

Dial M for Myth: Early Alfred Hitchcock and Greek Myth

Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980) is an important director of the 20th century, the filmmaker of important films such as *Rear Window* (1954), *Vertigo* (1958), and *Psycho* (1960). Classical themes have been observed in a few of his films, such as the Orpheus pattern in *Vertigo*, a reference in the film's source novel. But overall mythic analysis has assumed a tradition versus reception perspective.

This paper argues that Hitchcock's maturation in the neoclassical culture of Edwardian London and his Catholic school work, which included study of Latin and possibly Greek, means that he entered full-time studio work in 1920 familiar with antiquity. Because he rises quickly from title card designer to director, by 1926, it remains fair to ask how his films suggest unappreciated markings of this background. The legacy of Hitchcock as neoclassical, whether to assist the classics classroom or provide topics in scholarship, would expand the continuing work on cinematic antiquity, beginning in the 1970s (Solomon) and 1980s (McDonald), picking up in the 1990s (Wyke), and advancing since 2000 (Cyrino, Paul, Roisman, Theodorakopoulos, Winkler, et al.).

The case for the neoclassical Hitchcock is made in two ways. First, as just noted, the Irish-English Hitchcock grew up in the classical and neoclassical intensity of late Victorian and Edwardian England, where he attended St. Ignatius College (a Jesuit college prep) as a young teen. Using, then, the sociological analysis of Christopher Stray, about the role of school classicism in British culture, and also locating the Hitchcock family in the squeezed middle class of the period (between the Labour Party's growing influence and elites), the picture emerges of a mercantile-class young man who would trade on his school classicism to influence his social betters in the emerging North London studio sites.

While it is tempting to jump to a well-known film from his 1930s British or Hollywood years, a clear instance of how “mythical thinking” found expression in these early years is available in his 1928 pastoral comedy, the silent *The Farmer’s Wife* (1928). Based on a same-named and long-running play in London (1910s and early 1920s), set in Dartmoor-region village life, the film successfully deviates from its source by means of a borrowing from classical myth. The story involves Farmer Samuel Sweetland whose wife has passed away. After a hiatus during which his daughter is married, he seeks a second spouse. Sam is a gauche man whose initial list of “three possibles” leads to plenty of comic business as he insults one after another and utterly fails as a suitor. A fourth possible provides some final antics before he realizes that his housekeeper, the loyal and positive Minta, is his ideal mate.