



Greek Mythology in 18th-to-19th English Romantic Poetry

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Abstract

In the 18th and 19th century of English literature, there were two generations of English Romantic poetry in Britain, who have produced great influences on the literature world. Those romantic poets were inspired more or less by the French Revolution, and advocated to the people to pursue beauty and inner freedom in nature or art. The most extraordinary features found in their poems are the abundant Greek and Roman mythological figures. But two generations of romantic poetry have shown different purposes in employing the Greek and Roman mythology, which needs further reading and exploration. The present study centers on the comparison of characters preference in poems between the two generations and shed light on the critical difference in their purposes and impacts.

Keywords

British Romantic Poetry, Greek Mythology, Romantic Hellenism

Subject Areas: Literature

1. Introduction

In the 18th to 19th century, British literature underwent a revolutionary breakthrough under the influences of European revolution, especially the French Revolution which was regarded as a massive revolution of ordinary people against the aristocracy and the aristocratic class. William Blake's paintings and poetry unveiled the prelude of English Romanticism. The publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, co-authored by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth marked the beginning of the Romantic Movement. English Romanticism reacted against the convention and authority, a freedom in personal, political, and artistic life. The romantics revolted against the rationalism, the classicism, and the aristocratic social and political norms of Enlightenment Age as well as impersonality of growing industrialism. It associated with liberalism and radicalism. The movement also directed the focus on the history of culture, attached importance on intense emotion as an authentic source of aesthetic

experience and advocated to liberate the oppressed people.

2. Two Generations of English Romanticism

In the process of English Romanticism, two climaxes of development appeared, one in 1805 or so and the other in 1815. There are two generations of representatives of the English Romanticism, William Blake, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge of the first generation and George Gordon Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats of the second. The core issues in English Romanticism are liberation from the church and state and the pursuit of spontaneous outpouring of personal feeling, emotions. Death, depression and individualism are themes constantly appear in English Romantic poetry.

William Blake was a pious Christian who firmly believed in God and claimed he was able to see the presence of God in life. His poems contain numerous characters and expressions from the Bible, *God, lamb, snow, sun, garden, work, mighty, Thou Shalt Not* and so on. He is distinguished by his expressiveness and creativity and famous for the philosophical and mystical undercurrents within his works.

Coleridge and Wordsworth together with Robert Southey, living in the Lake District and transversing the same path in politics and in poetry (beginning as radicals and ending up as conservatives), are called the Lake Poets. Poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge hold that the language in the poems should be familiar to the common people or just the same as what the common people use in daily life, and it should be the natural outpouring from the heart and contain imagination, legend and human heart. The Lake Poets live close to nature and the nature is the main source of their poems as well. Their poems sing highly of rural life or the natural scenery, describe supernatural and mysterious legends or exotic and alien sights, and negate the evils of industrial civilization.

The second climax of English Romanticism started with Byron, whose poetry received warm welcome in Europe from 1815 to 1825. Then Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats joined him. Differing from the first generation, Byron, together with Shelley and Keats also advocated lyricism and idealism but stressed positive, aggressive and anti-violence revolution. It was not the nature or the Middle Ages, but a new world in which everyone is equal and lives without tyranny.

The poets of second generation of romanticism are more active and aggressive than those of the first generation. Byron is the most revolutionary and aggressive one. The figure of the Byronic hero is an idealized but a flawed character whose has many attributes such as talented, passionate, incompatible with the society and social institutions, lack of respect for rank and privilege, rebellious and so on. The figure “pervades much of his work, and Byron himself is considered to epitomize many of the characteristics of this literary figure” [1].

3. Greek and Roman Mythology in Their Poems

In the 18th century, the philosophical revolution of the Enlightenment spread throughout Europe. It was accompanied by a certain reaction against Greek and Roman myths; there was a tendency to insist on the scientific and philosophical achievements of Greece and Rome. The myths, however, continued to provide an important source of raw material for dramatists. By the end of 18th century, romanticism initiated a surge of enthusiasm for all things Greek, including mythology. In Britain, it was a great period for new translations of Greek tragedies and Homer’s works, and these in turn inspired contemporary poets, such as Keats, Byron, and Shelley [2].

The Greek mythology becomes the interest and source of inspiration of the two generations, especially the second one, because “by the late 18th century, the distortion of Greek myths for the sake for Christian sensibilities was becoming increasingly unpalatable to the growing Romantic movement” [3]. In this sense, poems written by Shelley, Keats and Byron have more features of Romantic Hellenism.

The roots of Romantic Hellenism are distinct from the revaluation classical tradition associated with the Renaissance. The redistribution of cultural forces can be traced back in part to English and French traveler in Greece and in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries who provided a new impetus towards an understanding of the Greek achievement in terms not of an idealized and abstract set of landscapes but of topographical and social specificity. By the early nineteenth century, Greece was no longer as remote and unfamiliar as it once had been.

3.1. Figures in Greek and Roman Mythology

According to Greek Mythology, the ancient Greeks included a dazzling array of deities, demigods, monsters,

and heroes. These figures inhabited a realm that stretched beyond the Greek landscape to the palaces of the gods on snow-capped Mount Olympus, as well as to the dismal underworld [4] [5].

The ancient Greeks believed that there were an extraordinary number of gods or divinities coexisting with them, and these divinities “resembled human beings in appearances, feelings and habits, intermarrying and having children, and requiring daily nourishment to recruit their strength, and refreshing sleep to restore their energy” [6]. The gods are immortal in life span and most of them live on the summit of Mount Olympus. On festival occasion the divinities meet and appreciate Apollo’s lyre accompanied with the Muses’ beautiful voices.

The emotions of the Greek figures are also symbolized in the natural phenomena like the awful roar of thunder, the shocking flashes of lightning, the rain storms, and so on. In the old Greek myths, there are some foremost gods and goddesses. Jupiter or Zeus or Jove is the king and father of all gods and men. He has two brothers Neptune and Pluto. Neptune rules the sea and Pluto the underworld, where people are believed to go after death. Juno is Jupiter’s queen, the most powerful goddess. Minerva is the goddess of wisdom, of war for a right cause, and of the arts of peace. Apollo is the god of prophecy, music, and poetry, and the god of the sun. His twin sister Diana is the goddess of the moonlight and Selene is the goddess of the moon itself. Venus is the goddess of love and beauty, born from the foam of the sea. Mars is the god of war while Mercury is the herald and swift-footed messenger of the gods, the patron of herdsmen, travellers, and rogues. Ceres is the goddess of crops and called the Great mother [7].

In the poetry of the two generations of English Romanism, many of the Greek figures enter the poetry and inspire more imagination, partly because the Greek myths are abundant in fantasy and adventure.

3.2. An Investigation of the Employment of Greek Figures in Their Poems

The two generations of British Romantic poets in the 18th to 19th century were inevitable influenced by Greek mythology. Their poems were the best evidence. In order to obtain an intuitive view of how great influence the two generations had had from Greek mythology, an investigation into their poems which were collected in the *Norton Anthology of Poetry* (2005) [8].

From **Table 1**, it is obvious to see that John Keats was the one who had made the most use of Greek mythology, 49 Greek figures in his 15 poems in the survey. The poems of the first generation made far fewer elements of Greek mythology, altogether 9 Greek figures in their 56 poems. Instead, the second generation the British romantic poets like Shelley, Byron and Keats tended to be more of Romantic Hellenism, the term referring to a cultural and literary phenomenon, a retrospective label that yokes together for historical convenience a wide range of manifestations and examples centered in and around the Romantic period but with roots that go far back into the eighteenth century [9]. The poets of the second generation had more interest in Greece or the Grecian model and a desire to appropriate it for particular purposes.

And it is interesting to notice that almost none of the Greek figures shown in the table occur twice or more in the two generations of English Romanticism with the exception of the muses or Muse, Phoebus, Apollo, Cupid,

Table 1. A brief survey of the two generations of romantic poets.

Poets	Poems	Greek figures	Total number of figures
Blake	27	Muses, Ida, Phoebus, Venus	4
Wordsworth	23	Vulcan, Proteus, Triton	3
Coleridge	6	Aeolian harp, Aeolian lute	2
Keats	15	Apollo, Jove, Neptune, Pan, Dian, Morphean, Porphyry, Andromeda, Lamia, Nymph, Satyr, Dryads, Fauns, Hermes, Olympus, Crete, Triton, Muse, Proserpine, Sicilian, Lethe, Silenus, Cupid, Elysium, Naiad, Thetis, Bacchus, Pluto, Orpheus, Pleiad, Venus, Adonian, Pyrrha, Aeolian, Ceres, thyrsus, Psyche, Phoebe, Zephyr, Melancholy, Lethe, Elysium, Hippocrene, Flora, Proserpine, Silenus, Thetis, Eurydice, Arcady,	49
Byron	8	Abydos, Hellespont, Venus, Cupid	4
Shelley	12	Chorus Hymeneal, Adonais, Urania, Echo, Narcissus, Hyacinth, Phoebus, the Pythian, a pardlike Spirit, Actaeon, Argo	11

Venus, Triton and Aeolian. The small letter muses appears in William Blake's *To the Muses*, written in 1783. Phoebus appears in Blake's *Song* (1783) (also titled as "*How sweet I roam'd from field to field*"), in Shelley's *Adonais* (1821). John Keats' *Lamia* (1820) contains the Greek and Roman figures such as Triton, Venus, Cupid, Aeolian, Muse, and Apollo. Aeolian appears in Coleridge's *The Aeolian Harp* (1796, 1817) and *Dejection: An Ode* (1802).

1) In the Greek and Roman myths, Phoebus means "bright", named after his maternal grandmother, Phoebe. Phoebus is Apollo, also Phoebus Apollo, who is Olympian god of the sun, the Greek and Roman god of poetic inspiration, the arts, music, medicine, and prophecy [4]. Edmund Spenser names Phoebus as the father of the Muses. But usually Zeus or Jove was considered father of the Muses [8].

2) The Muses are the nine beautiful daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne. They are the presiding divinities of music, song, dance and knowledge, such as poetry, astronomy, etc. They have Apollo as their leader, taking part in banquet or festivity in Olympus [6].

3) Venus or Aphrodite is the daughter of Zeus and the goddess of love representing the power of love, beauty and sexual desire. And she was the mother of Cupid (Eros, the god of love and lust) and Aeneas (the great Trojan hero and the head of the Greek colony in Italy) [4].

4) Triton, the only son of Poseidon and Amphitrite, usually precedes his father and acts as his trumpeter, using a conch-shell [6]. "The Hellenic invasions of the early millennium BC, usually called the Aeolian and Ionian," [10] Aeolus is son of Hellen and the nymph Orseis, a minor god presiding over the winds, who lives on the floating island of Aeolia. He is also Ancestor of the Aeolians [4].

4. Reasons for Different Preference

By looking into the different occurrences of Greek and Roman figures in the two generations of English Romanticism, it is evident that the second generation has shown more preference in employing the figures in the myths to convey their thoughts and ideas. They have shown more intuitive thoughts, receiving more influences from the supernatural and exotic Greek and Roman literature. Generally, compared with the evading and idiosyncratic life attitude, they are more passionate and emotional.

First, the common factor to the difference lied in distinct interest in Greece. The interest in Greek mythology can be seen part of a more widely based concern to investigate the origins and significance of the mythological, indicating beneath the seemingly disparate and heterogeneous elements of ancient universal mythoi-religious and historical traditions there lay a harmonious tradition. But not all poets welcomed the reading of Romantic mythology, including British's first generation poets. Wordsworth liked to write about the visionary dreaminess of the north with sentimental simplifications of landscape and the pagan luxuriance of the south. Coleridge greatly objected to the limitations of the Greek imagination when compared to the Hebraic Bible. Like the later Blake, he found in the Bible not only the truth and more satisfying form of expression. In his opinion, the structures of the Christian imaginations allowed greater possibility and greater freedom of operation for the religious sensibility. However, the Greek mythology appealed to Shelley and Keats in its force in changing the ideas into finites or forms of men. Shelley preferred the Greco-Roman temple to the Christian cathedral just as he celebrated the positive potential of Greek mythology as embodied in sculpture and in literature and lamented those Christian prejudices that had turned "the wrecks of Greek mythology, as well as the little they understood of their philosophy, to purpose of deformity and falsehood" [9]. Keats believed that the Greeks had invented the "poetry of gladness" and identified in them "the religion of the Beautiful and the Religion of Joy". Keats internalized from his encounters with Greek art a sense of strength, power and authority that demanded imitation, but he also experienced a sense of tension that undermined any complacent inclination to celebrate the nicely balanced harmonies of "classical" sculpture, together with an unnerving intimation of his own diminutive stature as poet.

Second, part of the reason went to the desire to associate the Grecian deities for certain purposes. Poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey preferred the northern and the Christian to a phenomenon which they regarded as southern and pagan. Romantic Hellenism seemed to provide a challenge or a provocation to those who subscribed to be the values of the patriotic and the English. It is also seen as a foreign importation that represented a danger to all such traditional allegiances, whether in religious codes or architecture or poetic diction. To some extent, the new discoveries, insights and theories, transmitted into Britain through the international currency of translation, produced effects on poets and informed a number of creative works: the mythological

poems of Keats, especially *Endymion*, “*Hyperion*”, “*Lamia*” and some of the odes; the second cantos of Byron’s *ChildeHarold’s Pilgrimage* and *DonJuan*, and some of his Turkish Tales; Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* and *Hellas*, his mythological poems, especially “*The Witch of Atlas*,” and his translation of the *Homeric Hymns* and *Plato* [9].

Byron’s empirical experience of Greece enabled him to deflate the untroubled simplicities of Wordsworth’s picturesque presentation of Greece as a land of lush pastoral variety “Under a cope of variegated sky” and also allowed him to defend the accuracy of Pope’s translation by matching it against particulars such as the “glow” of the night sky at Troy. The second canto of *Childe Harold* made a virtue out of authenticity and poetic capital out of Byron’s travels across the map of Greece.

In Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, the figure of Prometheus is one Greek and Roman myths whose representation in literature on the dynamics of the culture of political power on the dynamics of the culture of political power has generated contending ideas on his mythological purpose. Prometheus, in his Greek origins, belonged to a hallowed circle of Titans who reigned supreme over a universe in which the human population lived in intellectual darkness and backwardness. The sight of this humanity, flailing at one another for lack of cognitive light elicits, perhaps, sympathy in Prometheus. Consequently, he descends from his hallowed abode and gives the fit of “fire” (knowledge) to men to aid their enlightenment. But Prometheus’ gesture also amounts to an act of sacrilege. His act was considered a breach of the protocols that governed the behavior of the deities and threatening the social stability. On the contrary, the men on the world acknowledged Prometheus’ act as the “great benefactor of Mankind”. Thus Prometheus’ theft of “fire” from his fellow gods is regarded as liberating humans from servitude to gods to acts of assertive agency and independence and Prometheus was enshrined as a hero. The heroic notion of Prometheus sufficed 19th century English literary appropriations of the figure [11].

The Romantic rediscovery of the uses of Greek mythology is much more than a reordering of aesthetic preferences. For Keats and Shelley, Greek mythology was energized and inventive and often gave expression to their deepest concerns.

5. Conclusion

The two generations of British Romantic poets came from different historic, educational and family backgrounds, which made their distinction in the preference of Greek mythology. And by comparing the occurrences of figures in Greek and Roman myth, an objective conception and view can be formed about the distinct features and preferences of their poems for the sake of their concerns and inspiration.

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