

AN ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH ETYMOLOGY



颜帼英 编著

英语词源探析

—古希腊神话中的词源探索



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An Analysis of English Etymology

—Exploring the Etymology of Words from
Ancient Greek Mythology

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Preface

The word *myth* is related to the Greek word *mythos*, which carries the meaning “story” or “speech”. Myth can refer to the ancient stories explaining the events or objects in nature, the origin of customs and traditions, the development of history, the epic of ancestors or heroes, and the like. Therefore, it can reflect the psychology, cultures, or ideals of a society by delineating the creation of the universe and personifying the existence of the elements in the real world.

Although myths may interweave reality in the supernatural descriptions in the stories, they are not real existences and thus should not be considered as the real events in history. In spite of that, the impact of myths on the shaping of cultures and ideologies is undeniable.

The Impact of Greek Mythology on Western Cultures

In popular culture as well as classical literature and artistic works the influence of Greek mythology can be felt.

Songs are composed, television shows and movies are shot, paintings are created, and operas are performed by following or

adapting various versions of heroic deeds and stories about the immortals.¹ In Hollywood, movies about Trojan War, the Titans, and Heracles have gained a persistent favor from producers and directors for many years with new episodes coming out retelling the legends every few years.

Mythology was the primitive form of literature, which in turn enriches and popularizes the mythology. A detailed and vivid description of the gods and goddesses from Mount Olympus can be found in Homer's epic poems *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* which recount the Trojan War and Odysseus' adventures on his way sailing back home respectively. The two epics have a profound influence on English literature canon.

Great writers such as Dante and Milton make frequent references to Greek mythology. Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies can also find trails of inheritance from Greek mythology, such as the affinity to the powerful Goddess of Wisdom of the prototypes of the wise and brave women in *The Merchant of Venice* and *All's Well That Ends Well*.

The impact of Greek mythology on Roman mythology is obvious as the latter bears a striking resemblance to the former, though the latter bears a different system of names and is pertaining to the understanding about the origins of legends and religions in ancient Rome. Anyway, Greek mythology permeates into Roman mythology so much so that when scholars study mythologies, they have to study them together and refer to them as Greek-Roman mythology. Both mythological systems contribute a lot to the

development of Renaissance and philosophy.

Table 1 Greek and Roman names

Greek names	Roman counterparts
Zeus	Jupiter
Hera	Juno
Poseidon	Neptune
Demeter	Ceres
Aphrodite	Venus
Ares	Mars
Hephaestus	Vulcan
Athena	Minerva
Apollo	Apollo
Artemis	Diana
Hermes	Mercury
Dionysus	Bacchus
Hades	Pluto

From Table 1, it is obvious that the pantheon of Roman gods and goddesses have names that are different from those of Greeks except for Apollo, whose Greek name and Roman name are the same.

Greek mythology has shaped English and other languages on many levels. In the realm of science, a number of planets are named after the gods and goddesses. “Uranus”, the seventh planet from the sun, is named after the god of sky, and “Heracles”, the name of a

hero in the mythology, has become the name of a northern constellation. In Table 1, Jupiter, Neptune, Venus, and Mars, are all names for planets. In addition, Freud, the Austrian psychiatrist, applied several names in the mythology in his theory, such as “Oedipus” and “Electra” Complex. For commercial benefits, names of gods and goddesses are also employed to trademarks and brand names. For instance, the famed film company “Europa” is named after a princess in the Greek Mythology. Another example in point is the brand name “Nike”, which comes from the goddess of victory with the same name. There are also instances in our daily life: “Atlas” refers to a collection of maps and it is named after the Titan who shoulders the earth, and “Trojans”, the computer viruses, is derived from Trojan Horse which is used in the mythological Trojan War.

Literary Works about Gods and Greek Mythology

Around the eighth century BC, Homer is thought to create the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, two epics telling tales about the Greek myths. The *Iliad* focuses on the tenth year of the Trojan War, but the former nine years' stories are also recounted, through the conversation between Achilles and Agamemnon. The *Odyssey* is about Odysseus' way home after the ten-year long Trojan War. It is a journey of adventures, with Odysseus fighting with hurricanes, monsters, and godly powers. The two epics have been handed down generations after generations, so that some stories in them have

become known to every household.

Another renowned poet is Hesiod, who is thought to be born around seventh century BC. His works known to us today are *The Theogony*, and *Works and Days*. Both tell mythical stories about the origin of the world and legends related to gods. *The Metamorphoses*, written by Ovid, consists of fifteen volumes of mythological stories, which have become the major source of Greek myths.

In modern time, there are numerous accounts on the Greek myths, in the form of books and dictionaries. Among them, *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, edited by Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth, is a rich source of detailed stories and information about them. Without the knowledge in the dictionary, this book is not likely to have been completed. The other three books frequently cited in this book are: *The Greek Myths* by Robert Graves, *Gods and Goddesses in Greek Mythology* by Michaelle M. Houle, and *The Greek Myths* by Robin Waterfield and Kathryn Waterfield.

Words from Mythology

(1) epic [ˈepɪk]

- n.* ① An extended narrative poem in elevated language, telling the achievements of a hero;
epics by Homer.
- ② A novel, film, etc., that resembles an epic;
direct an epic.

Synonyms:

long poem, long film, long story, heroic poem, saga, history, legend.

adj. ① Of or suggestive of a literary epic:

an epic poem.

② Heroic; impressive in quality:

an epic journey.

Synonyms:

heroic, very great, very large, huge, very long, grand, extraordinary, ambitious.

(2) pantheon [ˈpænθiən]

n. ① P-A temple in Rome dedicated to all the gods.

② All the gods of a people considered as a group:

Jupiter is head of the Roman pantheon.

③ A group of persons most highly regarded for contributions to a field:

the pantheon of modern physics.

(3) Venus [ˈvi:nəs]

n. ① *Roman Mythology* The goddess of love and beauty.

② The second planet from the sun.

venereal [vəˈniəriəl]

adj. ① Transmitted by sexual intercourse.

- ② Of a sexually transmitted disease.

(4) Hades [ˈheɪdɪz]

- n.* ① *Greek Mythology* The god of the netherworld and dispenser of earthly riches.
 ② The underworld inhabited by the dead.
 ③ Hell.

Pluto [ˈpluːtəʊ]

- n.* ① *Roman Mythology* The god of the dead and the ruler of the underworld, identified with the Greek Hades.
 ② The ninth planet from the sun.

plutonic [pluːˈtɒnɪk]

- adj.* Of deep igneous or magmatic origin;
 plutonic rocks.

plutocracy [pluːˈtɒkrəsi]

- n.* ① A government ruled by the wealthy class.
 ② A wealthy class that rules a government.

plutocrat [ˈpluːtəkræt]

- n.* A member of a plutocracy.

Synonyms:

rich man, person of means, capitalist, tycoon, magnate, millionaire, billionaire, Midas, Croesus.

plutolatry [plu:'tɒlətri]

n. An excessive devotion to wealth.

River Lethe ['li:θi]

n. *Greek Mythology* The river of forgetfulness, one of the five rivers in Hades.

lethargy ['leθədʒi]

n. ① The quality or state of being drowsy; sluggishness; a lack of interest or enthusiasm:

held a pep rally to shake the students out of their lethargy.

② *Medicine* An abnormal state of drowsiness, as caused by disease or drugs.

lethargic [lə'θɑ:dʒɪk]

adj.

Synonyms:

sluggish, inactive, slow, slothful, phlegmatic, lazy, sleepy, heavy, dull, indifferent, debilitated, inert, languid, apathetic, drowsy, listless, comatose, stupefied, unenthusiastic, somnolent, torpid, enervated, unenergetic, passive, weary, enervated, fatigued, narcotic.



Contents

Chapter 1	Creation	/ 1
Chapter 2	The War Between the Titans and the Olympians	/ 9
Chapter 3	Prometheus and Epimetheus	/ 15
Chapter 4	The Twelve Gods and Goddesses	/ 21
1.	Zeus	/ 22
2.	Hera	/ 27
3.	Poseidon	/ 35
4.	Demeter	/ 38
5.	Aphrodite	/ 41
6.	Ares	/ 46
7.	Hephaestus	/ 51
8.	Athena	/ 54
9.	Apollo	/ 57
10.	Artemis	/ 65
11.	Hermes	/ 69
12.	Dionysus	/ 74
Chapter 5	The Age of Heroes	/ 78
1.	The Deucalion Deluge	/ 81
2.	Deucalion's Descendants and Sisyphus	/ 83
3.	The Argonauts and the Golden Fleece	/ 86



Contents

4. Perseus	/ 92
5. Thebes	/ 95
6. Mycenae	/ 100
7. Athens	/ 105
8. Heracles	/ 108
9. Trojan War	/ 112
10. Odysseus	/ 120
Chapter 6 Pandora	/ 126
Bibliography	/ 128
Appendix I	/ 129
Appendix II	/ 130

Chapter 1

Creation

“In all chaos there is a cosmos, in all disorder a secret order.”

— Carl Jung

Each culture has its own way to explain the beginning of the time and universe. In Greek mythology, the universe was a complete void called Chaos in the primordial time of creation when nothing existed. There was no gods or humans, no land or sky, no order or disorder, no age or decay. Then Chaos divided itself into the earth, the sky, and the sea, and a goddess named Gaia came into existence by herself. She designed and decorated the earth by giving it seas, rivers, plains, and mountains, so her name got the meaning “earth”.

Gaia conceived herself and gave birth to a son named Uranus, who grew up quickly and became the ruler of the sky. The god and goddess became a couple and had their first group of three children called the Hundred-handed Ones as each of them had one hundred hands and fifty heads. Their second group of children were also three giants, named the Cyclopes, each having only one eye. The third group of children had human figures, only that they were taller



and more handsome and beautiful with incredible strength. There were twelve of them, six goddesses, namely, Tethys, Theia, Mnemosyne, Rhea, Themis, and Phoebe, and six gods, namely, Oceanus, Hyperion, Iapetus, Cronus, Crius, and Coeus. They were known as the twelve Titans. Unfortunately, Uranus cruelly imprisoned all of them in Gaia's womb, for fear that his children might dethrone him one day.

In order to free her children, Gaia devised a plan by talking to the children in her womb. One night, Cronus secretly climbed out of his mother's body and assassinated Uranus with a sickle. Uranus died in resentment and cursed his son to end up with the same fate.

Finally, all the children were freed from Gaia's womb, and they made Cronus the new king. Cronus married his sister Rhea, and they ruled over the universe peacefully during the legendary Golden Age as the first pantheon of Greek deities.

Words from Mythology

(1) Chaos^[ˈkeɪɒs]

n. The disordered state of unformed matter and infinite space supposed in some cosmogonic views to have existed before the ordered universe.

chaos

n. Utter disorder or confusion;

The country appears to be sliding towards chaos.

Synonyms:

disorder, confusion, pandemonium, bedlam, tumult, upset, upheaval, disorganization, uproar, disruption, disarray, mayhem, anarchy, lawlessness, entropy, riot.

chaotic [ˈkeɪˈɒtɪk]

adj. Completely confused or disordered:

My house is always a chaotic mess.

Synonyms:

in chaos, disordered, confused, tumultuous, upset, disorganized, jumbled, topsy-turvy, askew, awry, disrupted, in disarray, orderless, uncontrolled, anarchic, lawless, riotous, purposeless.

(2) **Gaia** [ˈgaɪə]

n. Variant of Gaea. *Greek Mythology* Goddess of the earth and mother of the Cyclopes and the Titans. Roman counterpart: Tellus, or Terra Mother.

Related prefixes:

① geo- or ge-: earth; geography.

Related words:

geochemistry, geologist, geography, geographer, geocentric.

② terr-: land.

Related words:

territory, terrain, Mediterranean, terrestrial, terrace, telluric.

(3) **Uranus** [ˈjʊərənəs]

n. ① *Greek Mythology* God of the sky, son and consort of Gaea and the father of the Cyclopes and Titans.

② The seventh planet from the sun.

Related words:

uranium, uranolite, uranology, uranometry, uranography, uranoscopy.

(3) giant [ˈdʒaɪənt]

n. ① A being with human form but superhuman size and strength.

② A person or thing of extraordinary size, achievement, power, or significance:

a giant in the field of physics; automotive industry giants.

Synonyms:

colossus, titan, man mountain, behemoth.

adj. ① unusually large; gigantic; huge.

② of extraordinary power, importance, or achievement.

Synonyms:

gigantic, enormous, colossal, huge, immense, vast, mammoth, monumental, monstrous, gargantuan, titanic, elephantine, prodigious, stupendous, very large, behemoth, Brobdingnagian, Bunyanesque, cyclopean, gigantesque, herculean, heroic, massive, massy, mastodonic, mighty, monster, mountainous, pythonic, tremendous.

(4) Cyclopes [ˈsaɪklɒpsɪz]

n. *Greek Mythology* Plural of Cyclops.

