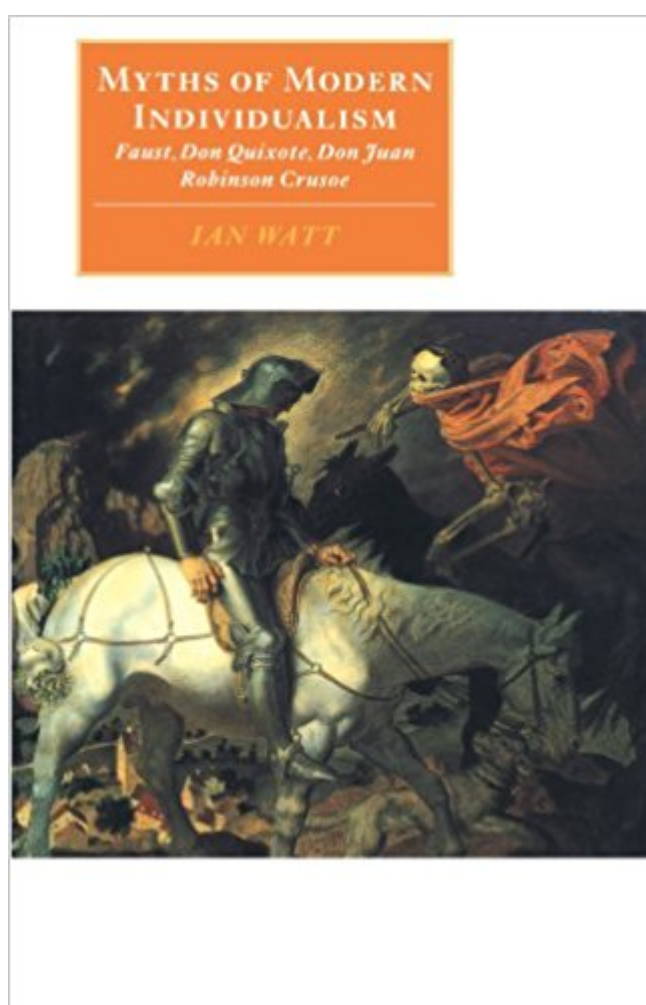


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Myths Of Modern Individualism: Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan, Robinson Crusoe (Canto Original Series)



Synopsis

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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"...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

In this volume, Ian Watt examines the myths of Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan and Robinson Crusoe, as the distinctive products of modern society. The four figures help to reveal the problems of individualism in the modern period: solitude, narcissism, and the claims of the self versus the claims of society. They all pursue their own view of what they should be, raising strong questions about their heroes' character and the societies whose ideals they reflect.

Watt examines four famous characters from Western literature who have been reincarnated numerous times: Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan, and Robinson Crusoe. He treats each individually in the first half of the book, and makes comparisons and discusses recent reworkings in the second half. The depth and breadth of Watt's knowledge of his four myths is readily apparent. Still, though, it's an easy read, intended perhaps for the non-expert. Even if you haven't read the original works yourself, it's easy to follow. The book hints at provocative issues in the creation and meaning of myth as well as "individualism," though Watt's theoretical musings aren't as rewarding or complete as his close analysis of the four figures. The work of history and translation on the transformation of myth is a fascinating subject, but Watt's book suggests far more questions than it answers.

The book, while very specific, read more like a scholarly text and less like one for someone new to these tales. Difficult to understand without an in-depth prior knowledge of scholarly dialogue and vocabulary, this text will stay on my shelf- but not on my reading list. It was too academic for a fast read, but would make an excellent read for a graduate student studying these texts.

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