity that always inwardly eluded him.

Goethe studied law at Leipzig and Strasbourg while earning a small reputation as a lyric poet. Then, at age 24, he became nationally famous with the publication of his play *Götz von Berlichingen* (1773), which boasts one of the most quoted lines in German literature—Götz's defiant message to the Emperor to "lick his arse." Twelve months later he published the *Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), the first modern novel about an alienated youth. Overnight, Goethe became an international sensation. The Werther cult inspired countless Werther-style suicides throughout Europe as well as porcelain services decorated with scenes from the novel.

In 1775, to prove that the poet could influence events, Goethe accepted an appointment at the Duke of Saxe-Weimar's court. He soon became the second most powerful man in Weimar. The historian Herder jealously observed, "So he is now Permanent Privy Councillor,