

Hellenic Impact in Romantic Literature

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ABSTRACT

Hellenism illustrates any of the characteristics of ancient Greek Culture, civilization, principles and ideals, including humanism, reason, the pursuit of knowledge and the arts, moderation and civic responsibility. It reflects the culture and civilization of the Hellenistic period. Hellenism divulges the admiration for and adoption of ancient Greek Culture, ideas and civilization. It unveils the national character or culture of Greece as well as the belief in and worship of the Greek gods. It can also termed as the neoclassicism. As a neoclassical movement distinct from other Roman or Greco Roman forms of neoclassicism emerging after the European Renaissance, it most often is associated with Germany and England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In Germany the preeminent figure in the movement Winckelmann, the art historian and aesthetic theoretician who first articulated what would come to be the orthodoxies of the Greek ideal in sculpture. For Winckelmann, the essence of Greek art was noble simplicity and sedate grandeur, often encapsulated in sculptures representing moments of intense emotion or tribulation. Other major figures includes Hegel, Schlegel, Schelling and Schiller. In England, the so-called "second generation" romantic poets, especially John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron are considered examples of Hellenism. Drawing from Winckelmann(either directly or derivatively), these poets frequently turned to Greece as a model of ideal beauty, transcendent philosophy, democratic politics, and homosociality or homosexuality (for Shelley especially). Women poets, such as Mary Robinson, Felicia Hemans, Letitia Elizabeth Landon and Elizabeth Barrett Browning were also deeply involved in retelling the myths of classical Greece.

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The relationship between the literary Romantic movement and the growing interest in ancient Greek literature, mythology, art, and culture in nineteenth-century England is a complex one; scholars rarely agree on which development is an offshoot of the other. While Harry Levin (1931), in the first major study of English Romantic Hellenism, maintained that the "cult of Greece" became a "mere enthusiasm" among a "long series of romantic obsessions," James Osborn (1963) pinpoints Romantic Hellenism as a part of the larger Neo-Hellenism movement. While the boundaries of these movements remain blurred, it is clear that during the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, in the aftermath of the eighteenth century's neo-classicism, England became increasingly enamored of Greece, and the Romantic poets—most notably Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats—turned to the past and to the East for inspiration. Several concurrent developments influenced a shift in English attention from Rome to Greece during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In terms of literature, the writings of ancient Rome and Greece had long been lumped together under the rubric of "classical studies." Typically, Latin translations of Greek works served as the basis of such studies, due in part, John Churton Collins (1910) notes, to the difficulty of the Greek language. But gradually, a separation of Roman and Greek cultures began to occur, resulting in a new respect for Greek works as the models on which subsequent Roman literature was based. At the same time, Greece was experiencing a new wave of travelers to

its shores. French and English travelers to Greece published accounts of their observations, and in the mid-eighteenth century, two British artists, James Stuart and Nicholas Revett, set out to measure the Parthenon and other Greek structures. James Osborn notes that with the publication of their *The Antiquities of Athens, Measured and Delineated* (1762), a new Grecian fashion in architecture and decoration took hold in England. Countless similar excursions to Greece followed, and soon overlapped with interest in Greek literature, as scholars sought to investigate the veracity of Homer and his works. Finally, it must be noted that in 1800, Thomas Bruce, seventh Earl of Elgin, had plaster casts made of Greek statues of the Parthenon. Elgin was also authorized to remove pieces of statuary on which there appeared inscriptions. The "Elgin marbles," as they became known, soon arrived in England (many by 1804) and in 1816 were purchased for the country by the British government.

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries also saw numerous developments within the field of mythography. Throughout most of the eighteenth century, explains Alex Zwerdling (1964), mythographers were primarily concerned with making pagan "idolatory" acceptable to a Christian audience. While the typical eighteenth-century attitude toward Greek mythology was a negative one, it remained a source of interest, mainly out of a sense of obligation to classical studies. By the late eighteenth century, the distortion of Greek myth for the sake of Christian sensibilities was becoming increasingly unpalatable to the growing Romantic movement. Greek mythology underwent a revival in which it was presented factually and objectively, rather than being reduced to Christian allegory. These more "scientific" treatments, as well as more comprehensive studies of lesser known myths, became the point-of-entry into Greek myth for many Romantics. Edward B. Hungerford (1941) stresses that for Shelley and Keats, as well as other Romantics, mythology became a "new language" for exploring religious and spiritual themes.

Before long, such shifts in attitudes were reflected in the works of England's Romantic poets. Lord Byron, just prior to his departure for Greece in 1809, disparaged the Elgin marbles as "freaks" and "mutilated blocks of art." After having traveled in Greece, Byron published the first two cantos of his *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in 1812, which included passages glorifying Grecian ruins. In *The Curse of Minerva* (1815), Byron berated Lord Elgin for his vandalism of Grecian statuary. Byron treats Greek themes in other poems as well, including *The Bride of Abydos* (1813) and *The Giaour* (1813). Byron, Shelley, and Keats are acknowledged by modern critics to be the best representatives of English Romantic Hellenism; as Levin notes, the three poets "are very near the centre of romantic Hellenism in England." Yet Byron is often characterized as Philhellenic, in that his interests toward the end of his career turned away from ancient Greece and toward the political issues surrounding contemporary Greece. In fact, Byron died at the age of 36 when he was killed fighting for Greek independence from the Turks. The works of Shelley and Keats, on the other hand, continue to be examined as more purely Hellenic. William Wordsworth, as well, has been identified as a Romantic Hellenic, with Douglas Bush (1937) describing him as "the fountain-head of nineteenth-century poetry on mythological themes." Bush points to such poems as "Laodamia" (1815) as evidence of Wordsworth's embracing of myth as a symbol of religious imagination, and credits the poet with establishing mythology as the "language of poetic idealism." Bush further maintains that Wordsworth "passed on to younger poets . . . a noble and poetic conception of mythology as a treasury of symbols rich enough to embody not only the finest sensual experience but the highest aspirations of man." One of these "younger poets" was Shelley. Levin describes Shelley's Hellenism as "sentimental." Shelley's most noted Hellenistic work is *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), in which he reworks the ancient myth of Prometheus. Modern critics observe a number of significant differences between the classic and romantic versions. Levin describes the poem as abstract and as "pure allegory, with little immediate or symbolic significance." Frederick Pierce (1917) finds that the "ancient models" for the poetic drama are only followed in the first act, yet "unquestionably Greek elements" flow throughout the poem. However, Collins states that while Shelley's poem "is a magnificent variant" of the myth, he charges that "its florid beauty and philanthropic enthusiasm are far from being Greek." Bush identifies John Keats as the poet most influenced by Wordsworth; Levin describes him as "the most Grecian of modern poets." Keats's inspiration includes Grecian

sculpture and art, as in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1820), as well as mythology, as in *Endymion* (1818). Pierce notes that poems such as "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and *Hyperion* (1820) are "classic in the noblest sense of the word, as nobly Grecian as anything in our language."

Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, and Keats, like many minor poets, were inspired in a variety of different ways by ancient Greece. Stephen Larrabee (1943), in concluding his analyses of the influence of Greek sculpture on the Romantics, summarizes what is perhaps the main thrust of English Romantic Hellenism when he notes that the Romantic poets "wished to emulate the Greeks in making great art from the circumstances of their time." In the Romantic period it was taken for granted that the intellectual and artistic achievement of ancient Greece and Rome was one of the foundations of western culture. The Classical world permeated almost every aspect of life, from political institutions and philosophical enquiry to scientific method and the basic forms of architecture. The classics of Latin literature, such as Virgil's *Aeneid*, the Odes of Horace and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, were standard texts. At Hawkshead Grammar School, [Wordsworth](#) received a thorough grounding in Greek and Latin as part of his general education. At Christ's Hospital school in London, [Coleridge](#) was discovered reading Virgil for pleasure and was made a 'Grecian', or scholar, and at Cambridge University won a medal for an ode in Greek. As a schoolboy, [Keats](#) decided to translate the whole of the *Aeneid* into English. [Shelley](#) was an excellent classicist, and sufficiently proficient in ancient Greek to make, as an adult, a fine translation of Plato's *Symposium*.

The ways in which classical literature, art and philosophy inspired the thought of the Romantic poets influenced their subject matter and determined their verse forms, which are many and various. Of particular note, however, is the increasing interest that was taken in ancient Greece, often referred to as Hellenism. General knowledge of ancient Greek civilisation was greatly increased by publications such as Johann Joachim Winckelmann's *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks* (translated into English by Henri Fuseli in 1765) and James Stuart and Nicholas Revett's *Antiquities of Athens* (1762–1830). Greek art could also be seen at first hand in museums, most spectacularly at the British Museum, where from 1816 visitors could see the newly acquired Elgin Marbles. There was an enthusiasm for the ruins of Greece, one of the few countries that could be visited during the Napoleonic wars. This enthusiasm was fed by Byron in Canto 2 of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, which opens on the Acropolis:

Look on its broken arch, its ruin'd wall,
Its chambers desolate, and portals foul:
Yes, this was once Ambition's airy hall,
The dome of Thought, the palace of the Soul:
Behold through each lack-lustre, eyeless hole,
The gay recess of Wisdom and of Wit
And Passion's host, that never brook'd control:
Can all, saint, sage, or sophist ever writ,
People this lonely tower, this tenement refit?

Ancient Greek poetry and visual art was admired for its serenity and simplicity, and what was seen as a kind of elemental vigour and purity. In *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley described the culture of 5th-century Athens as a golden age: "... never at any other period has so much energy, beauty, and virtue, been developed; never was blind strength and stubborn form so disciplined and rendered subject to the will of man, or that will less repugnant to the dictates of the beautiful and the true, as during the century which preceded the death of Socrates. Of no other epoch in the history of our species have we records and fragments stamped so visibly with the image of the divinity in man. His poetic drama *Prometheus Unbound* is directly influenced by ancient Greek drama, and especially the tragedies of Aeschylus. His elegy for John Keats, *Adonais* (1821) begins with an epigram attributed to Plato, and is rich in Platonic imagery. Keats, while he was planning 'Hyperion', a

projected long poem on the overthrow of the Titans, told Benjamin Robert Haydon that he would write in a 'naked and grecian Manner'. He soon abandoned 'Hyperion' however, deeming the language too unnatural. More successful was his inclusion in his shorter poems of figures from Greek mythology, which, like many non-Greek readers of the day, he learned about from Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary*, Tooke's *Pantheon* and Spence's *Polymetis*. He did this rather clumsily and sentimentally at first, in the manner of an early influence, Leigh Hunt, but his use of Greek myth in later poems such as the great odes of 1819 is exceedingly apt and successful.

Some writers, including Wordsworth and Coleridge, distrusted this attachment to Greek mythology, seeing it as an inappropriate preference for pagan mythology over Christianity. After hearing Keats read from *Endymion* Wordsworth commented drily that it was 'a Very pretty piece of Paganism'. Others were more savage, dismissing Keats as ill-educated, as someone who could only read Greek texts in translation and whose use of myth was presumptuous and lazy. The reviewer of Keats's *Endymion* in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, August 1818, probably John Gibson Lockhart, wrote with snobbish contempt: From his prototype Hunt, John Keats has acquired a sort of vague idea, that the Greeks were a most tasteful people, and that no mythology can be so finely adapted for the purposes of poetry as theirs. It is amusing to see what a hand the two Cockneys make of this mythology; the one confesses he has never read the Greek Tragedians, and the other knows Homer only from Chapman; and both of them write about Apollo, Pan, Nymphs, Muses, and Mysteries, as might be expected from persons of their education. What we now consider the most original aspects of the Romantics' use of the classical heritage were, at the time, often the most controversial and derided.

CONCLUSION

Hellenic spirit is traced vaguely or distinctly in English romantic literature. The aesthetic beauty of Roman or Greco-Roman forms of neoclassicism gave romantic literature a subtle elegance. The Hellenic flavour pervades in the writings of romantic poets. Even this hellenic spirit cast its impression on Victorian writers excelling the romantic era. So the intense relation between Hellenism and romantic literature is a matter of research and cultivation. And hence its relevant to delve deep into the interrelationship between Hellenism and romantic literature.

- Source :**
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