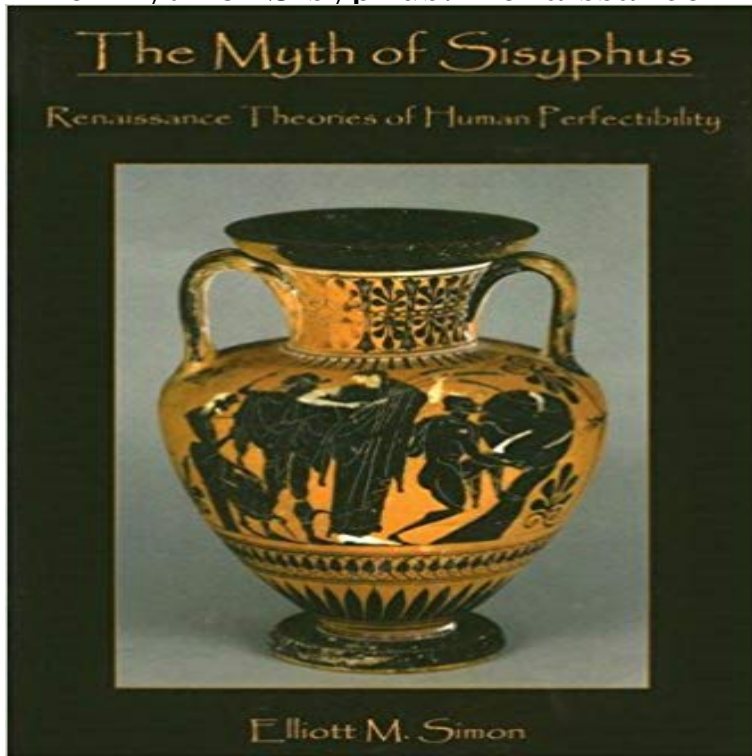


The Myth of Sisyphus: Renaissance Theories of Human Perfectibility



The myth of Sisyphus symbolizes the idealization of human excellence as a perpetual process of becoming over the impossibility of absolute achievement. In Stoic philosophy, the writing of the Early Church Fathers, and in its allegorical interpretations in medieval and renaissance mythologies, Sisyphus is the archetypal model of human perfectibility. This Sisyphian archetype is a principal theme in renaissance theories of astral magic in the works of Pico, Ficino, Reuchlin, Paracelsus, Agrippa, and Dee. It is prominent in humanist theories of eugenic education from Petrarch to Erasmus, Melanchthon, and Ascham, and in utopian thought from More to Bacon. Sisyphus illuminates the sacred mysteries of life in the works of Philo Judaeus, Plato, Nicholas Cusanus, and Ficino; the spiritual and sensual contraries of love in the dialogues of Leone Ebreo, Bembo, and Bruno; and the tribulations of the unrequited lover in the works of Petrarch, Ronsard, and Sidney. For Malory, Castiglione, and Spenser, Sisyphus symbolizes the elusive idealism of the aristocratic hero. Elliott Simon teaches English literature in the Department of English at the University of Haifa.

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