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Matter 15

Summary

The Celebrity Culture of the Greek Gods

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Report

Research Proposal for a PhD in Classics

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Provisional title: The Celebrity Culture of the Greek Gods

1. Overview

When, as a ten-year-old in late 2005, I played the strategy game *Civilization IV* [1], I was particularly struck by the quotation read by the actor Leonard Nimoy that accompanied the discovery of Polytheism:

Not at all similar are the race of the immortal gods and the race of men who walk upon the earth.

It seemed to me that this statement, ostensibly from Homer's *Iliad*, was wrong. The gods of ancient Greece were very much like us, from their petty squabbles and emotional outbursts to their family ties, friendships and desire to do the right (in their view) thing.

I had read the Penguin Classic version of the *Iliad* translated by Fagles [2], but did not recall this powerful line. Checking through, I found that Fagles had a rather different way of expressing it:

We are not of the same breed, we never will be, the deathless gods and men who walk the earth.

I sought out other translations by Buckley [3], Chapman [4], Lattimore [5], Pope [6], Cowper [7], Lang *et al* [8], Fitzgerald [9], Murray [10] and Edward, Earl of Derby [11]. None had the same turn of phrase as each other, let alone as in *Civilization IV*.

Setting aside my frustration with the vagaries of translation, this exercise inspired in me a desire to explore the psychology of the gods of ancient Greece. The structure of my undergraduate degree did not permit this, but that of my Masters did. I

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took the perspective of undertaking a number of standard psychology tests (Big Five IPIP [12], MMPI-2-RF [13] and MBTI [14]) adopting the personae of major Greek gods and then comparing the results.

Although I have yet to complete the analysis component of my dissertation, I am persuaded that personality inventories are insufficient to gain an in-depth understanding of the “minds” of the gods. A better way presents itself: using the apparent motivations of the gods to reflect on their personal mental make-up.

2. Background

The ancient Greeks were similar to us, but not the same. Their culture was very different (slavery was its bedrock [15]) and their beliefs often seem strange to modern ways of thinking. As the quotation from *The Iliad* suggests, the Greek gods likewise were similar to our ancestors, but not the same. Nevertheless, as the product of the collective minds of generations of poets, orators, priests and common people, the gods of the ancient Greeks must reflect *something* of their shared psyche.

As a way of teasing out what this shared psyche might be, I propose to use the model offered by celebrity culture. In the same way that celebrity culture reveals something about how we see ourselves in a mass-media society [16][17], so celebrity culture in the Classical period reveals

something about how the people of those times saw themselves.

Without question, fame was important to our ancestors in ancient Greece. Herostratus set fire to the second temple of Artemis at Ephesus for the simple reason that he wanted to become famous (a desire that was fulfilled, but only after he'd been executed). Achilles chose a brief but glorious life over a long but uneventful one.

Celebrity was more commonly found in the form of demonstrations of athletic prowess[18]. Individual Olympiads were named after the winner of the most prestigious race, the stadion, which was over a distance of a stade (about 200m); thus, we know the name of Coroebus of Elis, who won the stadion at the first Olympiad.

In addition to athletes, fame followed poets, philosophers, courtesans and high-profile criminals [19]. These were *pre-figurative* celebrities [20], though: there wasn't a feeling that they were part of the ordinary person's life, and many of them only achieved fame after death [21].

There is a glaring exception to this, however, which nonetheless does not appear to have been considered in any great depth by the academy: gods were part of every ordinary person's life, and individuals felt that they had a parasocial relationship [22] with them just as much as someone today might feel they know a newsreader or actor or footballer who has no awareness that they even

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exist. The Greek gods were figurative celebrities in the modern sense.

It is my hope that by examining the Greek gods as if they were people, insight can be gained into the minds of the ancient Greeks themselves. In particular, I hope to argue that the interactions between the gods and mortals were driven in part by a sense of celebrity: the gods directed their visitations towards those who were known to them.

My research question is:

RQ1: To what extent did the gods of ancient Greece treat key mortals as celebrities?

If I have time, I would like to add a second research question:

RQ2: To what extent did key mortals of ancient Greece treat the gods as celebrities?

My contribution is the creation of a new and original lens through which the interactions between the ancient Greeks and their gods may be viewed.

3. Methodology

I shall begin by identifying those Greek myths that show interactions between gods and mortals. I shall then iterate through them line by line, tagging all instances of such reactions with their nature, participants, cause and results. I hope to classify at least a thousand interactions this way.

To determine what tags to use, I shall first conduct a preliminary study of Homer, then use

the data obtained from this to construct a robust set of tags to use for the remaining selected works.

For example, in the first 400 lines of book five of the *Iliad*, there are the following direct interactions between gods and mortals:

- Athena endows Diomedes with courage.
- Hephæstus rescues Idæus (his son).
- Artemis chooses not to intervene to save Scamandrius (whom she had taught).
- Pandarus boasts that Apollo is on his side.
- Diomedes asks Athena to help him kill Pandarus.
- Athena endows Diomedes with the spirit of Tydeus (his father).
- Athena endows Diomedes with the ability to tell the difference between gods and mortals.
- Athena urges Diomedes to wound Aphrodite (her half-sister) if she appears.
- Athena directs Diomedes' spear to kill Pandarus.
- Aphrodite protects Æneas (her son).
- Diomedes wounds Aphrodite.
- Apollo rescues Æneas.

There are also six direct interactions between gods and two cases where mortals act in accordance with their interpretations of the gods' motives.

Even from this short analysis, it is clear that the Olympians regarded certain mortals as celebrities

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and *vice versa*, and that this is what drove them to behave as they did with respect to each other.

The tagging can be done in translation, rather than in the original ancient Greek. Although I am familiar with basic quantitative methods, I believe that I may need further training to do justice to the analysis. Most notably, I'm very weak in the area of clustering techniques.

4. Timescale

I expect to spend the first year reading up on what others have written about the psychology of Greek gods and about celebrity (both in the ancient and modern eras). I shall spend the second year collecting data and the first half of the third year on analysis. I shall devote the remainder of the third year to writing up my thesis.

5. Bibliography

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Notes

Prewitt's proposal was rejected for lacking sufficient impact. He went on to embark upon a PhD on the topic of a Deleuzian reading of Aphrodite's interactions with her siblings.

[Update 22 Aug 2022]

Prewitt passed his *viva voce* 9 Aug 2022.