

**The Importance of Greek Mythology and Its Impact on Youth Culture in the United States**  
**Using *Percy Jackson: The Lightning Thief***

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Abstract:

Rick Riordan's work with the *Percy Jackson* book series presented young readers with a connection to Greek Mythology unparalleled to anything they had experienced before. His work, crafted as an Americanized and easily consumable form of Greek Mythology for young readers, became an integral piece of a culture fixated on ancient classics. This study examines the impact on both the immediate and long-term effects on youth culture within the United States given this newfound interest and interpretation of Greek Mythology. Both ancient works, such as Homer's *Iliad*, and contemporary studies, such as Jan Bremmer's *Interpretations of Greek Mythology*, are utilized to grasp an understanding of how mythology is integrated into a society's culture and the lasting impact it may have, particularly with modern consumers. This led to the understanding that mythology may still be very pertinent to our society today, yet in a modern and revolutionized way.

For millennia, the utterly captivating and endless lore of Greek mythology has mesmerized the world's population, serving in duality as both an escape from harsh realities and as a tool of divine guidance. Through the stories of Greek gods and goddesses, people find themselves entranced with their likeness so much that they have been deeply ingrained in not only Greek culture, but popular culture across the globe. In the history of the United States, the study of its own social construct and popular culture has been best understood as a grand accumulation by outside influences, with ancient Greek culture holding a notable prominence in this respect. While live plays, poetry, and prose writing dominated most of the ancient world in covering the landscape of Greek mythology, modern American adaptations demonstrated their accounts best through interpolative novels, television shows, and movies. In lieu of historical epics and fantastical chronicles, the early 2000s was a monumental period for a cultural boom of old and new worlds to coincide with the mainstream of American popular culture. As *Harry Potter* spellbound a generation with magical spells and wizard games, or as the *Lord of the Rings* ignited the dream of dragon fighting in Middle Earth, *Percy Jackson: The Lightning Thief* introduced a whole new generation to the fabled world of Greek mythology. Rick Riordan, the author of the *Percy Jackson* series, which spans five novel entries, weaves between the lines of connecting contemporary lifestyles within ancient characters, creating a cast of relatable deities that are not only unforgettable, but inspiring. Riordan's Americanization of Greek mythology is not necessarily groundbreaking; western adaptations go as far back as the 19th Century with *A Wonder Book for Boys and Girls* (1851) and *Tanglewood Tales* (1853), yet Riordan's storytelling has propelled the *Percy Jackson* series to the single-most successful breakthrough of Greek mythology in American culture. For most of the adult population, these cultural influences are fun crazes that come and go. There will always be something new and exciting to cross the

landscape of the silver screen or the pages of a novel. However, for the youth in the United States, these influences stand as much more than that; mythical stories and characters become something to admire, something to cling on to when there is nothing else. Percy Jackson was a necessary protagonist to kids that could both relate to his out-of-the-box, outsider nature while finding admiration in his courage and heroism that could seldom be found elsewhere at his magnitude when the novel was released in 2005. While undoubtedly significant in the mainstream of popular culture, Rick Riordan's Americanization of Greek mythology was especially powerful for the way it introduced a seemingly innovative world of stories that young people connect with, learn from, and endlessly explore. What is most pertinent to question is both the immediate and long-lasting impact that Riordan's series had on young readers, specifically, how his Americanized submission into the mythological canon promoted a strong interest in the classics and how this might have affected the audience's interpretation of Greek mythology given this series was likely their first introduction to it. As the series remains alive through a Broadway musical and talks of a revitalized television series, its legacy suggests Riordan's series is the single-most successful rendition of the Greek classics in the new millennium.

As American culture finds Greek mythology as a constructive backbone, it is fundamental to understand the gravity of mythology and religion in ancient Greek societies before understanding its place in our American structure. Mythology, by ancient Greek standards, is fascinating as it holds an unparalleled connection between the divine and the natural world. To historians, understanding the sheer scale of mythology is challenging as the presence and functionality of supernatural monsters and deities surely had a larger impact on their world outside of pure entertainment. Cara Leigh Sanders proposes that there were eight functions to

mythology in Greek society, those being: history, education, explanation (for the unexplainable), cultural causality (to explain why a culture did certain things), governing legitimacy, understanding creation, understanding the afterlife, and lastly, entertainment.<sup>176</sup> All that considered, as difficult as it may be to retroactively comprehend the exact placement of Greek mythology in their ancient society, it is widely accepted that it was deeply interconnected within the lives of everyday people, more so than any folklore seen at this breadth. As a component of history, Greek myth could most realistically be understood through the tales of human heroics more so than the study of divine intervention. For example, Homer's famous epics, the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* are both sequences of the same overarching story and yet both were delivered in subtly different ways. In these stories, Homer depicts the great duality that Greek myth is often broken down into, that of the Heroic and the Divine<sup>177</sup>. The *Iliad* could much more accurately be perceived as a historical retelling of one of the largest wars ever fought in the pre-Greek kingdom era due to the nature of human heroism. While divine intervention is certainly present, it is much more prominently represented through the idea of fate and the emotional connections the deities have between the mortals and their actions. Alternatively, divine myths expand upon the origins and actions of the gods, often amongst themselves, yet there remain instances when the gods play an integral part in the dealings of humankind. In contrast to its precursor, the *Odyssey* introduces a significant increase in direct divine intervention that immediately impacts Odysseus' journey. This could be well exemplified by the end of book 12, as Odysseus and his men are divinely punished by Zeus due to their wrongdoing of slaughtering the Sun God's divine cattle:

“Then, then in the same breath Zeus hit the craft

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<sup>1</sup> Sailors, Cara Leigh, *The Function of Mythology and Religion in Ancient Greek Society*. (2007).

<sup>2</sup> Sailors, *Function of Mythology*, 14

with a lightning-bolt and thunder. Round she spun,  
 reeling under the impact, filled with reeking brimstone,  
 shipmates pitching out of her, bobbing round like seahawks  
 swept along by the whitecaps past the trim black hull—  
 and the god cut short their journey home forever.<sup>178</sup>

Homer's delivery of mythology is undoubtedly groundbreaking in the scope of classical studies and our modern understanding of ancient Greece and Greek mythology as one of the top primary sources from an era of forgotten or lost literature. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* survive as prime examples of nearly all eight of Sailor's eight proposed functions of Mythology, not just history. Another major component of Mythology within society was its purpose of explanation which was regularly visited through the ideas of fate and divine explanation, which were found in many more stories and tales outside of Homer's. As understood by Jan Bremmer in his book, *Interpretations of Greek Mythology*, the muses and poets that told these stories were divinely inspired by deities, conveying the adventures of the gods as they bore important and relevant messages about life or about the gods to the people of Greece.<sup>179</sup> It is within this societal relevance that Greek mythology has graced the cultures of countless people outside the walls of its own history.

This is why in a college classroom in the year 2005, nearly three thousand years after the writings of Homer, Euripides, and Hesiod, students eagerly compare the

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<sup>3</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Emily Wilson (New York: W.W. Norton And Company, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Jan N Bremmer, *Interpretations of Greek Mythology* (2014).

similarities between the story of Hercules and the 1987 cultural hit *Predator*.<sup>180</sup> Within weaving ancient mythology inside the fabric of popular culture, we see most potently how old stories can have a profound effect on all cultures, and how David Fraufenfelder puts it, can “illuminate both sides in ways otherwise impossible.”<sup>181</sup> Rick Riordan became a powerful proponent of this effect. His *Percy Jackson* series delivered the pantheon of Greek gods in a way never-before-seen in the American media. He blends ancient mythology with everyday American life, allowing young readers to symbolically connect the stories of the Greeks to the locations and norms of American culture and society. As a seamless introduction into the world of Greek mythology, Riordan largely drops grand and imagined temples, caves, and palaces alike often found in ancient stories and interpolates them into familiar settings. Examples of this are found all across Percy’s journey, as he finds himself a new home in the form of a demi-god summer camp in Long Island, New York; and akin to Odysseus and his men encountering the intoxicating lotus flowers in the *Odyssey*<sup>182</sup>, Percy and his companions come across the Lotus Hotel in Las Vegas, where once you “check in, you stay forever.”<sup>183</sup> And to his ultimate destination, the Empire State Building, as the building’s grand elevators double as the celestial entrance to Mount Olympus.<sup>184</sup> In hand with this modernization of Greek mythology is naturally the representation of the deities themselves, imagined in ways a younger audience can draw easy connections to their character. For example, in *The Lightning Thief*, Ares, the God of war, is introduced in front of a “chrome-lined diner” and is

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<sup>5</sup> David Fraufenfelder, *Popular Culture and Classical Mythology*. (2005).

<sup>6</sup> Fraufenfelder, *Popular Culture* (2005)

<sup>7</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, Trans. Emily Wilson, 139

<sup>8</sup> Riordan, Rick, *Percy Jackson: The Lightning Thief*, 273

<sup>9</sup> Riordan, *Percy Jackson*, 351

imagined as a rough rider, described with aviator sunglasses and a studded leather jacket as he twirled around a pocket knife<sup>185</sup>, in a scene that is distinctly reminiscent of the American “greaser” stereotype from the 1950s. Riordan’s connection with American iconicity continued through Ares’ counterpart, Aphrodite, the Greek Goddess of love and beauty, fittingly associating her with a retired “tunnel of love” amusement park ride where they come across her pink silk scarf that smelled of “indescribable-rose.”<sup>186</sup> It is within these walls of recognition that American audiences, most notably young readers, can draw lines of cognition that allows them to garner further interest in both the subject and the characters of classical literature. Not only that, but Riordan’s Americanized connotations of these gods present an easier and more natural path for young and interested readers to learn about the pantheon of the Greek Gods and Goddesses.

Riordan’s intentions to Americanize Greek mythology to tailor its stories to a younger audience is directly influenced by his own experience as both a teacher and a father. He presented Percy Jackson as a young student, unaware of where he fits in, struggling with ADHD and dyslexia, a protagonist capable of courage, cleverness, and heroism. Riordan idealized the learning disabilities of ADHD and dyslexia as pseudo-superpowers, driving the explanation as due to his brain possessing heightened senses and reflexes because of being a demigod<sup>187</sup>. As his own son dealt with the same issues as Percy, Riordan created his character as an admirable figure, allowing his son, and children everywhere, to embody the capacities that they struggle with and wear it, as in Riordan’s words, “as a badge.”<sup>188</sup> It is important to take this admiration of Greek

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<sup>10</sup> Riordan, *Percy Jackson*, 233

<sup>11</sup> Riordan, *Percy Jackson*, 243

<sup>12</sup> Riordan, *Percy Jackson*, 88

<sup>13</sup> Williams, Sally. “Percy Jackson: My Boy’s Own Adventure.” *The Guardian*, February 8, 2010

mythology honed by American society and understand the significance of its presence. The fundamental morality underlying the stories of classical mythology, such as loyalty, control, sympathy, forgiveness, and respect still prove themselves as powerful lessons to live by and Rick Riordan does an effective job to perpetuate, and in a way, enhance those models for his younger audience.

In reference to the aforementioned eight functions of mythology in Greek society, as proposed by Cara Leigh Sailors, it can be equally proposed that the *Percy Jackson* series introduced its own set of functions for its readers and the budding new generation. As a source of historical insight, Riordan relays the relationships between the gods in a relatively accurate manner while exploring the grand range of creative liberties that keeps the stories exciting and relatable to his target audience. Examine the titular character and his Greek mythological counterpart, Perseus. Rick Riordan weaves the connection between how Perseus was presented through Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (8 AD) while continuing to tell his own story. Just as Perseus was given a sword of adamantine forged by Hephaestus, Percy was given "Anaklusmos", a shimmering bronze sword that Percy translated as "Riptide"<sup>189</sup>. And just as Perseus was gifted winged sandals by Hermes, Percy was gifted winged basketball sneakers by Hermes' demigod son, Luke.<sup>190</sup> Most notably, Riordan also links the characters' most heralded victory, that of slaying the gorgon, Medusa. Riordan's creativity through the novel is perhaps most visible in his inventive depictions of half-blood sons and daughters (children born from God-mortal relationships) of several Greek gods as vehicles to deliver relationships between Gods and Goddesses that are canonically accurate to ancient portrayals. For example, in Percy

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<sup>14</sup> Riordan, *Percy Jackson*, 159

<sup>15</sup> Riordan, *Percy Jackson*, 156

Jackson's fight against Medusa, Anabeth, Athena's fictionalized demigod daughter, found Percy a reflective glass orb that he used to defeat the monster.<sup>191</sup> As Anabeth first discovered the orb, she says, "A polished shield would be better." in reference to the polished shield that Athena had given Perseus in his battle against Medusa. While nothing is truly ever "set in stone" in ancient myth, Riordan's appreciation and acknowledgement towards the source material that is derivative of these characters speaks to the faith he has in the series as an educational tool for a reader's first introduction to the world of Greek mythology.

Understanding the importance and impact that Greek mythology has had on American culture is naturally found in the reception of the audience. The general fascination with Greek myth, which has sustained multiple millennia, has found its lore indoctrinated within the everyday life of society. So much so that several major American companies, institutions, projects, and programs pride their linkage with the characters and stories of Greek mythology. Nike, now the #1 clothing and sports brand in the country<sup>192</sup>, is famously named after the Greek Goddess of Victory by the same name. NASA's top space program, Apollo, follows suit after the God of the same name, which refers to his archery talents and accuracy to hit his target. Fast-forward to the late-20th and early-21st Century, and fascination with Greek mythology and culture rose to a new height thanks to the popular success of movies like Disney's *Hercules* (1997), which would become a household classic; games like *God of War* (2005), which won several "Game of the Year" awards; and of course with novels such as *Percy Jackson: The Lightning Thief*,

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<sup>16</sup> Riordan, *Percy Jackson*, 190

<sup>17</sup> Fitzpatrick, Hayley, "The Top 10 Clothing Companies in America - Business Insider," Business Insider (July 6, 2015)

which was critically received as one of the top children/young adult novels of the year from its 2005 release. The groundbreaking footwork that these mediums put forward became the driving force behind the passionate national interest of Greek mythology and culture that entranced an entire generation.

*Percy Jackson's* equally successful and important reception to young readers was evidently vital to the teaching of the classics in school, as the book series transcended the material from something purely educational to something that was now fun, entertaining, and relatable. The garnered interest behind the series even influenced real-life renditions of summer camps modeled after the demi-god camp from the series, Camp Half-Blood, which allowed fans to immerse themselves in the lore and activities that they so enamored while reading. As stated by one of the camp's original coordinators from 2006, "We'll do anything to keep kids interested in reading. We try to make meaningful connections between history, mythology, literature, art, science, sports, current events, language, and rampant creativity."<sup>193</sup> Their activities, which pertained to sword training, rock climbing, archery, and chariot racing helped prompt an innovative insight into the world of ancient Greece to the younger generation that they would not have otherwise if it were not for the success and influence of Riordan's novels and his Americanization of mythological stories.

In a 2009 interview, Rick Riordan encapsulated his understanding of how powerful the presence of myth is in our modern context with this: "I think the more you understand myths, the more you understand the roots of our culture and the more things will resonate. Do you have to know them? No, but certainly it is nice to recognize how deeply these things are embedded in

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<sup>18</sup> Topher Bradfield, "Lareviewofbooks," lareviewofbooks, (2013)

our literature, our art.”<sup>19</sup> Through the ancient Greek civilization, the tales of mythology were integral to their society in a multitude of ways, ranging from pure entertainment to giving legitimacy to a system of governance, or to simply explain what was once believed to be unexplainable. While the resulting impact on mythology today, as an influential building block of American culture, is not as direct and explicit, it may still be utilized as a framework for understanding human nature and the world around us. These creative, curated tales of recurring deities that are symbolic of both the natural world and the human psyche have been essential building blocks to art, literature, and education for thousands of years. What *Percy Jackson: The Lightning Thief* accomplishes is a revitalization of these ancient narratives to an audience that had seldom mythological outlets prior. With credit to the excellently crafted modern Americanization of these stories by the mind of Rick Riordan, a generational wave of readers and consumers have been given the breadth to further encounter the many questions and morals that mythology often employs.

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<sup>19</sup> Jacqueline Bach, “Battling Greek Mythology, History, and Reluctant Readers: An Interview with Rick Riordan,” *The ALAN Review* 37, no. 1 (2009)

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