

# Reflections on Man and Nature in Greek Mythology: From the Name of Natural Creatures

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## ABSTRACT

It is well known that Greek mythology has been very influential to western cultures and languages. As for the English language, it enriches its vocabulary to a large extent. And it is having an impact in a lot of different areas, like biology, psychology, geography, etc. Among this, one particular branch is the name of natural creatures. Many English names of natural creatures have their origin in Greek mythology. If these stories are analyzed carefully, they all contain a common theme—the relationship between man and nature. Based on the idea that myth as a reflection of people's ideology at that time, also reveals the condition of economic and social development in one society, this article mainly tells the story behind those words in detail and tries to find a reason for the theme from a societal perspective.

**Keywords:** *Greek mythology, English words, lexicon, derivation, borrowing*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Greek civilization had a crucial influence on western culture and language, especially Greek mythology. Although everyone can list some English words that came from Greek, the thoughts about stories themselves are very few. This article mainly focuses on man's understanding of nature as reflected in myths in terms of natural creatures' names.

In short, Greek mythology includes the story of the Twelve Gods of Olympus, the tale of the Heroes, and the Homeric epic, which is divided into two stories called the Iliad and the Odyssey. As for the reason for the

emergence of myths, in that time when science and technology were not developed, the ancients could only resort to their imagination and answer the questions about nature by making up stories. These stories were passed from one word to the other, forming different versions as they were told, gradually evolving into the myths we see today.

As for the influence on the English lexicon, about ¼ of the English language has been borrowed from Greek. That is close to 85,000 words! And many of them come from myths and stories of gods and goddesses, particularly from stories from ancient Greece. These words from Greek mythology are widely used in all areas of daily life, just as table 1 shows.[1-4]

**Table1.** some examples of English words derived from Greek myths

Greek	English	derivative word
μούσες	muses	Music, museum, amusement
Τιτάνες	titan	titanic
Άτλας (support the sky on his shoulders)	Atlas	Atlantic
κρόνος	Cronos	chronic
Γαία	Gaea-geo	geography
Νέκταρ	Nectar	
Ίριδα	Iris	iridescent
νύμφη	nymph	

Ευρώπη	Europe	European
ήπνος	Hypnos	Hypnosis
Οδύσσεια	odyssey	
αχιλλειος πτέρνα.	Achilles Heel	
ηράκλειο άθλο	Herculean Task	
το κουτί της Πανδώρας.	Pandora's Box	
το άγγιγμα του Μίδα	The Midas Touch	
φόβος	Phobia-Phobos	acrophobia, nomophobia
το Δούρειο Ίππο	Trojan horse	
ωκεανός	ocean	
Νίκη (the goddess of victory)	Nike	
μορφή	morph	morphology
Σειρήνες	Siren	Siren's singing
Μορφέας (the god of dreams)	Morpheus	morphine

## 2. NATURAL CREATURES' NAMES IN GREEK MYTHS

One particular branch of The English vocabulary that comes from mythology is the name of natural creatures, which can be mainly divided into two categories, flowers, and animals. In this part, I will discuss the origin of those words and tell their stories respectively.

### 2.1. Flowers

First, as for the word flower itself, it is derived from the Greek goddess of flower called φλώρα and her husband is Ζέφυρα. Ζέφυρα is the god of the western wind, which causes everything to grow and sprout. Odysseus traveled to a floating island walled with copper walls in the Odyssey stories. There lived Αίολος -- the god of the wind. He gave Odysseus a gift bag filled with all kinds of winds to help him home, except the West wind. The god of the wind tells Odysseus that they can safely arrive at their home Ιθάκη in nine days as long as they do not open it. The story shows that the West wind is the wind that helps others to get home, and when it is married to φλώρα, everywhere they go through blooms and flourishes. The word φλώρα in English is Flora, which is the root of flourish, florist, flower.

Now the three specific kinds of flowers' names will be discussed.

The English word laurel is also called Daphne. Behind this lies a very romantic Greek myth. Apollo, the handsome god of music and sports, met Δάφνη, the daughter of river Πηνειός when he was walking in the wild, and fell in love with her immediately. But Δάφνη did not want to marry him. She ran and ran, but Apollo caught up with her. She prayed to her father. As soon as Apollo touched her, her father changed her into a laurel tree. From then on Apollo always carried a wreath of

laurel, which became his favorite plant. In ancient Greece, laurel leaves were considered a symbol of victory, a status symbol, and laurel wreaths were presented to victors of the Pythian Games (6th century BC). [5]

The word narcissus comes from the Greek word νάρκισσος. It was originally the name of a beautiful teenager who fell in love with his reflection in the water, became depressed, and drowned to death, becoming a daffodil.[5-6]

As for the name lotus, it has a long history. It is from Latin lotus, from Greek lotos, a word used as a name for several plants before it came to mean Egyptian white lotus. It first appeared in Homer's Epic Poem, The Odyssey, where Odysseus drifted to an island where the people all ate a fruit called λωτό. Legend has it that eating this fruit will make you forget everything, and many of Odysseus's companions ate it and even forgot their goal of returning to their homeland. Because it can induce a dreamy forgetfulness, hence lotus-eater is "one who finds pleasure in a listless life".

### 2.2. Animals

In addition to these flowers, there are many animals with names derived from myths—for example, the cuckoo and the spider.

It was well known that Hera, Zeus' wife, resented his infidelity. So how did she decide to marry him in the first place? That's the story of the cuckoo. Zeus had been expecting Hera to act alone. At last one day, he saw Hera alone in the mountains and thought that his chance had come at last. He rained a shower of thunder (Zeus was the god of weather) and became a wet cuckoo, who sat trembling on Hera's lap, pretending to be in pity. Hera felt very sorry for the bird and covered it with one leg of her skirt to keep it warm. At once Zeus resumed his true form and forced Hera to marry him, promising her to be his

only lawful wife. From then on the cuckoo became the symbol of Hera. It also explains the rhododendron's moral -- always yours, a flower more sincere than a rose for a lover. Cuckoo(κούκος) is an onomatopoeia which mimics the sound of birds and is the sound made by lovers in love.

The English word spider is widely used, but it also has the name araneid. The name comes from a story about Athena, the goddess of wisdom. Athena mastered the textile industry and taught it to humans. In a village in Greece, a girl named Αράχνη became so good at weaving that she dared to ask Athena to compete against her. Athena was furious that a mortal had dared to challenge her authority, and that the girl had woven a fabricated love story of the gods onto the cloth. In her anger she changed the girl into a spider, araneid was her name Αράχνη. From it forms the word arachnid and arachnoid.

### 3. REASONS BEHIND

If we carefully analyze the above stories, we can find that most of these flowers and animals were changed by gods or people, and this phenomenon of "metamorphosis" is very common in Greek mythology. So why do these stories have one thing in common: gods or people turning into animals? It has to do with the time when these stories were made. Greek mythology, such as the Odyssey mentioned above is considered to be a reference to the Homeric period of Greek history. The plot of the story is closely related to the level of social civilization at that time. For example, iron was widely used in this period, and agriculture also developed greatly. There are many episodes in the epic, such as the Odyssey's race to plow and mow the grass, and the Iliad's reward of the winning discus thrower with a round piece of pig iron, which reflects, to some extent, the development of civilization. Therefore, the plot in myth is not simply fabricated by imagination but can reflect the level of social development and people's ideology at that time.

To be specific, most of the stories about people changing into animals in myth are stories in ancient times. For example, the story about the twelve main gods of Olympus mentioned above was passed down orally by ancient Greeks. As you can imagine, the society at that time was less civilized and less productive. Most of the people's production activities were closely around nature, such as hunting for food, living in caves, and so on. For people at that time, nature was as almighty as a god, providing all kinds of food, clothing, shelter, and transportation. It's not hard to understand why they worship nature and incorporate this worship into their stories.

In addition, they not only worship nature but also have a strong curiosity about the mysteries behind it. They may look out at the vast forests and wonder how

these plants came to be, and why these animals have these different preferences. These questions haunted people at that time. However, due to the backward technology, they could only make up stories by imagination to explain nature, which resulted in many individuals turning into natural creatures. This also reflects that people at that time were already thinking about the relationship between man and nature.

In general, the plot in which human beings or gods turn into animals is closely related to the level of social development at that time. The backward productivity makes them think that nature is omnipotent, worship it in thought, and resort to it to solve their doubts. [7]

### 4. CONCLUSION

Just as I mentioned above, many animals and plants in the English language have names derived from people in Greek mythology. This reflects that the ancestors at that time had begun to think about the relationship between man and nature and they worshiped and revered nature. Thus, it can be seen that myth is not merely imaginary. Through them, modern scholars can better understand the historical society at that time. Moreover, as Greece was the birthplace of Western civilization, the words in these stories also spread to various places, exerting a profound influence on English vocabulary. [8-10]

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