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## CHRISTIANIZATION OF MUSE IN A. COWLEY'S POETRY

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**Summary:** *The article focuses on the role of Pagan Muse in Cowley's epic poetry. The article concerns the convention of beginning a poem by first invoking the Muse and the conflict that emerges between her pagan and Christian characteristics.*

**Keywords:** *invocation, Pagan Muse, narrative, digression, Christianization.*

The objective of this article is to analyze epic invocations and the role of Pagan Muse in the Christian poetry of Abraham Cowley, (born 1618, London—died July 28, 1667, Chertsey, Eng.), Milton's predecessor. Cowley's poetry contributed to the Classical epic tradition in England and paved the way to the epic "Paradise Lost" by Milton. In all times any poet needs the inspiration of the Muse, the source of eloquent human speech whose graceful style influenced and directed poets' career.

In this article the conversion of the pagan Muse to Christianity is examined. In seventeenth-century England the pagan gods remained strong; they survived during the Middle Ages because they had never disappeared from collective memory of imagination.

While Muses had maintained their vitality during the Middle Ages through syncretic readings of pagan mythology, they had come to be regarded by many poets as clichés. Religious poetry written by Cowley explicitly asserts that invocations to the

Muses either need to reject the pagan past or to convert it to Christianity. It was Cowley who aspired to write the first neo-classical epic in English. Cowley soon realized from his own study of the classics as well as from Renaissance commentaries upon epic poetry that he must invoke the Muse to begin. Cowley's solution was to turn the pagan Muse into a Christian Muse [4]. He attempts to do this in the *Davideis* (1656) by invoking Christ as Muse and then by offering his Muse to Christ as a Magdalene, a redeemed whore, to his service. Besides his hostility towards the pagan gods, Cowley's presentation of his Christian muse as redeemed whore suggests his discomfort with the Muse's feminine attributes. Cowley adopts a Puritan position here, insisting that the Muse can either be a disciple of Christ or a whore. Abraham Cowley fails to complete the epic *Davideis*.

This article will explore the crisis of the pagan Muse in the poetry of Cowley. In order to understand the transformations of the Muse in seventeenth-century England, this article will explore the crisis of the pagan Muse in the poetry of Cowley.

During the English Civil War, Commonwealth, and Restoration, a religious crisis becomes a political and military crisis. What is the relationship between a Christian nation and its classical and pagan past? How can one make a pagan Muse viable in Christian literature? The Royalists establish a Christian nation that is connected to a classical past, while the Puritans reject that idea of a classical and pagan past as they attempt to work God's purpose out in the world. Cowley was a Royalist and his more famous contemporary Milton was the Puritan. Both poets attempt to answer these questions by turning to a public genre concerned with national origin and definition – the classical epic. Milton's universal Christian epic *Paradise Lost* is more famous and has been analyzed by many critics. Cowley's *Davideis* didn't attract so much attention. But his contribution to the rebirth and transformation of the classical epic should not be underestimated.

In order to explore the complex relationship between poetic form and political crisis two methods are used – poetic interpretation and new historicism. Seventeenth-century poets use and transform classical conventions by reconciling their religious beliefs with their classical education.

The Bible provides most people's example of the natural beginning, the Genesis of the world, while classical Homer's *Iliad* provides an example of an interventionist opening in the middle of the Trojan War, which started due to Achilles' wrath.

On a literary level this study concerns the convention of beginning a poem by first invoking the Muse and the conflict that emerges between her pagan and Christian characteristics. The classical Muses – Calliope, Clio, Erato, Euterpe, Melpomene, Polyhymnia, Terpsichore, Thalia, and Urania – served respectively as the deities of epic poetry, history, love poetry, lyric poetry, tragedy, songs of praise to the gods, dancing, comedy, and astronomy, and were generally recognized as the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne (or Memory). In Antiquity their role and the canonical number of nine come from *Theogony*, in which the Muses approach the poet on Mount Helicon, the Muses give their chosen bard insights into the past and into the future.

The Muse's function in epic poetry expands considerably from Homer to Vergil. Vergil does not simply call upon the Muse for memory but more importantly to highlight transitions in the narrative.



With the advent of Christianity and the decline of paganism, Christian writers become increasingly critical of the Muses. In fact, the rejection of the Muses in Christian poetry a theme in itself. Many religious poets invoke the Holy Spirit, Christ, or God. Perhaps the most famous example of the rejection of the Muses comes in the work of Boethius (c.480-524 A.D.) *In De Consolatione* 1 prose 1, Lady Philosophy banishes the Muses of poetry: "When she saw that the Muses of poetry were present by my couch giving words to my lamenting, she was stirred a while; her eyes flashed fiercely, and said she, 'Who has suffered these seducing mummers to approach this sick man? Never do they support those in sorrow by any healing remedies, but rather do ever foster the sorrow by poisonous sweets. These are they who stifle the fruit-bearing harvest of reason with the barren briars of the passions: they free not the minds of men from disease, but accustom them thereto. I would think it less grievous if your allurements drew away from me some uninitiated man, as happens in the vulgar herd. In such an one my labours would be naught harmed, but this man has been nourished in the lore of Eleatics and Academics; and to him have ye reached? Away with you, Sirens, seductive unto destruction! leave him to my Muses to be cared for and to be healed" [1, pp. 8-9].

Nevertheless, the Muses remain connected with the epic form, and literary critics of the Renaissance continue to affirm the importance of beginning epic poems with an invocation to the Muse or some celestial power to guide the poet in his writings [5].

Cowley began his epic, *Davideis, a Sacred Poem of the Troubles of David* (1656), at Trinity College, Cambridge in about 1638, and expanded it in later years, without completing more than four of the projected twelve books. *Davideis* is the first neoclassical religious epic in English. Cowley's zeal for purging poetry of pagan influence reveals itself in the choice of Muse for his epic. So who is Cowley's Muse? To what extent does Cowley's Muse help him restore poetry to the kingdom of God? Does Cowley successfully convert the Muse from paganism to Christianity? Can a Muse ever really be Christian? To answer these questions we must first turn to the invocation to Book I and Cowley's notes upon the poem and his choice of names. In the manner of Vergil with an assertive "I sing", before calling upon any kind of divine aid to help him narrate the events of the epic or to provide him with the poem itself.

I sing the man who Judahs scepter bore,  
In that right hand which held the crook before.  
Who from best poet, best of kings did grow,  
The two chief gifts heav'n could on Man bestow.  
Much danger first, much toil did he sustain, 5  
Whilst Saul and Hell crost his strong fate in vain.  
Nor did his crown less painful work afford,  
Less exercise his patience or his sword,  
So long her conqu'ror Fortunes spight pursu'ed,  
Till with unwearied virtue he subdue'd 10  
All homebred malice, and all foreign boasts.  
Their strength was armies, his the Lord of Hosts [2].

Cowley focuses upon his hero's authority and origins: David, once a shepherd (symbolized by the "Sceptre"). Moreover, Cowley calls attention to David's outstanding

achievements (his Renaissance *virtue* or Hellenic *arête*) as best Poet and as the best of Kings, / The two chief gifts Heav'n could on man bestow." Although presented as the "gifts" of God, David's excellence in both vocations reflects the Homeric and Aristotelian ideal of a man who is a "very God among men." Though not literally a God among men, Cowley's David possesses "unwearied *Virtue*" given to him by God fight against God's enemies "*Saul (in the Bible the first king of Israel) and Hell*" and reestablish his people and their God in Judah. Cowley's proposition, which looks ahead to David's struggles and to his eventual triumph, concludes fittingly by contrasting false with true sources of inspiration and power: "Their strength (Saul's and Satan's) was *Armies*, his (David's) the *Lord of Hosts*." Thus before calling upon his heavenly Muse, Cowley states that David's God is the true God, and the source of power. Then Cowley invokes the Muse, however this Muse differs considerably from Erato (the Muse of lyric poetry and hymns) and Calliope (the Muse of epic poetry). Cowley addresses *him* as the Father, progenitor of Abraham and David, and as the Son of God, who died upon the cross the salvation of humanity. In doing so, Cowley ascribes all creative and redemptive powers to God. The body of invocation, from epithets to specific petitions, reveals Cowley's conscious transformation of the pagan Muse from classical convention to Christian *logos*. The following section, lines 13-24, presents a consistent view of the Muse as the Christian Godhead, culminating in a strikingly visual and iconographic depiction of Christ's passion:

Thou who didst Davids royal stem adorn,  
And gav'st him birth from whom Thyself was't born,  
Who didst in triumph at Deaths court appear, 15  
And slew'st him with Thy nails, Thy cross and spear,  
While Hells black tyrant trembled to behold  
The glorious light he forfeited of old,  
Who, heav'ens glad burden now, and justest pride,  
Sits high enthron'ed next Thy great Fathers side, 20  
(Where hallowed flames help to adorn that head  
Which once the blushing thorns invironed,  
Till crimson drops of pretious blood hung down  
Like rubies to enrich Thine humble crown) [2].

Rather than addressing one of the sacred daughters of Memory, Cowley calls upon God, the Father of David's line, the Creator of the universe, and the Son, who with his sacrifice conquered death and sin. In all forms, Cowley's Christian Muse is male, not a female. The poet appeals directly to the source of inspiration to write his biblical epic. In his invocation Cowley remains true to his desire to baptize Poetry in the water of Jordan. In providing the reader with David's genealogy, Cowley shows the path to salvation and eternal peace to people.

The culmination of the epic is the poet's vision of Christ on the cross, marking the end of Old Testament and the beginning of Christ's new commandments. In this episode Cowley meditates upon the wounds of Jesus Christ and compares Christ's blood with rubies in a Baroque manner.

Cowley shifts from Muse as icon to Muse as poetic inspiration leading the poet to his personal Promised Land – a career as God's sacred poet. At this point, Cowley's Muse turns from God himself, then religious icon, to a more conventional female identity blended with Old and New Testament imagery:



Ev'en Thou my breast with such blest rage inspire, 25  
Guid my bold steps with Thine old trav'elling flame,  
In these untrodden paths to sacred fame.  
Lo, with pure hands Thy heav'nly fires to take,  
My well-chang'd Muse I a chaste vestal make!  
From earths vain joys and loves soft witchcraft free, 30  
I consecrate my Magdalene to Thee.  
Lo, this great work, a temple to thy praise,  
On polisht pillars of strong verse I raise!  
A temple, where if Thou vouchsafe to dwell,  
It Solomons and Herods shall excel. 35  
Too long the Muses lands have heathen bin,  
Their gods too long were dev'ls, and vertues sin.  
But Thou, eternal Word, hast call'ed forth mee,  
Th' apostle, to convert that world to Thee,  
T' unbind the charms that in slight fables lie, 40  
And teach that truth is truest poesie [2].

Cowley's initial image of God – the Muse- as a pillar of fire leading his chosen people out of the wilderness seems consistent with the poet's desire to Christianize his poetry, as does his own desire “with pure hands thy heavenly Fires to take”. However, having first invoked the Muse as Christ in line, he then dedicates his Muse (not Christ?) to Christ: “I consecrate my *Magdalene* to Thee.” This Cowley's odd logic was noticed by many critics [3, p. 98]. Suddenly, Cowley's Muse changes from Christ to Magdalene, from male to female Muse. As Magdalene, Cowley's Muse embodies the poet's purpose – to redeem the classical Muse (a whore to paganism) by converting her to Christianity (now a follower to Christ). Cowley presents his Muse as a convert and as an image for the Christianizing of the Muse. But at the same time Cowley shows uncertainty about the nature of his poetic inspiration. Sacred Fame seems to be a problem for Cowley; on the one hand he wants to acknowledge God as the fountain of all creation by replacing the pagan Muse but on the other hand he wants to be God's apostle and convert the Muse. He wants to present his “well-changed Muse” to God as a “chaste vestal”. And that would be Cowley's work, not the work of God or Holy Spirit.

Is God Cowley's Muse? Suddenly the Muse is female again, and closer to the conventional model, but dressed up in biblical clothing. By shifting from Christ to Magdalene as Muse, Cowley transfers the origin of the poem from God to poet. Cowley is concerned with purifying the sullied Muse: she was a whore, but in her Christian form she is now a “chaste Vestal.” Cowley seems to assert that he has made the Muse pure for God; she is now Magdalene, a whore turned into a faithful disciple of Christ. Cowley views his poetic creation, the  *Davideis* , as a “great work” by virtue of its purer source in God's “Heavenly Fires”.

The final lines of the invocation to the “well-changed Muse” embody Cowley's poetic theory concerning pagan elements in Christian poetry. Cowley replaces classical with Christian values and distinguishes between the true and false. Furthermore, Cowley asserts his own relationship to God, calling himself Apostle and defining his didactic purpose: “To unbind the charms that in slight fables lie, /And teach that truth is truest poesie”.

Cowley takes his own vocation as seriously as his dedication to Christianizing poetry. But his Muse is not so convincingly Christianized since the Muse still keeps her classical heritage. Cowley both employs and rejects classical epic conventions, for example in Book I Cowley invokes the Muse in order to begin the digression of Music:

Tell me, o Muse (for thou or none can'st tell 440  
The mystick pow'rs that in best numbers dwell,  
Thou their great naure know'st, nor is it fit  
This noble gem of thine own crown t' omit).  
Tell me from whence these heav'nly charms arise,  
Teach the dull world t' admire what they despise. 445  
At first a various unform'd hint we find  
Rise in some god-like poets fertile mind,  
Till all the parts and words their places take,  
And with just marches verse and musick make.  
Such was Gods poem, this worlds new essay, 450  
So wild and rude in its first draught it lay.  
Th' ungovern'd parts no correspondence knew,  
An artless war from thwarting motions grew,  
Till they to number and fixt rules were brought  
By the aeternal Minds poetick thought. 455 [2].

The invocation to the Muse and the introduction of the subject of Music is conventional. Then Cowley comes to the conclusion that God creating the Universe is behaving like a poet, and the world is God's poem. Cowley compares the rhetorical canon of invention to God's creation of the world: In the beginning was the Word. Where there was once chaos and darkness, now there is a Hint, which grows into a harmonious creation. While Cowley implies that he is unworthy of so great task and still dependent upon the Heavenly Muse for inspiration, his parallel between the mind of the poet and the mind of God is arrogant. In the first invocation Cowley attempted to convert the Muse to Christianity and in the second merely transmits from the narrative to a digression.

*Davidies* is only the beginning, not a finished epic. But we should not underscore Cowley's role as innovator. Cowley did not write the great Christian epic in English but for Cowley's contribution, Milton would not have created *Paradise Lost* that inaugurated the Classical epic tradition in England and embodied and defined it for generation to come.

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**Анотація:** *В статті аналізується роль музи давньогрецької міфології в поезії А.Каулі.*

*Мета статті - дослідити роль традиційного звертання до музи в поезії та конфлікт, який виникає під час християнізації поганської музи.*

**Ключові слова:** *звертання до музи, муза в давньогрецькій міфології, наратив, ліричний відступ, християнізація.*