

A Comparative Study of Greek and Roman Mythologies With Special Reference to Excerpts From Ovid's 'Metamorphoses' and Riordan's 'Percy Jackson'

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Abstract

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is a collection of poems chronicling the history of the creation of the world, consisting of fifteen fully constructed Books with over 100 poems. Over the years, *Metamorphoses* has inspired other great writers including Dante, Chaucer and Shakespeare himself. *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* is a mythological fiction series by Rick Riordan and through its modern writing depicts the story of the life of a young Demigod with an intricate inlay of Greek and Roman myths which, while entertaining to most readers, a scholar of Culture and Literature would find most refreshing. This work makes an analysis on the re-popularisation of the old concept of Gods, Goddesses, Deities and Demigods of different ethnicities while staying true to the concepts put forth by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*. This can be shown by comparing the ideologies and the popular beliefs pertaining to particular characters - both mortal and immortal - from both the texts. In this way, it will be evident that through the passing of the years, the beliefs, traditions and cultures of the people have remained by and large similar to what they were in the olden days and to try to illuminate on some of the parts where they have changed.

Keywords: Ovid, Riordan, Percy Jackson, Comparative Literature

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Introduction

Myths, Legends and Lores have been around since time immemorial. Be it through oral form of storytelling or written form, the concept of a God or a higher being has persisted through the years. The Greeks and the Romans were no strangers to this concept. They too had, not only a wide but also a diverse variety of gods all with supernatural strengths and traits particular to their area of proficiency. Though the years may have passed or the civilizations may have eroded, it is these characters and their extraordinary characteristics that have endured until today.

Not only have they persisted, they have been re-popularized in recent years through the 21st Century media. One of the best examples of this can be given through the popular mythological and adventure fiction series by Rick Riordan called *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* which, through its modern writing, depicts the story of the life of a young Demigod. Though the tale is aimed at a young demographic, throughout the plot and storyline of the series, however, there is an intricate inlay of Greek and Roman myths which, while entertaining to most readers, a scholar of Literature would find most refreshing.

These references to the Greek Gods in the modern pentology can also find its roots in Ovid's *Metamorphosis* in which we find their Roman counterparts. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is a collection of poems chronicling the history of the creation of the world, according to the poet. Consisting of fifteen fully constructed Books with over 100 poems, *Metamorphoses* is one of the most influential works in Western Culture from 8 CE.

The re-popularization of the old – Greek and Roman - concept of Gods, Goddesses, Deities and Demigods, can be shown by comparing the ideologies and the popular beliefs pertaining to particular characters - both mortal and immortal - from both the texts. In this way, it will be evident that through the passing of the years, the beliefs of the masses have remained by and large similar to what they were in the olden days.

Transition in Myths from Greek to Romans

Around the year 146 BC, after the Battle of Corinth, the Romans conquered Greece, enabling both the nations to adapt and adopt each other's cultures. Religion has, as mentioned before, played a vital role in any given society. The Roman Empire was no different. The Roman religion – being polytheistic – worshipped an array of gods as well as spirits. After the Battle in 146 BC, Rome began to include the Greek gods as well as a number of other smaller foreign cults.

With the expansion of the Empire, the Romans did attempt to refrain from imposing their own religious beliefs upon the ones they conquered. Earlier, Roman religion could be seen as more animalistic in nature as they believed that divine spirits inhabited not only humans and animals but inanimate entities such as trees or rivers as well. They also believed that the spirits of their ancestors would forever watch over them. With the inclusion of the Greek culture, initially only three gods were included – Mars, the god of war; Jupiter, the supreme god; and Quirinus, the deified founder of Rome, Romulus, who watched over Rome. These three gods formed the Capitoline Triad and were worshipped at a temple on the Capitoline Hill. This 'triad' evolved later to consist of Jupiter, who remained the supreme god; Juno, his wife, sister and goddess of family and fortune; and Minerva, Jupiter's daughter, the goddess of war and wisdom.

This later form of the triad and the characteristics of the deities in it were more akin to the Greek concepts of the same deities. Zeus, who is the Greek counterpart of the Roman god Jupiter, is also the King of the Gods of Olympus and wields the ultimate power over the heavens and lightning. Juno's counterpart Hera is Zeus' wife and sister and she too is the goddess of family, fortune and relationships while Athena, the complement of Minerva, takes the role of a more passive goddess inclined more toward wisdom rather than war, though she holds power over both traits. Due to the impact and stimulus provided by the Greek colonies, the once ferocious and barbarous Roman gods became a little more anthropomorphic in nature. That is, they started to exhibit more humane traits of anger, jealousy, lust and passion though not to the extent that the Greek gods initially represented by themselves.

The Greco-Roman Concept of Gods

In both Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* the notion of the 'gods' or the 'supreme beings' is explained through the metaphor of a 'living force' or a 'fire', as can be seen from the following extract.

[...] it is a living force. A collective consciousness that has burned bright for thousands of years. The gods are a part of it [...] The fire started in Greece. Then [...] the heart of the fire moved to Rome, and so did the gods. Oh, different names, perhaps – Jupiter for Zeus, Venus for Aphrodite, and so on – but the same forces, the same gods. (*The Lightning Thief*, Pg 72)

Here, Riordan refers to the Olympians – the Greek gods who reside on Mount Olympus according to mythology – being alight with energy, a “collective consciousness”, that has moved from one place to another depending on the civilization that was most prosperous during their time. It is due to this reason that this “living force” moved from Greece to Rome, possibly referring to the aftermath of the Battle of Corinth which saw Rome as the victor. As Riordan explains further through the character of Chiron – who himself is a mythological character who was said to have trained many Greek heroes including Hercules, Achilles and Perseus – it is only the names and nuances of the gods that have changed after the shift of “the heart of the fire.”

The force of fire ascended first on high,
And took its dwelling in the vaulted sky:
Then air succeeds, in lightness next to fire,
(Book the First; *The Creation of the World*; Ln: 32-34)

Book One of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* begins with the poem *The Creation of the World*. Palpably, in this poem Ovid depicts the formation of the Earth from Chaos or nothingness through the sparking of a fire. This fire “ascended on high” and amalgamated with light and air to form the Heavens for the gods. From the above lines, a clear parallelism can be drawn along the line of the “force of fire” in both the old and modern texts. Where in Ovid's text, there was the specification of the occurrence of the lighting of a fire that goes on to make the Heavens, Riordan specifies that that initial fire was in fact lit in Greece. This falls into the chronology of the history of the Greco-Roman Era since the Roman religion is said to have absorbed many of the traits and characteristics of the Greek gods. Riordan rightly raises the question of science in relation to the spectrum of the creation of the world in the lines where the protagonist says,

‘But they’re stories,’ I said. ‘They’re myths, to explain lightning and the seasons and stuff. They’re what people believed before there was science.’ (*The Lightning Thief*; Pg 67-68)

According to Riordan, however, before up until a few decades ago, whatever could not be explained by science was said to be ‘magic’. Whatever could not be explained by magic was said to be ‘fancy’ and before fancy there were ‘myths’ and ‘legends’. In other words, just because in the modern name of science the limited things on Earth can be explained does not mean that there is a limit to the things that actually exist. If the term of ‘Science’ did not exist before a particular time, there is no way to prove or disprove the concept of Gods or Ethereal Beings as they were there during the very conception of the Earth and, by relation, time itself.

High o'er the clouds, and empty realms of wind,
The God a clearer space for Heav'n design'd;
Where fields of light, and liquid aether flow;
Purg'd from the pondrous dregs of Earth below.
(Book the First; *The Creation of the World*; Ln: 83-86)

Heaven was created out of Chaos, fire and light for all the divine beings. They, being the only creatures that existed, made a home for themselves with “fields of light” and was “purg’d from the ponderous dregs of Earth”. They created the Earth and then they created Man to look over the Earth in their place while they look over the forces of nature and the fates on Men, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

Thus, while the mute creation downward bend
Their sight, and to their earthly mother tend,
Man looks aloft; and with erected eyes
Beholds his own hereditary skies.
(Book the First; *The Creation of the World*; Ln:107-110)

Gods

‘Ah, gods, plural, as in, great beings that control the forces of nature and human endeavours: the immortal gods of Olympus ... Zeus ... Hera. Apollo...’ (*The Lightning Thief*; Pg 67)

The gods have been described in great detail in both the sets of texts. According to Greek mythology, there are twelve major Olympians – Zeus, the King of the gods, Hera, wife and sister of Zeus, Poseidon, the sea god, Demeter, the goddess of harvest, Athena, the goddess of wisdom, Apollo, the god of the Sun, of healing and prophecies, Artemis, the goddess of the Moon and Huntress, Ares, the war god, Aphrodite, the goddess of love, Hephaestus, the blacksmith of the gods, Hermes, the god of travellers and messengers, and Dionysus, the god of wine and madness – in hierarchical order.

Each of these gods have a Roman counterpart, with similar characteristics and personality traits – Jupiter for Zeus, Juno for Hera, Neptune for Poseidon, Ceres for Demeter, Minerva for Athena, Apollo as himself or sometimes as Phoebus, Diana for Artemis, Mars for Ares, Venus for Aphrodite, Vulcan for Hephaestus, Mercury for Hermes and Bacchus for Dionysus.

I ran through D names from Greek mythology. Wine. The skin of a tiger. The satyrs that all seemed to work here. The way [the satyr] cringed, as if Mr. D were [their] master. ‘You’re Dionysus,’ I said. ‘The god of wine.’ (*The Lightning Thief*, Pg 70).

While each of the Greek and Roman versions of the Olympians are mentioned in the texts, it is Dionysus or Bacchus – the ‘least’ of the Olympians – who is most interesting. This is so as if the least of the gods can be so ferocious, one can only imagine the extent of the power of the higher gods like Zeus or Poseidon.

‘A god. You.’

[Dionysus] turned to look at me straight on, and I saw the man was only showing me the tiniest bit of his true nature. I saw visions of grape vines choking unbelievers to death, drunken warriors insane in battle lust, sailors screaming as their hands turned to flippers, their faces elongating into dolphin snouts. I knew that if I pushed him, Mr. D would show me worse things. He would plant a disease in my brain that would leave me wearing a straightjacket in a rubber room for the rest of my life.

‘Would you like to test me, child?’ he said quietly.

(*The Lightning Thief*, Pg 70)

According to Ovid, Bacchus was born to a mortal woman by Jupiter. As the mortal mother passed, Jupiter deified Bacchus in memory of her and made him the god of wine.

But Mineus' daughters still their tasks pursue,

To wickedness most obstinately true:

At Bacchus still they laugh,

(Book the Fourth; *Alcithoe and her Sisters Transform'd to Bats*; Ln 1-3)

As can be seen from the above lines, Bacchus was mostly ridiculed because while he was a human, he was not adept at anything in particular. He was rather plump, red faced and even as a grown man looked like a child. It was only for these reasons, for these physical attributes that he was mocked constantly while he was a mortal.

‘But remember, boy, that a kind act can sometimes be as powerful as a sword. As a mortal, I was never a great fighter or athlete or poet. I only made wine. The people in my village laughed at me. They said I would never amount to anything. Look at me now. Sometimes small things can become very large indeed.’ (*The Battle of the Labyrinth*; Pg 328)

This is another similarity between the idea of the Wine God in the olden days and his modern take. In addition to the literary similarities, the terms ‘Bacchanalian’ and ‘Dionysian Frenzy’ are terms that are commonly used even today to depict the unrestrained consumption of wine and drunken revelry. The terms also go hand-in-hand with the terms ‘madness’, ‘intoxication’ and ‘orgy’ as Bacchus or Dionysus was also the god of fertility and these were all associated to the god.

There was a rush [...] all around me, and a sound like a huge sigh. The sunlight tinged with purple. I smelled grapes and something more sour – wine.

SNAP!

It was the sound of many minds breaking at the same time. The sound of madness. (*Titan's Curse*; Pg 225-226).

As mentioned before, Dionysus is also depicted as the god of madness or psychological anguish. The likenesses in Ovid's *Alcithoe and her Sisters Transform'd to Bats* in Book Four of *Metamorphoses* and Riordan's *Titan's Curse* are astounding and accurate to each other to the very scent in the air.

At Bacchus still they laugh, when all around,
Unseen, the timbrels hoarse were heard to sound.
Saffron and myrrh their fragrant odours shed,
And now the present deity they dread.
Strange to relate! Here ivy first was seen,
Along the distaff crept the wond'rous green.
Then sudden-springing vines began to bloom,
And the soft tendrils curl'd around the loom:
While purple clusters, dangling from on high,
Ting'd the wrought purple with a second die.
(Book the Fourth; *Alcithoe and her Sisters Transform'd to Bats*; Ln 3-12)

The skin of a tiger, the color purple, grapes and grape vines are all associated with Dionysus and later Bacchus as well. While these may not seem like much to the untrained eye, these were the wealth as well as the weapons of the wine god of the Ancient Greeks.

[The Manticore's] tail bristled, but the planks under his paws erupted into grapevines that immediately began wrapping around the monster's body, sprouting new leaves and clusters of green baby grapes that ripened in seconds as the manticore shrieked, until he was engulfed in a huge mass of vines, leaves and full clusters of purple grapes. Finally the grapes stopped shivering, and I had a feeling that somewhere inside there, the manticore was no more. (*Titan's Curse*; Pg 226)

Monsters

Mythology is not only made of gods and myths – there are many creatures that fall under the category of mythology. These creatures can either be neutral beings like nymphs, dryads and naiads, or they can be the very impersonation of the metaphorical Hell they were created through. One of the prime examples of this can be the well-known mythical creature called the Minotaur.

Minos, as a symbol of support, prayed and asked from Poseidon a bull of great beauty. So, Poseidon sent a snow-white bull to Minos. However, even though King Minos of Crete was to “[Perform] his vows to Jove's protecting pow'r” by sacrificing “A hundred bullocks of the largest breed” including the white bull, Minos decided to retain the bull as it was extremely beautiful. As a punishment from the sea god, Pasiphaë fell deeply in love with and mated with the bull.

Mean-while the monster of a human-beast,
His family's reproach, and stain, increas'd.
His double kind the rumour swiftly spread,
And evidenc'd the mother's beastly deed.
(*The Labyrinth*; Book the Eighth; Lns 7-10)

When Minos learnt the truth of the deed, he called for the best architect and inventor of the land – Daedalus – to build a maze to confine the ‘shame’ of the family in.

When Minos, willing to conceal the shame
That sprung from the reports of tatling Fame,
Resolves a dark inclosure to provide,
And, far from sight, the two-form'd creature hide.
(*The Labyrinth*; Book the Eighth; Lns 11-14)

‘That’s what they call it in Greek Myths, isn’t it?’ I demanded. ‘The Minotaur. Half man, half bull.’ (*The Lightning Thief*; Pg 59).

In Riordan’s *The Lightning Thief*, the Minotaur is introduced as one of the first mythological creatures that the protagonist knowingly faces. It is described as a truly horrific incarnation of a cross between a man and a bull.

Glancing back, I got my first clear look at the monster. He was seven feet tall, easy, his arms and legs [with] bulging biceps and triceps [...], coarse brown hair started at about his belly button and got thicker as it reached his shoulders.

His neck was a mass of muscle and fur leading up to his enormous head, which had a snout as long as my arms [...] nostrils with a gleaming brass ring, cruel black eyes, and horns – enormous black-and-white horns with points you just couldn’t get from an electric sharpener. (*The Lightning Thief*; Pg 50)

Though the description of the creature is made to be entertaining to the readers, one cannot help but cower at the horrendous and atrocious image on the one hand and applaud the creative genius that has stayed true to the original representation of the Minotaur on the other hand.

From the waist down, he wore standard Greek battle gear – a kilt-like apron of leather and metal flaps, bronze greaves covering his legs and tightly wrapped leather sandals. (*The Last Olympian*; Pg 170)

Myths

‘The greatest architect, the greatest inventor of all time. If legends are true, his workshop is in the center of the Labyrinth. He’s the only one who knew how to navigate the maze perfectly.’ (*The Battle of the Labyrinth*; Pg 63)

The above lines refer to Daedalus, the paramount in the sphere of designing and invention and he was said to have been the son of Athena, the goddess of wisdom. When Queen Pasiphaë gave birth to the Minotaur, King Minos searched far and wide for any man with not only enormous talent, but who could also be discreet when trying to conceal the shame on the family name.

That sprung from the reports of tatling Fame,
Resolves a dark inclosure to provide,
And, far from sight, the two-form'd creature hide.
(*The Labyrinth*; Book the Eighth; Ln 12-14)

Upon hiring Daedalus, he came up with the idea of trapping the Minotaur within a giant maze, a Labyrinth for eternity as it was so strong that it could not be killed by any mortal blade.

Great Daedalus of Athens was the man
That made the draught, and form'd the wondrous plan;
Where rooms within themselves encircled lye,
With various windings, to deceive the eye.
(*The Labyrinth*; Book the Eighth; Ln 15-18)

However, as Daedalus created the intricate layers of the maze with staggeringly high and inescapable walls, he suddenly found himself trapped within its complexities as well. Though the origin of the architect himself may still be disputed in literature, the Labyrinth itself is one constant whose specifications and architectural details are remembered even today with the one major consistency being that the Labyrinth is baffling and perplexing. Those who enter the Labyrinth very rarely ever made it out alive again. This can be seen from the comparison of the following extracts from Riordan's *The Battle of the Labyrinth* and Ovid's *The Labyrinth* in Book Eight of *Metamorphoses*:

We made it thirty metres before we were hopelessly lost.
The tunnel looked nothing like the one Annabeth and I had stumbled into before... I shone a light through one of the portholes out of curiosity, but couldn't see anything. It opened into infinite darkness. (*The Battle of the Labyrinth*; Pg 90; Percy)

Such was the work, so intricate the place,
That scarce the workman all its turns cou'd trace;
And Daedalus was puzzled how to find
The secret ways of what himself design'd.
(*The Labyrinth*; Book the Eighth; Ln 27-30)

The Labyrinth is one of the mystical creations of the Greek mythology that has endured throughout the ages. It is due to its convoluted complexity in its ambition and multifarious intricacy in design that it provides as such an enigma even eons after its inception.

Conclusion

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is a collection of poems chronicling the history of the creation of the world, according to the poet written in the 8th Century CE. Percy Jackson and the Olympians is a mythological fiction series by Rick Riordan and through its modern writing depicts the story of the life of a young Demigod written in the 21st Century CE. Both these texts are as far away from each other in terms of era, language, genre and aimed demographic as can be. However, through the common thread of belief and culture, what should have been lost and forgotten has not only endured but has revitalized with renewed vigour.

Therefore, it is evident that the old concept of Gods, Goddesses, Deities and Demigods have not only been re-popularised, but they also remain true to their lineage of more than a thousand years prior. The ideologies and the popular beliefs pertaining to particular characters - both mortal and immortal - from both the texts are very much similar, not only regarding the more popular Gods and Goddesses, but also in terms of the mythical creatures and mythical

structures as shown above. Ergo, with the eroding of time the dogmas of the common people have remained unchanged.

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