

## Traces of the Myth of Io and Argos in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*

Appreciations of the layering of classical myth in *Vertigo*--a film Alfred Hitchcock directed in 1958 and set in 1950s San Francisco--have focused on the stories of Orpheus and Eurydice (Brown-1986) or Pygmalion (James-2011). The movie features further mythemes, however, and this paper explores its tracings of the story of Io and Argos as featured in Hesiod, Aeschylus, and Ovid.

In a story of Archaic period pedigree, Io is an Argive naiad raped by Zeus and then transformed into a heifer to conceal the event from his wife Hera. Hera places her monstrously eyed shepherd, Argos, to guard the apparent cow as a member of her sacred herd. After Zeus sends Hermes to behead Argos, the scourge-impelled Io finally completes in Egypt a madness-marked sojourn of parts of Europe and Asia. Returned to human form, Io gives birth to Epaphus, ancestor of a future noble line that includes Perseus and Heracles, and she assumes divinity as Isis. The story was popular in Greek and Roman literature and iconography (Icard-Giarolia-1981-1999) and in Western fine art (Reid-1993).

As discussed so by Walter Burkert (Burkert-1983), Hesiod's use of the story deploys the mythic motif of character doubles to symbolize the ritualism of kingship succession, for the murder of Argos (doublet of the Argive king) further manifests Zeus' growing authority after his overthrow of Kronos. *Vertigo* is replete with doublet motifs (part of the filmmaker's German Expressionism legacy) and includes a related rivalry motif in Scottie's (James Stewart) desire for the wealthy and beautiful Madeleine, whose family fortune, princess-like, bestowed on Gavin Elster (Tom Helmore) a coveted elite social status. In Athenian tragedy, Aeschylus' portrayals of Io operate on two layers: girls' rites of passage (Dowden-1989 and Katz-1999) and Greek

colonization (Davison-1991). *Vertigo* too includes the theme of girl-to-woman transition (Judy's [Kim Novak] doubled assumption of the older Madeleine persona) and the topic of colonization (the Spanish-then-American annexation of California, as linked to the two mission locales).

Ovid treats the Io and Argus story in Book One of the *Metamorphoses* in ways that broadly parallel Hitchcock's themes of deception and infidelity, identity transformation, madness, male sexual obsession and control, storytelling, violence, voyeurism and spectacle, and wandering.

Character parallels between the myth and the film are found in Elster suggesting Zeus; Judy evoking both Io and Hermes; Midge (Barbara Bel Geddes) corresponding with Hera; and Scottie tracing Argos. Finally, the motifs of the beheading of Argos and Hera's picking out the eyes from his body to adorn the train of her multicolored peacock find consonance in the production's expressive art design, specifically in the use of floating head shots during sequences whose shared color schemes are garish and even peacock-evoking—a possible sign of Hitchcock's visual influences from fine art to conceive his cinematic narratives (e.g., Rubens' brightly colored *Juno and Argos* [1610]).

The story of Io and Argus defines an important but unexplored archetype in *Vertigo*, and exploration of this material further advances the broadening picture of Hitchcock's reliance on antique narrative for his cinematic inspirations (Padilla-2016).

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