The Embodiment and Interpretation of Greek Mythology in The Renaissance: Analyzing Perseus with The Head of Medusa

Yixuan Yang *

London College of Communication, University of the Arts London, London, United Kingdom

* Corresponding Author Email: y.yang0220207@arts.ac.uk

Abstract. Greek mythology had a significant influence on the arts and literature in the Renaissance. From the epic poems of *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and the ancient *Theogony*, to the well-known plays of Greek tragedy and modern adaptations of the gods and heroes in both literature and screens, Greek mythology is foreign to no one. This dissertation aims to discuss the embodiment and the inventive interpretation of Greek mythology in a piece of Renaissance artwork *Perseus with the head of Medusa*. It looks into the original story from Hesiod's *Theogony* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and analyzes the symbolic influence of classical traditions. Expanding the contextual perspectives puts the artwork on a wider stage of the society of the time and examines the semiotics within this sculpture that show the unique Renaissance interpretation. The Renaissance concept about secularism, rationalism, and individualism is also explained through the iconography analysis and the comparison with the ancient artwork. With the help of useful references, this dissertation incorporates aspects like art, mythology, literature, politics, social psychology, and ideology to offer some knowledge of the sculpture by Cellini as well as the Renaissance world.

Keywords: Mythology; Interpretation; Metamorphoses; secularism; individualism.

1. Introduction

From the epic poems of *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and the ancient *Theogony* to the well-known plays of Greek tragedy and modern adaptations of the gods and heroes in both literature and screens, Greek mythology is foreign to no one.

Greek mythology is also a widespread theme in all kinds of artworks of the Renaissance. On the one hand, the literature of Greek mythology got more attention and acknowledgment. The study of Greek, the scholarly interest in ancient manuscripts, and the rediscovery of ancient poets and authors such as Homer, Plato, and Catullus largely boosted the arrival of the Renaissance [1]. Angelo Poliziano translated Homer's poems from Greek into Latin in the late fourteenth century, making the ancient author's works more accessible to Renaissance audiences [2]. Moreover, one can find many stories in Renaissance art that have their roots in Ovid's Metamorphoses. On the other hand, the imitation of the natural and realistic artistic style of ancient Greece and Rome formed one of the most prominent features of Renaissance art. Since mythology takes up a significant amount of the classical arts, the revival of the classical ideals is undoubtedly partially embodied in the portraits of myths and their adaptations. In an age of technology and rationalism like the Renaissance, Greek mythology, with its vivid humanism and captivating imagination, still played an important role.

2. Background

Perseus with the Head of Medusa is a bronze sculpture made by Benvenuto Cellini, a famous sculptor and author of that time (Fig. 1). As a favored material in ancient sculptures, bronze displays a classical taste and the tribute paid to those antiquity examples. According to Hesiod's Theogony, Medusa was one of the three Gorgon sisters who lived beyond the famed Oceanus at the world's edge [3]. "She was mortal, but the other two were immortal and ageless." Ovid had more detailed descriptions in his *Metamorphoses*, that Medusa was once a beautiful girl with lovely hair and even drew the attention of the sea god Poseidon [4]. The irritated Athena chose to punish Medusa, the violated victim, by changing her hair to horrifying snakes. What's more, her petrifying gaze could

turn anyone that looked into her eyes to stone. The hero Perseus had himself looked at the reflection of Medusa in his polished bronze shield and cut off her head from her neck, from which out sprang the warrior Chrysaor and the winged horse Pegasus. In this sculpture, Cellini presents the victorious moment of Perseus, in an approximate contrapposto pose, standing on the beheaded body of Medusa. He raises his left arm high above to show the head to the spectator while his right hand firmly holds the blade with which he slays Medusa. The heroism of the character is shown through his muscular form, his ability, and his courage in this heroic deed. The accuracy of Perseus as the mythological hero is portrayed through his accessories, the winged sandals, and the Cap of Invisibility, a helmet that belongs to the god of the underworld and can turn the wearer invisible according to the Bibliotheca. As a compendium of Greek myths and heroic legends, the Bibliotheca was almost lost in the Middle Ages and the surviving parts were later copied for Cardinal Bessarion, a Byzantine Greek Renaissance humanist [5]. Bringing in reliable information, the revival of the ancient source contributed to the detailed and accurate descriptions of the mythological characters of the Renaissance artists. However, "humanism is concerned not so much with reviving the ancient world as with absorbing the spirit of the ancient culture. Physical antiquity was and remained remote; it was its spirit, its tone, and general appeal that were near enough to recaptured." [1].



Fig. 1 Perseus with the Head of Medusa [6]

To articulate this case, there is an Ovidian sense of the nonfinito (not finished) that evokes Metamorphoses in this sculpture, showing Renaissance notions of poetic transformation in the visual arts inspired by the fables of Ovid [7]. From the abundance of blood pouring from the ends of Medusa's neck and her eyes being not fully closed, it can be inferred that she is still in the process of dying and this is a moment of the unfinished action [8]. As for the depiction of blood, one can notice its similarity to the wiggling hair of Medusa, thus another level of transformation is built. An additional quality showing the accordance with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is the artist's own name on Perseus' band. "In Ovid, poetry that describes metamorphoses is itself metamorphoses." [7]. As self-promotional as it could be, Cellini deliberately put his name in his creation to emphasize the classical iconography of transformation. One more noticeable thing is the resemblance between the poses of Perseus and another Cellini statue Narcissus. They both seem to gaze downward toward their mirrored images [8]. Narcissus, according to Alberti, is the inventor of painting as well as the first painter that he admired and then painted himself seeing his reflection in the water. "Poets or artists are always transformed or transforming themselves" [7]. By comparing himself to Perseus, and Perseus to Narcissus, Cellini indicates that his identity and self-image are a type of Narcissus, and that, once more, demonstrates the symbolic influence of *Metamorphoses* in this sculpture.

3. Analysis

Renaissance artists incorporated the particular nature of the classical culture into its own time and in accordance with their own world of ideas [9]. Apart from the loyalty to the original mythology and classical convention, Perseus with the Head of Medusa also has an interpretation that is unique to its own time. The mirror was often associated with virtue prudence during the sixteenth century in Italy and the mythological scenes were frequently designed to serve as exempla of how to accomplish virtuous deeds while avoiding vice [10]. In the context of Perseus gazing downward, the most obvious and possible mirror existing would-be Athena's shield or aegis, which is helpful to identify him as personifying Prudence, considering the virtue prudence was also especially associated with the armored goddess Athena [9]. For Perseus in the original myth, it is vital for him to possess the virtue prudence and use practical reason to guide himself through this adventure since what he encounters is a deadly monster; for Piazza della Signoria this highly charged political place, the virtue Prudence can be recognized as a sign of power and a symbol of the successful Medici domination. Perseus was commissioned by Cosimo I de' Medici who became "head of the Florentine Republic" in 1537. In Veen's "Republicanism in the Visual Propaganda of Cosimo I de' Medici", he pointed out that in addition to the six virtues represented in the statues and paintings of the triumphal arch in front of the Porta al Prato, one of the most ancient gates in Florence, there was a seventh virtue, prudence, reserved for the last arch in the apparatus, where it was associated with Cosimo's government. Borghini described it as a "political virtue, that consisted in knowing how to govern and to keep a state tranquil, peaceful, stable and happy". The Prudence in Perseus serves as an example of the Florentine visual propaganda showing Cosimo's ambition to establish his administration as an integral part of the city's history [11]. Furthermore, the masculinity among several sculptures in Piazza della Signoria can be perceived as an artistic rivalry between contemporaries. Renaissance artists were in a continuous competition which was often intensified by the pressure from their patrons. Bandinelli's Hercules and Cacus, the reproduction of Michelangelo's David, and Cellini's Perseus all display a strong sense of masculinity that is not only for faithfully exhibiting the heroic physical forms but also for suggesting political control as well as artistic competence. According to Garrard, Hercules was explicitly made to surpass Michelangelo's David. Bandinelli held the opinion "the more muscular, the more powerful", and chose to deepen the muscles of Hercules after finishing it, so as to compete effectively with Michelangelo [12]. Although the strengthened masculinity is a device to indicate Florence's political power, the iconography of Perseus reveals that associations of Perseus's hyper-masculinity with Cosmo I are secondary to the association intended between Cellini and Perseus [8]. With the artist's persuasive identification with Perseus, Cellini demonstrates his creative power by holding the head of Medusa aloft toward other sculptures in the piazza, petrifying them while bringing himself more into the life of glory.

4. Discussion

Renaissance contemporaries formed their own interpretations of the story featuring an emphasis on the concept of secularism, rationalism, and individualism. As mentioned before, Medusa's hair is one of her most prominent characteristics. One example of criticism that hairstyles steal gazes, and a woman should wear a veil to cover her coiffure out of respect in the church also occurred in Quattrocento Florence. Boccaccio, an important Renaissance humanist who attempted to rediscover and reinterpret ancient texts, explained the reason Medusa was punished in the original myth: her hair should be seen as symbolizing the secular goods full of trickeries, who's oppressive and biting nature the wise Athena eventually disclosed. From Boccaccio's interpretation, one might be skeptical about secularism in the Renaissance, however, he mainly used the story of Medusa as an allegory to reveal the relentless pressure of religion thus showing his supportive opinion towards secularism [13]. The use of classical figures as narrative or allegory was mainstream in the Renaissance that many artists practiced including Botticelli [14]. Perseus seizes Medusa's hair tightly as if showing off the "secular goods" to the audience, and particularly, just like what Perseus is doing, to the enemy, which is the

absolute power of the Church. On the one hand, secularism is declared through this audacious and defiant action. On the other hand, rationalism is firmly demonstrated. It reminds people of the two-sidedness of secular goods, that when handing it right it could be beneficial, otherwise it could be destructive. Additionally, a less abstract sense of secularism lies in the gradually growing secular power of the patron Medici Family who strengthens its influence by funding artworks of mythological scenes and classical aesthetics. Last but not least, like secularism and rationalism, individualism is also one of the indispensable components of the Renaissance. A sense of selfhood persisted in the best works of the time which reflected a concept that man's earthly nature was the outward expression of his spiritual destiny. While iconic depictions of personality continued, new approaches in poetry and painting were being developed to create the artistic illusion of individuality [15]. In the case of Perseus, this is shown not only via Cellini's signature but also from a new narrative this sculpture adopts that is unlike those in the classical past. Among the accessible ancient artworks depicting Perseus slaying Medusa in Greek vase paintings and Roman fresco paintings, Perseus is usually accompanied by Athena (as can be seen in Figure 2.), although, at this exact moment, Athena is not expected to be in the scene. The vase paintings present scenes without a precise moment or a fixed location, and they could be said less to illustrate a story than to embody a theme [16]. This vase presents the theme of Perseus's adventure with a continuous narrative, his head turning back to Athena further connecting different scenes together and making the separate events a whole motif. Meanwhile, this painting style emphasizes the importance of help and protection from the Olympian deities, which reduces the focus on the main character and the individuality of the hero. In spite of some accessories acquired from other deities, Cellini's Perseus is conducting this tremendous task as an independent and experienced individual, highlighting the spirit of individualism of the artist as well as the cultural movement of the Renaissance.



Fig. 2 Terracotta pelike [17]

5. Conclusion

To conclude, Greek mythology gained its popularity in the Renaissance largely due to the rediscovery of ancient sources. The embodiment of Greek mythology and the classical convention in the sculpture Perseus with the Head of Medusa is displayed through the choice of material, the application of contrapposto, the accurate depiction of Perseus as the famous mythological hero, and multiple layers of adaptions of Ovid's Metamorphoses. The Renaissance interpretation of Perseus

includes the virtue of Prudence which represents the patron Cosimo I de' Medici's political power and success, the intense artistic rivalry between contemporaries in which the masculinity is compared, and the concept of secularism, rationalism, and individualism. This dissertation summarizes and offers some valuable points of view on the analysis of Perseus with the head of Medusa, incorporating aspects like art, mythology, literature, politics, social psychology, and ideology. It considers interpretations of myths as reflections of society. The case study serves as a representative example of the study of the artworks located in Piazza della Signoria, Florence. Further research could be done to compare different artworks in this location, in order to discover more connections between classical conventions and Renaissance renderings. It is also very meaningful to explore more of how classical myths as allegories are interpreted and adapted in different times, the reasons behind this cultural phenomenon, and how those inventions could offer some crucial lessons and reliable guides to people. The charm of classical myths will always have its place in ever-changing societies.

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