

The Analysis of the Influence of Greek and Roman Myths on European Culture

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Abstract

The paper makes a brief overview on ancient Greek and Roman myths, sketching an overall outline about these mythical stories to us. Then, it analyzes the influence that the ancient Greek and Roman myths exerted upon the European culture in the sequence of historical period. All these indicate the broadening and deepening of the influence.

Keywords

Greek Myths; Roman Myths; European Culture.

1. Summary of Ancient Greek and Roman Myths

The period of ancient Greek and Rome was the budding stage in the development of human civilization. People in that period were weak in the struggle with nature. Facing the phenomenon of nature, the ancient Greeks and Romans were deeply confused and felt unsafe. So they speculated on the nature by their own imagination, imaging that there existed an omnipotent God to help them conquer the nature. In Greek's imagination, the powerful natural phenomena were visualized and the figures of characters with legend were admired and idealized. Thus, the myths came into being. To sacrifice for God, the ancient Greeks built altars and temples. When they met with difficulties that couldn't be solved, they would go to beg for the prophecy so they could foresee the near future. On some special days, they would hold celebrations to sacrifice for the God. The ancient Greeks worshipped not only God but also heroes, so some heroes were placed in the form of God. They also worshipped their ancestors, regarding the sacrificing for the ancestors and burying the dead as a kind of holy responsibility. All these religious beliefs and concepts of ethic morality deeply impressed in the arts of literature in Greece and the following period.

The ancient Greek and Roman myths were the most systematic and integrated one in the system of western mythology. "It mainly consists of two parts: tales of God and sagas of heroes. Tales of God are composed of the genesis—the creation of the world, the beginning, pedigree, replacement, and daily life of God"[1]. The ancient Greeks were pantheists. They believed that every phenomenon in the natural world had an impact of God. Since illuminati Prometheus made man out of dust, Gods from Olympus have been the ruler of the whole world. Zeus was the king of Olympus Mons, king of the world and common father of human being and God. His elder sister, Queen of Heaven—Hera was in charge of marriage and family. His brother Poseidon was the God of sea. Hades was the God of Netherworld. Of his offsprings, Apollo was the God of sun, Artemis—God of moon, Ares—God of war and Aphrodite—God of love, etc. The God's ruling led by Zeus was just like an epitome of human society. Not only in the aspect of political system, but also in the aspect of social life the Greek Gods were rather similar to human beings. They were like men, having feelings, love and hatred. And they were not short of vanity and jealousy that human being possessed. In God's tales, illuminati Prometheus played an important role. As men's friend, not only did he help men revolt against God's ruling, but also stole the fire from the heaven, making an important contribution to the development of human being. He hence suffered from penalty, severely punished by Zeus. But Prometheus won the

battle in the end. His behavior essentially reflected the power and spirit of revolting against the oppression and might in secular life. A large proportion of ancient Greek myths were about the sagas of heroes. The heroes were always the descendants of God and human being. They were adventurers with bravery and wisdom, men of developing the human civilization, fighters of killing monsters, and initiators of famous great families. Among them were Perseus who killed Medusa, Jason who searched for golden fleece, tragical Heracles, and Theseus who fought for his people etc. Among these heroes, Heracles—Zeus' son, was one of the most welcomed one. When he was still in the cradle, with his two hands he killed two poisonous snakes intending to kill him. His twelve exploits he committed when he grew up made him even more popular. He refused the temptation of pleasure and chose a way of defeating difficulties and creating happiness for men. He killed lions and dragons, beating Medusa and saving Theseus from the hands of God of Netherworld. The king of Oedipus can be seen as a hero of tragedy. Princess of Thebes—Oedipus exiled himself to avoid the fate of killing his father and marrying his mother uncovered by the oracles. But he still could not get rid of his own fate. Finally he stabbed his own two eyes, exiled himself, and found his own end in the darkness. The story of the king of Oedipus was moving and everyone who knew it would sigh over it. A man who wants to get rid of tragically fate cannot get rid of it of his own in the end. The king of Oedipus morally won in the end. The legends of heroes looked back in essence their far-early ancestors and extraordinary leaders[2-6]. Those heroes led the people to fight with God and nature in bad natural conditions and it thoroughly revealed the power of man and man's struggling spirit.

2. The Aspect of Worldiness of Ancient Greek Myths

The ancient Greek and Roman myths did not appear in a short period of time, on the contrary, it covered a long history of development. In the early period, the natural property on God was relatively apparent. Hydra was a snake with nine heads living in the swamp, among which one head was even immortal. It was fierce and frightening, ruling over the people. On hearing this, Heracles came. With his nephew's help, he burnt most of the newborn snake heads with burning branches. Finally he cut off Hydra's immortal head with his sword, cut the body of the snake into two pieces, and saved the people. With the passing of the time and the development of the production, more characteristics of social property were represented on God. On the Olympus Mons, Zeus was absolutely the number one. He often did whatever he wanted, ignoring the feelings of other Gods and showing his strong desire of despotism. He was said to be the executor of despotism, a tyrant and a dictator. However, there was a God against him. Prometheus stole the fire of heaven to the earth at the risk of his own life. He taught people to build houses, treated diseases and became men's friend. Prometheus fought against the dictatorship of Zeus. To some extent Prometheus' struggle against the system of dictatorship reflected that the sense of democracy had infiltrated into his body and soul.

Myths endowed human being with endless power of imagination. It can be considered as the rich soil of literature. Taking this as his subject, Homer created his far-reaching literary works—Homeric Epic. Among which, Iliad was a story based on the war of Troy; Odyssey described the adventures that Odysseus went through on the way back home after the war of Troy. Although the story was full of adventurous events, it was still tranquil and graceful. The Goddess of dispute was not welcomed on the Olympus Mons, because she was a trouble-maker. One day, Achilles' parents forgot Elis—the Goddess of dispute when they got married. She threw a golden apple at the marriage feast out of anger. On the apple a line of words was carved: For the Fairest. Three of the beautiful goddesses—Hera, Aphrodite and Athena all eagerly wanted it. Finally Zeus asked them to find Prince of Troy—Paris to make a judgment. Paris had a similar life experience with king of Oedipus. He was discarded by his parents to avoid the oracle, but was nursed and saved by a female bear. Hera promised him to be the greatest monarch, ruling over

the richest country in the world; Athena promised him to possess the unprecedented power; Aphrodite promised that she would marry him the most beautiful woman as his wife. Paris made his judgment that the golden apple belonged to Aphrodite. Later, when Paris was sent to Sparta on a diplomatic mission, he fell in love with Helen—the wife of king of Sparta. He summoned his warriors to attack the palace of the king of Sparta, robbed his treasures and jewels and seized the Queen Helen. Till now, “the golden apple” was to become an “apple of discord”. Paris’ behavior immediately enraged king of Sparta—Menelaus and his brother Agamemnon. They asked all the Greek armies to fight against Troy. On the point of going on a punitive expedition, the daughter of Agamemnon Iphigenia went towards the altar with ease: because of Helen, the beauty of woman has caused killing and war. You should not kill for me. If I can, let me save Greece. Iphigenia’s self-sacrificing words encouraged the brave Greek soldiers. But, on the point of sacrificing, the Goddess of moon showed her sympathy and took the girl away and made her a priest in her own temple. Instead, a female deer was used to replace Iphigenia. The Trojan war was in fact a war of robbery under the guise of myths. It mainly depicted the things that happened during the couple of days before the war ended. During the war, the chief commander—Agamemnon used his power, always full of presumption and rampancy and wanting the lion’s share. He kept the priest’s daughter ignoring his request, which resulted in the outbreak of the epidemic. The general Achilles stepped forward to persuade but was reviled. Agamemnon returned the priest’s daughter in the end but seized a maid from Achilles as compensation. Achilles was angry and withdrew from the battle. The Greek allied army was defeated step by step under the leadership of Agamemnon, and even Achilles’ good friend Patroclus was killed by the enemy. On hearing the death of his good friend, Achilles was extremely grieved. He definitely abandoned the past grudge, walked into the battlefield and finally reversed the whole situation of the war. The Greek allied army won in the end. Achilles was the son of God and man. His anger towards Agamemnon reflected his sense of righteousness and sense of honor. As his mother had foreseen, he died in the battlefield instead of sleeping in tenderness. Hector on the Trojan side was like Achilles. He regarded the death for his own country as his sovereign honor. He forefelt that Troy was likely to ruin, but he looked down upon his own death. To defend his own country, he would die willingly. "Surely I take thought for all these things, my wife; but I have very sore shame of the Trojans and Trojan dames with trailing robes, if like a coward I shrink away from battle. Moreover, mine own soul forbidden me, seeing I have learnt ever to be valiant and fight in the forefront of the Trojans, winning my father’s great glory and mine own." "Andromache! My soul’s far better part ... no force can then resist, no flight can save; all sink alike, the fearful and the brave ... Me glory summons to the martial scene, the field of combat is the sphere for men. Where heroes war, the foremost place I claim, the first in danger, as the first in fame"[7] . He bade farewell to his wife Andromache, regardless of his father’s persuasion, and died in the battlefield in the end. The sovereign honor belonged not only to the general Achilles of the Greek allied army but also to the Trojan general Hector. The seige warfare was extremely hard. At this moment, Odysseus advised to build Trojan horse, with soldiers hiding in it, and pretended to withdraw. The Trojans were trapped. They opened the city gate and carried the horse back as war spoils. When the Trojans were holding a feast to celebrate at night, the soldiers in the horse opened the city gate and conquered the city of Troy. The Greek allied army won the victory in the end and the city of Troy was in ruins. After the Trojan war, the Greek heroes safely escaping from the battlefield and the storm on the way home all returned to their own countries one after another. Only Odysseus did not come home. He offended the God of sea—Poseidon and for this he paid the price of ten years on the sea drifting. During the voyage of Odysseus and others, the strong wind blew them to Island of Neverland. Some soldiers eating the lotos soon forgot their own task and mission, their hometown and only wanted to stay there. Odysseus and others soon left the coast and arrived where Cyclopes lived. In a cave, some of their companions were devoured.

Using his own wisdom, Odysseus defeated the one-eyed monster—Polyphemus with “nobody” strategy. The lonely ship voyaged on the sea. They arrived a small island where the daughter of Apollo lived. Odysseus’ companions were all changed into pigs and banned in the swinery. With the help of God of message—Hermes, Odysseus broke Kirke’s spell and helped his companions back into human being. According to Kirke’s guidance, Odysseus came down to the netherworld. And there he saw the souls of his mother, Agamemnon, Achilles and Ajax. After returning to Kirke’s island, Odysseus and others set off again. They escaped away from the Sirens and other kinds of sea monsters. Later, on the island of Apollo, the sailors killed and ate the sacred cows. Zeus blew their ship into pieces with thunder. Only Odysseus survived and saved by nymph in an island and he stayed there for seven years. Later, Zeus ordered the nymph to release him home and Odysseus drifted to the island of Skolia. The king of Skolia was moved by his story and sent him home with ships. During the ten years of drifting, many noblemen coveted Odysseus’ throne and property. They all expressed their love for his wife Penelope. Odysseus and his son designed the tricks hand by hand and killed all the suitors. The whole family reunited again in the end. The experience of Odysseus’ offending the God of sea—Poseidon and drifting on the sea for ten years reflected the struggle between nature and human being. Odysseus was the king of Ithaca. He was bright, intelligent and brave. He was not afraid of difficulties, drifting on the sea harshly. He was also strong-willed, not tempted by ease, money and even love, only wanting to go home. He had beautiful wife and barren soil in his hometown. Wherever he went, no place could be better than his own hometown. He overcame many difficulties, refusing many temptations and after ten years of wandering, he finally went back to his hometown.

3. Influence of Ancient Greek and Roman Myths Upon the European Culture

The ancient Greek and Roman myths were the cradle of western civilization and one of the important origins in the European culture. The westerners regarded it as their own cultural origin and were proud of it. The freedom and the spirit of humanism implied in the myths were the deepest implication of modern European civilization. They were the source of great power of conquering and influence that culture possessed. In A.D. 476, the west Roman Empire perished. Europe entered the dark period of the Middle Ages. The ancient Greek and Roman culture infiltrated with the spirit of humanism had to give place to the culture of Roman Christian church. The religious ruling exerted great influence on the development of western culture. The church controlled the power and the spirit of humanism disappeared. The whole Europe “slept” for more than a thousand years under the infiltration of Christianity. The period of Renaissance was a period with great development in literature in Europe. It was not only a succession but also a surpassing to the ancient Greek and Roman culture. In the literary works in European countries, the ancient Greek and Roman myths were the creating material favored by man of letters and artists. They had a far-reaching influence on western literary works. Prometheus was one of the important roles. In the beginning he created men according to the body of God. Although men were created, they did not know how to use their noble hands and souls. So Prometheus taught men how to build houses, drive animals and treat different kinds of diseases. In the process of struggling with Zeus, Prometheus helped men steal the fire from the heaven—the last thing needed to gain the civilization. The fire represented the way of living and the knowledge of human civilization. Prometheus’ stealing fire implied his courage and determination to fight against absolute power and to pursue knowledge. Christopher Marlowe in the period of Renaissance had a good knowledge of the ancient Greek and Roman myths. He used the mythical allusions in his works to achieve the hopeful artistic effects. The play Doctor Faustus was Marlowe's representative play. In the play, Doctor Faustus was humble in nature,

but he was a young and learned scholar. He was not satisfied with the mediaeval knowledge, full of desire for unlimited knowledge in his inner heart. "Learned Faustus, To know the secrets of astronomy Graven in the book of Jove's high firmament, Did mount himself to scale Olympus' top, Being seated in a chariot burning bright, Drawing by the strength yoky dragons' necks ... [8]" Doctor Faustus was full of spirit of research in himself, and this was the same as Prometheus. They were both unsatisfied with the past and the reality, one was strongly opposed to Zeus' dictatorship, and the other was against the sovereign thearchy. Both of them were full of hope and curiosity about the outside world. Faustus was just the recurrence and image of Prometheus in the ancient Greek and Roman myths. The Greeks lived in a relatively loose and free social environment, which could be reflected in the myths: the love between God and God, God and men were common. Hero and Leander were destined to be lovers. Marlowe described the story in his long poem Hero and Leander. Leander who sailed across the sea and wanted to date with his lover was drowned in the sea because of exhaustion. Hero committed suicide by jumping into the sea when he saw Leander's body. "He's gone; up bubbles all his amorous breath!" [9]

The sad love tragedy could always result in people's sighing and their story existed in the long literary traditions because of their sad beauty. Another love tragedy Romeo and Juliet was a play by William Shakespeare, the greatest playwright in the period of Renaissance. This tragedy was similar to the legend of Pyramus in the ancient Greek and Roman myths. Romeo saw Juliet who was in a coma and thought she was dead. Then he committed suicide just like Pyramus. When Juliet woke from the coma and saw what had happened, she also committed suicide just like Thisbe. The two pairs of lovers could not get married before death and left two sad love tragedies for the following people. In the system of the ancient Greek and Roman myths, Apollo and Dionysus had absolutely different characters. The former was steady and kingly and he was the symbol of reason and self-control; while the latter unrestrained and open-minded, being the symbol of sensibility and imagination. In literary creation, they represented two different kinds of literary thought and way of creation. Two trends of thought—Classicism and Enlightenment respectively appeared on the European continent between the 17th and the 18th century. Influenced by the two trends of thought, the spirit of Apollo occupied the absolutely leading position in the author's creation in this period. These authors not only advocated the royal power, but also put forward the "Three Unities" in the standard of creation. They tried to make the knowledge independent of the influence of religion, and put forward the slogan of returning to nature. Nature was the outer representation of reason. In the ancient Greek imagination, Gods were everywhere and their activities resulted in the occurrence of natural phenomenon. Pan was the God of mountains and fields and the meaning of the name was "everything". So he was regarded as the symbol of universe and representation of nature.[10] John Milton described him with the following sentences: "Universal Pan, Knit with the Graces and the Hours in dance, Led on the eternal Spring." Although the spirit of Apollo emphasizing the reason was the mainstream in this period, the romantic and imaginative spirit of Dionysus appeared occasionally. British poet laureate John Dryden depicted Dionysus' boozing in his poem Alexander's Feast: "The jolly god in triumph comes; Sound the trumpets, beat the drums; ... Bacchus' blessings are a treasure, Drinking is the soldier's pleasure; ... Sweet is pleasure after pain." In the early 19th century, the Romanticism Movement finally gained the ruling status on the European continent. The spirit of Dionysus didn't exist in a subordinate position but predominated absolutely. Dionysus' some characteristics in the myths were expressed by the flowing of people's feeling, non-rationality in thoughts etc in this period. The Romanticism Movement inherited the essence of ancient Greek and Roman myths, emphasizing people's feeling, imagination and intuition. It revered nature and was full of expectations for the new world. While the spectacular ancient Greek and Roman myths brought in the inspiration of creation for Romantic writers. One of the most important images in the writers'

hands of this period was Prometheus. After creating man, Prometheus violated God of Heaven—Zeus' order and stole the fire from the heaven. Zeus was angry and tied him to a big rock on Caucasus Mountain, making him suffer from the eagle's pecking his liver. As long as Prometheus gave in to the oppressor Zeus at any time, the torture would come to an end. But Prometheus did not give in firmly, saying to Heracles who went to rescue him:

"The soul of man can never be enslaved
Save by its own infirmities, nor freed
Save by its very strength and own resolve
And constant vision and supreme endeavor!"[11]

Prometheus resisting against dictatorship and tyranny became the model with extraordinary patience:

"Still, in thy patient energy,
In the endurance and repulse
Of thine impenetrable spirit,
Which earth and heaven could not convulse,
A mighty lesson we inherit ..." [12]

Prometheus inspired man's spirit of self-support with his perseverant soul and experience. "Even the faintest heart, unquailing." British poet George Gordon Byron mentioned Prometheus many times in his works. He hated the times that he was in, praising the protector of men—Prometheus, taking him as an example and constantly fighting with the evil. Byron sacrificed his life for freedom but his spirit showed man's determination and power. "Mad Shelley" who lived in the same age with Byron was also a Romantic poet fighting against oppression. He also created a drama in verse Prometheus Unbound with the material of Prometheus. The poet re-interpreted the myth: with the help of Prometheus, the master of Gods—Zeus climbed up to the throne, but carried out an autocratic rule. Prometheus stole the fire of heaven to save the human being, but was tied and tortured on a rock. He was not alone, on the contrary, he had infinite power to support him: the earth mother blessing him with power, faith and "the fire on the earth" side by side with him and waiting him in front. Prometheus bore all the sufferings quietly: "Fiend, I defy thee with calm, fixed mind, All that thou canst inflict I bid thee do." Just as Jupiter reached his evil purpose, his son God of Netherworld overthrew his rule and threw him into the hell. Prometheus was also released. The whole universe was full of light of love.

"...The man remains
Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed, but man
Equal, unclassed, tribeless, and nationless,
Exempt from awe, worship, degree, the king
Over himself; just, gentle, wise." [13]

There used to be story of reconciliation between Prometheus and Zeus. But in this play, Shelley passionately portrayed a bright figure—"protector of men" who loved human being, had sympathy with men's suffering and fought with the despot for the happiness of the human being. One characteristic of ancient Greek and Roman myths shared by Gods and men was that they had the same body and sex. They were highly personalized, possessing human being's emotions like love and hatred. The love story happened not only between God and God, but also between

God and man. John Keats told the love story between the Goddess of Moon Diana and the earthly man Endymion in his long poem. In a quiet and clear night, the Goddess of Moon watched that the handsome shepherd was in a deep sleep. She fell in love with the shepherd unconsciously and kissed him from the heaven. She left her work more and more to make a date with Endymion. Endymion travelled again and again to meet the goddess that he loved:

"With lily shells and pebbles milky white, ...
Meekly through billows:—when like taper-flame
Left sudden by a dallying breath of air,
He rose in silence, and once more'gan fare
Along his fated way." [14]

The secret was found in the end. The God of Heaven Zeus gave Endymion a choice—either to die in the way he liked or to sleep for ever. The couple was separated mercilessly by Zeus. To this day, Endymion is still sleeping while the goddess of Moon often watches him in dark night, carefully looking after his properties and flock. The story has a similarity with the legend of Niulang and Zhinv of ancient China. The dictator gained the victory temporarily, but love will never be cut off. Even if one was in another place, the loving hearts will be together. Endymion was in a sleep indeed, but the heart between he and the goddess of Moon will always be together. Zhinv was forced to returned to heaven, but her husband Niulang still met her annually in the heaven with their children. Keats interpreted an ancient Greek and Roman story using the love story between Endymion and the goddess of Moon. In the middle and end of the 19th century, the heating European romantic epic passed and the critic realism began to prevail. What people concerned about was not only people's spirit and world of emotions. The inequity and suffering caused by the development of society urged people to pay more attention to the rational thought and criticism to the society. The spirit of Apollo representing rationalism once again became the mainstream of the social spirit. The writers of this period used the themes of myths to criticize the unfair and devouring society, among which the nightingale with pathetic voice was an important image. In the legend the king of Thrace saved the king of Athens with his army. Later, the king of Thrace married Procne, the older daughter of the king of Athens, and they brought up one son. Living in a foreign country, Procne suffered from nostalgia. So she asked to see her younger sister Philomela. The king of Thrace raped Philomela on the way back home, cut off her tongue and threw her in a small room in the deep forest. Philomela suffered a lot, and later she told everything to her sister with a piece of cloth. Procne saved her sister but killed her own son as a punishment. Procne was transformed into a swallow and Philomela a nightingale, while the king of Thrace was transformed into an eagle, pursuing the two sisters for ever.

4. Conclusion

From the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, the whole European society stepped into a new phase of development—modernism and post-modernism. The human civilization exerted more and more apparent influence upon people's alienation. The surrounding world made people feel absurd, indifferent and incomprehensible. People felt lonely, strange and painful. The harmonious relationships between man and nature, man and society, and man and man disappeared. The spiritual disaster urged people to re-examine their own living environment, think of the value and meaning of self-existence, and explore the end-result of the whole human being. The traditional concept of value from the early 19th century was not suitable any more for the development of the society. The spirit of Dionysus

representing the anti-traditional concept of value once again became the mainstream of the spiritual world. The story of Odysseus in ancient Greek and Roman myths provided the topic of this period—the exploring and pursuing of the future of human being with excellent theme. After the Trojan war, the king of Ithaca was not afraid of the difficulties, fighting against the troubles. He was not jealous of the treasures, saying goodbye to the tender goddess, princess and the carefree place and finally got home. Odysseus' experience of ten-year's wandering home exerted great influence upon later writers. The masterpiece *Ulysses* by British writer James Joyce can be seen as a modern interpretation of the story of Odysseus. One of the characters in the novel Bloom roamed along the streets of Dublin from day to night, always thinking of and looking for Marion. This was similar to Odysseus' hope and pursue. Bloom was looking for, also his son Stephen was looking for—selfness and his spiritual father. And finally Bloom took Stephen home, symbolizing the get-together of the father and the son. This was also similar to Telemachus' action of looking for his father—Odysseus. Bloom and Stephen's pursuing and Odysseus' wandering had a similar meaning. Using the story of Odysseus, Joyce more properly expressed the spiritual disaster and the spiritual pursue of modern people.

The myths themselves are not narration of the real life, but a kind of interpretation of the real life or creation of imagination. In the description of later writers, the ancient Greek and Roman myths have naïve beautiful fantasy and clear plain style. They rooted in the soil of culture, becoming one of the important part of world cultural relics. They not only exerted great influence upon the development of European culture, but also had an important effect upon the development of world culture.

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