

A BRIEF HISTORY OF FOREIGN LITERATURE 简明外国文学史

Written and Edited by Warren Gao 高万隆 编著



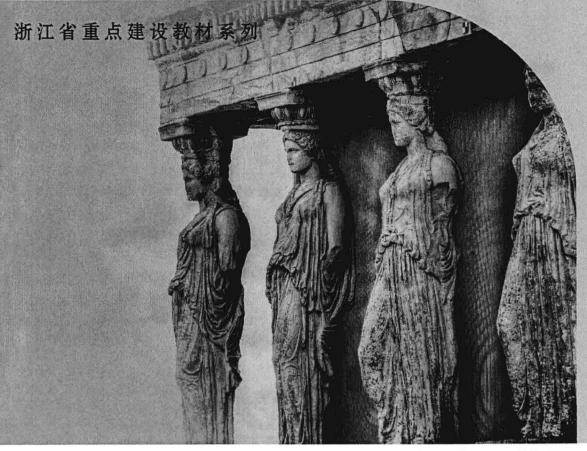


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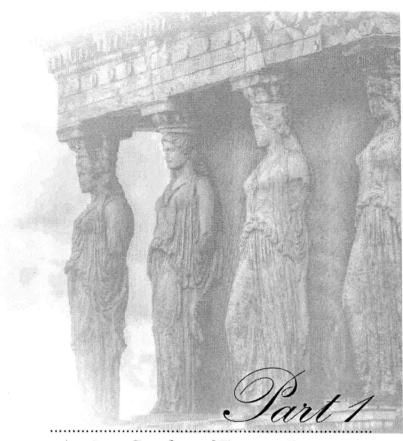
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Ancient Greek and Roman Literature

Part Ancient Greek and Roman Literature



Ancient Greek Literature

Ancient European literature is composed of Ancient Greek literature and Roman literature. It is generally regarded that Greek literature is the source of European literature and that Roman literature is the imitation and inheritance of Greek literature and functioned as a bridge between Greek literature and later European literature. Ancient Greek literature refers to literature written in Ancient Greek from the oldest surviving written works in the Greek language until approximately the fifth century AD and the rise of the Byzantine Empire. The Greek language arose from the Proto-Indo-European language, though roughly one-third of its words cannot be derived from various reconstructions of that tongue. A number of alphabets and syllabaries had been used to render Greek, but surviving Greek literature was written in a Phoenician-derived alphabet that arose primarily in Greek lonia and was fully adopted by Athens by the fifth century BC.

1. Preclassical Period(the eleventh century BC—the ninth century BC)

Mythology and epics flourished in this period. Greek myths were the oral works from the primitive society, which were later recorded in some literary, historical, and philosophical works. At the beginning of Greek literature stand the two monumental works of Homer, the Iliad and the Odyssey. Though dates of composition vary, these works were fixed around 800 BC or after. The other great poet of the preclassical period was Hesiod. His two surviving poetic works are Works and Days and Theogony. Some ancients thought Homer and Hesiod roughly

contemporaneous, even rivals in contests, but modern scholarship raises doubts on these issues.

2. Classical Period (the eighth century BC—the fourth Century BC)

In the classical period many of the genres of Western literature became more prominent. Lyrical poetry, odes, pastorals, elegies, epigrams; dramatic presentations of comedy and tragedy; histories, rhetorical treatises, philosophical dialectics, and philosophical treatises all arose in this period. The three major lyrical poets were Sappho, Anacreon and Pindar. Sappho was honoured in ancient Greece. Plato called her "the tenth Muse". Sappho and Ancreon's poems mostly extol love and wine. Pindar's poems mainly sing the praises of gods and sport champions. Their lyrics had a huge influence on later European lyrics.

As the lyrics rose, some fables about animals passed from mouth to mouth. It is said that they were written by Aesop, a liberated slaver. They were collected and compiled into a bestiary titled *Aesop's Fables*. The bestiary is a summary of common people's wisdom and experience. Besides, the Classical era also saw the dawn of drama. Of the hundreds of tragedies written and performed during the classical age, only a limited number of plays by three authors—Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides—have survived.

Like tragedy, comedy arose from a ritual in honour of Dionysus, but in this case the plays were full of frank obscenity, abuse, and insult. The surviving plays by Aristophanes are a treasure trove of comic presentation.

Two of the most influential historians who had yet lived during Greece's classical age are Herodotus and Thucydides. A third historian, Xenophon, began his *Hellenica* where Thucydides ended his masterpiece *History of the Peloponnesian War* about 411 BC and carried his history to 362 BC.

The greatest prose achievement of the 4th century was in philosophy. Among the tide of Greek philosophy, three names tower above the rest: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Plato and Aristotle had different views of art. Plato first defined art as a mimesis of reality. For Plato, the artist was a dull fellow, simply holding a mirror to nature, imitating it without purpose or thought. His second major bone to pick with the arts was that it appeals solely to our emotional nature. He saw that art was harmful and led people in the wrong direction. He wanted the focus shifted to philosophy, and dreamed of a rational society where everything ran smoothly. Art was a speed bump to progress. Therefore, in his *The Republic*, he drove the poets out of his republic. Aristotle accepted Plato's definition of art as an imitation of



nature? However, he disagreed on the nature of that imitation. For Aristotle, imitation was not some mindless mirror-holding, but a thoughtful way of reflecting specific truths about nature. He looked at art's effect on the human audience and disagreed with Plato in seeing it as an incendiary spark for the emotions. Instead, he saw it as a therapeutic way to soothe pent-up emotions. Aristotle's *Poetics* has been long regarded as an authoritative work of dramatic theory and the first extant philosophical treatise that focuses on literary theory.

3. Hellenistic Period (the fourth century BC—the second century BC)

By 338 BC many of the key Greek city-states had been conquered by Philip II of Macedon. Philip II's son Alexander extended his father's conquests greatly. The Greek colony of Alexandria in northern Egypt became, from the third century BC, the outstanding centre of Greek culture.

Greek poetry flourished primarily in the third century BC. The chief poet was Theocritus, who lived from about 310 BC to 250 BC, was the creator of pastoral poetry, a literary genre that the Roman Virgil mastered in his *Eclogues*. During the Hellenistic period, the sociopolitical changes influenced theatre. The new genre was conventionally called New Comedy, which derived elements both from Old Comedy—mainly from Aristophanes' comedies. Compared to ancient political comedy, the Hellenistic one differs in its themes: the political issues were abandoned and interest began to be focused on situations inspired by daily activities and the presentation of the human characters of the period. Furthermore, as far as its structure is concerned, the division into acts was established whilst the choral songs ceased to be connected with the plot of the play and are used more to interpolate events. An important representative of the New Comedy is Menander, who created only one comedy, *Dyskolos*.

One of the most valuable contributions of the Hellenistic period was the translation of the Old Testament into Greek. The work was done at Alexandria and completed by the end of the second century BC. The name Septuagint is from the Latin word *septuaginta* (seventy), from the legendary story that there were seventy-two scholars spending seventy-two days translating the Torah from Biblical Hebrew into Greek.



Greek Mythology

Greek mythology consists of the ancient Greek myths and legends, which explain the origins of the universe or world and tells the lives and adventures of a variety of gods and heroes, and other mythological creatures. Greek mythology has extensively influenced Western culture, arts and literature. The writers, artists and scholars from ancient up to now have drawn inspiration from Greek mythology. Greek mythology can be roughly divided into two circles: gods and heroes.

1. The God Lineage

1) Creation of the World

In the beginning there is only chaos. Then out of the void appears Erebus, the unknowable place where death dwells, and Night. All else is empty, silent, endless, darkness. Then somehow Love is born bringing a start of order. From Love comes Light and Day. Once there is Light and Day, Gaea, the earth appeare. Then Erebus sleeps with Night, who gives birth to Ether, the heavenly light, and to Day the earthly light. Then Night alone produces Doom, Fate, Death, Sleep, Dreams, Nemesis, and others that come to man out of darkness.

Meanwhile Gaea alone gives birth to Uranus, the heavens. Uranus becomes Gaea's mate covering her on all sides. Together they produces the three Cyclopes, the three Hecatoncheires, and twelve Titans. However, Uranus is a bad father and husband. He hates the Hecatoncheires. He imprisons them by pushing them into the



hidden places of the earth, Gaea's womb. This angers Gaea and she plots against Uranus. She makes a flint sickle and tries to get her children to attack Uranus. All are too afraid except the youngest Titan, Cronus.

Gaea and Cronus set up an ambush of Uranus as he lies with Gaea at night. Cronus grabs his father, castrates him with the stone sickle and throws the severed genitals into the ocean. The fate of Uranus is not clear. He either dies, withdraws from the earth, or exiles himself to Italy. As he departs he promises that Cronus and the Titans will be punished. From his spilt blood comes the Giants, the Ash Tree Nymphs, and the Erinnyes. From the sea foam where his genitals fall comes Aphrodite.

2) The Titans

The Titans, also known as the elder gods, has ruled the earth until they are overthrown by the Olympians. The ruler of the Titans is Cronus who comes to power by castrating his Father Uranus. He and his wife Rhea give birth to many offspring, including Zeus, the first of the Olympians. To insure his safety Cronus eats each of the children as they are born. Rhea feels unhappy at the loss of her children, so she tricks Cronus into swallowing a rock, saving her son Zeus. When he grows up, Zeus revolts against Cronus and the other Titans, defeating them, and banishing them to Tartarus in the underworld.

3) The Olympians

The Olympians are a group of twelve gods who rule the world after the fall of the Titans. All the Olympians are related in some way and form a big family led by Zeus, which, besides Zeus, includes Zeus' two brothers and two sisters, and his seven children. They reside on Mount Olympus and are named after their dwelling places.

Zeus, after overthrowing his Father Cronus, draws lots with his brothers Poseidon and Hades. Zeus wins the draw and becomes the supreme ruler of the gods. He is the third generation of the sky god and the rain god. His weapon is a thunderbolt which he hurls at those who displease him. He is married to Hera, but, is famous for his many affairs. He is also known to punish those that lie or break oaths. The most known example is his punishment on Prometheus who has stolen the sky fire for human beings.

Hera is Zeus' wife and sister. She is the protector of marriage and takes special care of married women. Hera's marriage is founded in strife with Zeus and continues in strife. Zeus courts her unsuccessfully. He then turns to trickery,

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changing himself into an untidy cuckoo. Hera feels sorry for the bird and holds it to her breast to warm it. Zeus then resumes his normal form and takes advantage of the surprise he gains to rape Hera. She then marries him to cover her shame. Hera schemes to convince other gods to revolt against Zeus and often intrigues against Zeus' plans and is often able to outwit him. Most stories concerning Hera have to do with her jealous revenge for Zeus' infidelities.

Poseidon is the brother of Zeus. After their Father Cronus is overthrown, he draws lots with two of his brothers—Zeus and Hades—in order to share the world. He is rewarded to become the sea god, so he is widely worshiped by seamen. His weapon is a trident, which can shake the earth, and shatter any object. He is second only to Zeus in power amongst the gods. He has a difficult quarrelsome personality. He is greedy. He has a series of disputes with other gods when he tries to take over their cities.

Hades is Zeus' brother, too. After drawing lots with Zeus and Poseidon, he is made lord of the underworld, ruling over the dead. He is a greedy god who is greatly concerned with increasing his subjects. Those whose calling increase the number of the dead are seen favorably. He is also the god of wealth, due to the precious metals mined from the earth. He has a helmet that makes him invisible. He rarely leaves the underworld.

Ares is the son of Zeus and Hera. He is disliked by both of his parents. He is the god of war. He is considered murderous and bloodstained but, also cowardly. When caught in an act of adultery with Aphrodite, he is publicly ridiculed by her husband Hephaestus. His bird is the vulture. His animal is the dog.

Athena is the daughter of Zeus. She springs full grown in amour from his forehead, so she has no mother. She is fierce and brave in battle and wars to defend the state and home from outside enemies. She is the goddess of the city, handicrafts, and agriculture. She invents the bridle, which permits man to tame horses, the trumpet, the flute, the pot, the rake, the plow, the yoke, the ship, and the chariot. She is the embodiment of wisdom, reason, and purity. She is Zeus' favorite child and is allowed to use his weapons including his thunderbolt. Her favorite city is Athens. Her tree is the olive. The owl is her bird. She is a virgin goddess.

Apollo is the son of Zeus and Leto. His twin sister is Artemis. As the god of music, who often plays a golden lyre, the Archer, far shooting with a silver bow, the god of healing, who teaches man medicine, the god of light, the god of truth, who can not speak a lie. One of Apollo's important daily tasks is to harness his



chariot with four horses and drive the Sun across the sky.

Aphrodite is the goddess of love, desire and beauty. In addition to her natural gifts she has a magical girdle that compels anyone she wishes to desire. There are two accounts of her birth. One says she is the daughter of Zeus and Dione. The other goes back to when Cronus castrates Uranus and tosses his severed genitals into the sea. Aphrodite then arises from the sea foam on a giant scallop and walks to shore in Cyprus. She is the wife of Hephaestus. The myrtle is her tree. The dove, the swan, and the sparrow are her birds.

Hermes is the son of Zeus and Maia. He is Zeus' messenger. He is the fastest of the gods. He wears winged sandals, a winged hat, and carries a magic wand. He is the god of thieves and commerce. He is the guide for the dead to go to the underworld. He invents the lyre, the pipes, the musical scale, astronomy, weights and measures, boxing, gymnastics, and the care of olive trees.

Artemis is the daughter of Zeus and Leto. Her twin brother is Apollo. She is the lady of the wild things. She is the huntsman of the gods. She is the protector of the young. Like Apollo she hunts with silver arrows. She becomes associated with the moon. She is a virgin goddess, and the goddess of chastity. She also presides over childbirth.

Hephaestus is the son of Zeus and Hera. Sometimes it is said that Hera alone produces him and that he has no father. He is the only god to be physically ugly. He is also lame. Accounts as to how he becomes lame vary. Some say that Hera, upset by having an ugly child, flings him from Mount Olympus into the sea, breaking his legs. Others that he takes Hera's side in an argument with Zeus and Zeus flings him off Mount Olympus. He is the god of fire and the forge. He is the smith and armorer of the gods. He uses a volcano as his forge. He is the patron god of both smiths and weavers. He is kind and peace loving. His wife is Aphrodite.

2. Heroic Legends

The heroes in Greek mythology do not qualify the general definition of a hero properly as someone who ventures to help others. They are quite selfish, with antisocial tendencies time and again. However, it is essential to know their names and exploit for understanding references in literature and even popular culture today. One of the most well-known heroes is Heracles. In Greek mythology, a hero or a heroine, who is of divine ancestry and endowed with great courage and strength, is often celebrated for his or her bold exploits, and is favoured by the gods.

1) Heracles

Heracles is the Roman name for the greatest hero of Greek mythology—Heracles. Like most authentic heroes, Heracles has a god as one of his parents, being the son of the supreme deity Zeus and a mortal woman. Zeus' queen Hera is jealous of Heracles, and when he is still an infant she sends two snakes to kill him in his crib. Hera's scheme fails as Heracles is found prattling delighted baby talk, a strangled serpent in each hand.

When he has come of age and already proves himself an unerring marksman with a bow and arrow, a champion wrestler and the possessor of superhuman strength, Heracles is driven mad by Hera. In a frenzy, he kills his own children. To atone for this crime, he is sentenced to performing twelve hard tasks, or "Labours", for his cousin Eurystheus, the king of Tiryns and Mycenae. By rights, Heracles should have been king himself, but Hera has tricked her husband Zeus into crowning Eurystheus instead. Heracles' two labours are briefed here:

Labour One: The Nemean Lion. Heracles is challenged to kill the Nemean Iion. This was no easy feat, for the beast's parentage is supernatural and it is a monster more than an ordinary Iion. Its skin could not be penetrated by spears or arrows. Heracles blocks off the entrances to the Iion's cave, crawled into the close confines where it would have to fight face to face and throttles it to death with his bare hands. Ever afterwards he wears the Iion's skin as a cloak and its gaping jaws as a helmet.

Labour Five: The Augean Stables. Eurystheus is very pleased with himself for dreaming up the next Labour, which he is sure would humiliate his heroic cousin. Heracles is to clean out the stables of King Augeas in a single day. Augeas possesses vast herds of cattle which has deposited their manure in such quantity over the years that a thick aroma hangs over the entire Peloponnesus. Instead of employing a shovel and a basket as Eurystheus imagines, Heracles diverts two rivers through the stable yard and gets the job done without getting dirty. But because he has demanded payment of Augeas, Eurystheus refuses to count this as a Labour.

2) Jason

Jason is the leader of the Argonauts, the fifty heroes who sails in search of the Golden Fleece. Jason's uncle, Pelias, has stolen the kingdom that should belong to Jason. He promises to return it only if Jason will bring home the Golden Fleece—the