13

Theoi Becoming Kami: Classical Mythology in the Anime World

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This paper deals with the reception of classics into a specific modern medium, Japanese animation. This type of cartoon – called *anime* – constitutes a very important cultural phenomenon that has spread across Japan and latterly the Western world over recent decades. *Anime* production, and consumption, is now a pillar of Japanese pop culture, and it is becoming more and more a worldwide trend: such a broad media and social phenomenon knows almost no comparison as far as the depth and breadth of its diffusion is concerned.[1] Japanese animation is not just a kind of entertainment intended for 'kids': there are different productions, aimed at various audiences, from little children (*kodomo*) to adults (*seinen* and *josei*), and dealing with themes better suited either for males (*shounen* for boys, and *seinen* for men) or females (*shoujo* for girl and *josei* for women).[2]

We are aware that this is not the first review of Greco-Roman elements in Japanese animation,[3] but we firmly believe that our approach can meaningfully contribute to understanding the process of perception and appropriation of classical heritage in Japanese pop culture. Research conducted so far has mostly focused on a classically-centred view. Even leaving aside the tacit assumption of cultural superiority that this approach implies (a strategy rarely leading to balanced studies), such a conceit could prove to be too narrow in perspective for a full enquiry into this subject. Indeed, this approach led to some really *trenchant* comments on this type of production. For example, Salvatore Settis, in a recent essay about the future of classical culture, questioned Miyazaki's decision to name one of his heroines Nausicaa;[4] or worse, the phenomenon has been dealt with as a process of 'declassicizing the classics', implying that a non-European culture could not fully metabolize our ancient heritage, and would just randomly or whimsically pick some exotic elements out of it.[5]

This is not our standpoint, as we believe that such a presumptuous approach could be very misleading. With this study we aim to expand current knowledge on the topic and to provide new perspectives. We do not restrict our research to a mere list of Greco-Roman elements found in *anime* productions; rather, we investigate their origin and, more generally, how the classical heritage is perceived by *anime* creators filtered by Japanese pop culture. Moreover, we believe that the *anime* world – thanks to its wide success – could be an advantageous observatory to analyse the actual reception of the classics in Japanese mass culture. Of course, a study of the circulation of such themes in academic fields or other cultural enclaves could be enlightening in its own way, but the analysis of the output of pop culture can explain better how the classics are perceived by a mass audience and how they reach it. This prospect may lead to some really interesting surprises, since it might reveal how the 'pop reception' perhaps travelled along completely different routes from the more elite version and could be, for a good part, independent from it.

Classical mythology in 70s anime: the golden era of Osamu Tezuka

Even though born shortly after World War II *anime* production in Japan really flourished in the 1960s, thanks especially to the work of Osamu Tezuka. Tezuka, who was already a productive *manga* author in the 1950s, founded Mushi Production in 1962 and created the so-called *anime*. These thirty-minute animated episodes, regularly aired on television, quickly became the standard Japanese cartoons and played a major role in exporting Japanese animation to the West. The influence of Western culture on Tezuka's work was already evident in his *manga* and became more so in his *anime* productions: those physical features of the characters – large eyes, blonde or unlikely-coloured hair and anthropomorphized animals – that later became trademarks of Japanese *anime* production; but also themes, traditions and leitmotifs typical of Western culture. Tezuka indeed drew inspiration not only from traditional Japanese culture, but also from the American comics which literally invaded Japan at the end of World War II. He learned about Marvel heroes and DC comics, and both affected his work; above all he was fascinated by the output of Disney, which was much more meaningful than its Marvel and DC counterparts at that time. These Western models affected both the graphic and narrative aspects of Tezuka's work: among

his first *anime* there are remakes of Disney classics, such as Bambi. Tezuka did not limit his exploration and revision of Western culture to American comics only: he also showed a great interest in European culture, traditions, myths and divinities.[6] The fusion between these diverse sources of inspiration – which influenced generations of *mangaka*, scriptwriters and character designers – is very evident in the first era of Japanese *anime* production, which is characterized by references to Western myths and traditions. Besides, Osamu Tezuka is not only the first author who imported Western elements in Japanese animation, but also the first who influenced Western productions with *his* work (*The Lion King*, Blockbuster Disney, 1994 is essentially a remake of *Jungle Taitei*, *The Jungle Emperor*, 1965–1966 by Tezuka).[7]

The first *anime* revolving around classical mythology was *Umi no Triton* (*Triton of the Sea*) by Tezuka, broadcast in 1972 and inspired by the homonymous *manga* series published in the years 1969–1971. The *anime*, a *shonen*, tells the story of the young Triton, a boy growing up in a village of fishermen who finds out that he belongs to the sea family of the Tritons: he is in fact the son of the king and the queen of Atlantis, overthrown and killed by the god Poseidon. After he finds out the truth he wages war against Poseidon in order to avenge his parents and claim back the throne of Atlantis.

Despite the not very original plot, *Umi no Triton* contains many of the typical elements of Western culture that will be used from this moment onwards in *manga* and *anime* productions, first of all the recurring fusion of Japanese elements with Western ones, all framed in a fluid narrative structure. The merging process follows a precise schema. The Western classical tradition essentially constitutes the background of the *anime*: it is referenced in the names of the main characters, Poseidon, Atlantis, Tritons, mermaids and sea monsters. However, the way the same characters and their *modus agendi* is represented is instead drawn from the Japanese tradition. For example, Poseidon, the Tritons and the nymphs are far from similar to their original Greek counterparts. Poseidon resembles an *oni*, a Japanese demon; the mermaids look like humans while the nymphs are half-fish and half-women. Moreover, many of the sea monsters sent by the god of the sea to fight Triton are large dinosaurs similar to Godzilla (*Gojira*). The latter, according to Japanese collective imagination, represents the archetype of the sea monster. The sea itself seems to be alive, rather than controlled by Poseidon. Following Japanese tradition, the sea is shown to be a positive character at times – a source of nourishment and a saviour – and a mighty adversary and destroyer at others – incarnating the ancestral and unfortunately current fear of *tsunami*, the great wave.

More generally *Umi no Triton* presents for the first time what can be defined as a 'monolithic reception of the Western world': an ideal perception of the Western world as a whole, lacking that spatial and temporal contextualization the knowledge of which is a result of a direct experience. This homogeneous view is most likely the result of the way Japan learned about the Western world: an indirect acquisition of information filtered by Western media: television, comics, cinema and animation. This aspect would always be present in every *anime* dealing with classical elements. It should be no surprise then that Triton, as soon as he finds out he is the son of the sovereigns of Atlantis, abandons his clothes to wear the traditional Greek attire: a tunic with a red *chlamis* (which will become the uniform of Athena's knights in the 1980s classic *Saint Saiya*); similarly, it should come as no surprise that Atlantis and the sea empire show many similarities with the kingdom of Namor[8] in the (Western) Marvel universe, well known and appreciated by Osamu Tezuka.

In conclusion, we would like to point out a detail that is symptomatic of how the reception of classics in this oeuvre is a progressively evolving process: starting with *Umi no Triton*, all *anime* characters related to the marine world and connected to the Western world are characterized by green or blue hair, following the trend started by Tezuka: the hair of Sailor Neptune is green, and that of Sailor Mercury (warrior of the waters) is blue in the *Sailor Moon* series; Andromeda's hair is green in *Saint Seiya* – both the mythological princess' and the knight's – while the hair of Kira of Scilla, general of Poseidon's army, is blue.

Another work connected to mythology is *Kuroi Kumo Shiroi Hane* (*Black Cloud, White Feather*), an animated film – again by Osamu Tezuka – broadcast in 1979. It tells the story of Unico, a young unicorn who was originally Psyche's pet, who is doomed by the evil Venus to an endless peregrination. Unico uses his magical powers to bring happiness to the people met during his travels.

The *anime* was fairly successful, and a spin-off was realized at the beginning of 1980s.[9] In *Kuroi Kumo Shiroi Hane* it is possible to find again the elements mentioned above, shared by all the animated productions of the same genre in that period: the fusion between Eastern and Western elements, even between elements from different Western traditions. The narrative structure is typically Western, more reminiscent of a tale by the Grimm brothers (extremely popular at that time in Japan)[10] than of classical myth. The graphic style, although congruent with Japanese standards, is influenced by the Disney universe. Once more we can find the monolithic reception of the Western world: it seems as if, while the *anime* is clearly characterized by a strong mythological setting, when it comes to princesses, queens and talking animals, Grimm and Disney productions

are clearly seen as paradigms. Aside from the setting and the graphic rendering, the Disney universe has a strong influence on this work even when it comes to the emotional features of both humans and animals. Moreover, Venus, the main antagonist of the tale, shows many personality traits typical of the evil stepmothers of German folklore. From a graphical perspective, she resembles Grimhilde from the Disney production *Snow White* (1937).

The *anime* is characterized by the presence of many aspects typical of Japanese culture which might not easily be understood by a Western audience. The most striking of them is the special attention given to air pollution, an issue extremely relevant in Japan at that time and present in several animated productions of the same period: in *Kuroi Kumo Shiroi Hane* the ecological threat – that Unico defeats with his magic – is represented by the noxious fumes generated by a factory.

Others tried to follow Tezuka's footsteps but no production ever achieved similar quality or success. Such was the case of *Hoshi no Orpheus* (*Orpheus of the Stars*), broadcast in 1979, the same year as *Kuroi Kumo Shiroi Hane*. This *anime* clearly shows the great differences in terms of culture and art between the Japanese and American worlds in the 1970s and 1980s. According to the original project, developed by a joint Japanese-American team, *Orpheus* should have been similarly constructed to *Fantasia* by Disney (1940): a series of animated episodes accompanied by music. The subjects chosen were some myths drawn from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.[11] The final outcome was five episodes with mythological plots, for which the Japanese team took care of the graphic part while the Americans dealt with the musical elements. Despite the huge amount of resources employed, and the effort of the Japanese team to appeal to a Western audience, the *anime* was not very successful in the US. Even though the animation techniques are reminiscent of Disney standards – especially *Fantasia* – and the myths are accurately represented, unlike Tezuka's *anime*, nonetheless the Western audience – mostly American – did not like the production, mainly because of two factors: the human character features – too homogeneous and then perceived as too typically Japanese; and the plot, considered too difficult to follow. In order not to waste the work done, the *anime* was re-produced with the title *Wind of Change*, with some heavy modifications: the introduction of dialogue and most importantly a voice-over (by Peter Ustinov) explaining the plot and the reasons why the characters were so similar to each other. Obviously the new version completely distorted the original aim of the project. It was abundantly clear that the Western audience was not ready to accept a Japanese presentation overstepping the boundaries to which American and European prejudice wished

to confine it. In fact, the latter was perceived, not without bias, as inferior to the Disney production: in the 1970s it was unacceptable for a cartoon claiming to be 'the new Fantasia' to be produced according to the standards typical of an 'inferior' production. This bias had its root in the inability of a Western audience to understand the intrinsic characteristics of Japanese *anime*. This prejudice would be overcome later in the 1990s thanks to Hayao Miyazaki, whose works would be granted great acclaim in the West. It is also the case that Miyazaki established a branch of his production house, Ghibli Studio, in the US and recently Disney has signed a deal with Ghibli's parent company, Tokuma Shoten, for exclusive worldwide distribution rights to many Ghibli films.[12]

Getting into the industry wheels: the 80s revolution

Starting with the 1980s, something begins to change in *anime* productions that include classical themes. What we have now, even if at a first glance it may not seem so different from the 1970s productions, is a completely new approach to the subject, that involves a different perception of the market and, above all, of the method of production.

The new series broadcast at the beginning of the decade represent, in a way, the follow-up of the great lesson of Tezuka; yet, at the same time, they set a clear break with the previous productions: *anime* dealing with the classical heritage are no longer either a whim or the brilliant intuition of a genius, nor an ambitious project aiming at reproducing Disney's successes. Greco-Roman topics are now ready to enter the *anime* industry officially and they have to conform to the same rules as any other production: perhaps these works didn't aim at excellence, as we have seen that some of the works from the previous period did, and were more like a mass-market product; yet they were welcomed by their audience. Perhaps *Hoshi no Orpheus* taught a good lesson to Japanese producers: as a matter of fact, in this period of adjustment, they concentrated their efforts on what was worldwide supposed to be the field in which they could reach – if not perfection – at least a very good result, namely the long series.

The process began in 1981, with the release of a new series, *Uchuu Densetsu Ulysses 31*[13] (*Space Legend Ulysses 31*). The new series can be considered an experiment in terms of the concrete usability of classical themes in the animated market. Set in the thirty-first century, this *anime* is a Franco-Japanese co-production that offers a reinterpretation of the *Odyssey*, set among the stars. Of course, Japan is not setting aside its culture and merely putting on stage a myth

by broadcasting this *anime*. The choice of shifting the setting from the sea to outer space fits flawlessly with the most common tendencies of contemporary production: the airing of this series coincides with the full bloom of the great robot era and the development of the most famous space sagas.[14] Even the graphic rendering perfectly reflects the bond between Western tradition and Japanese creativity: the choice fell upon Shingo Araki[15] who decided to draw the mythological characters and took inspiration from classical sculptures, in order to create a product that would better satisfy Western audiences. In all, this *anime* is an accurate, yet not stilted, blend of classical elements and modern sci-fi: Ulysses, while travelling on a space ship, meets characters taken from the *Odyssey* – like Circe, Calypso, the Laestrygonians, Scylla and Charybdis – yet his sole companions, along with his son Telemachus, are two young aliens, Yumi and Yumaiosu.

This *anime* was a great success, between the 1980s and the 1990s, in both Japan and Europe, but also in America, Oceania and Asia, proving that serving a Western heritage in soy sauce could bring about a winning product, fitting any kind of audience. In a way, this can be considered the start of the great era of the classical-related *anime* productions.

The same bond between classics and Japan can be found in an almost contemporary *anime* that, at a first glance, could seem totally different from *Ulysses 31*: *Ochamegami no Monogatari: Korokoro Poron*[16] (*The Tale of the Little Goddess: Korokoro Poron*), inspired by a *manga* written by Azuma Hideo[17] and aired in Japan for the first time in 1982. The setting of this story – which takes place on Mount Olympus, where Poron, Apollo's daughter, lives with her family, all the Greek gods and goddesses – doesn't drag the characters out of their original location, yet the narration manages to bring in several external elements, with which the main characters have to deal daily.

The construction of this *anime* is quite peculiar, and shows how different tendencies can coexist at the same time, even in the same product: namely, classics and Japanese elements, as well as clear signs of what we defined as the monolithic reception of the Western heritage; all these trends, furthermore, coexist with the requirements imposed by the specific *anime* genre – it is a *kodomo*, a series meant for kids – which calls at the same time for a clear and straightforward plot, funny elements and the absence of potentially traumatic themes. Especially the latter point has great influence on the storytelling: for once, most of the cruelties that show through the original stories – like Prometheus' punishment – are softened and transformed into mild and hilarious incidents; furthermore, some myths – like Arachne's and Orpheus' legends – were

changed in order to grant a happy ending. Aside from the adjustments required by the needs of the main audience, the storytelling seems nonetheless to be quite accurate and faithful to the original legends; moreover, the myth plays a didactic role, providing the opportunity to pass social and ethical teachings to the young audience, as if Poron's creators set themselves and their work as successors to the greatest storytellers of the past, teaching while entertaining, from Aesop to La Fontaine.

In any case, even if the tales usually unfold according to the original myths, this does not mean that this *anime* can be considered a result of a passive reception process; rather, this series represents an interweaving of different suggestions, kept together by the classical plot, but constantly mingling with each other. Above anything else, it is full of Japanese references that, even if a bit subtle for a Western audience, are clear and immediate in the eyes of local spectators. The omnipresence of Japan occurs on different levels. First of all, some creatures taken from Japanese folklore might make their appearance among the Greek deities, interacting undisturbed with them: hence, for example, the ponds are usually inhabited by *Kappas*, Japanese water spirits, the rain is ruled by a Dragon God, and the thunder deities are *Oni*, Japanese demons. Even the Greek gods and goddesses, who live in a quasi-classical environment, wear clothes that resemble *pepla* or *kotoniskoi*, drink ambrosia and live in temples, and aren't exempt from a strong Japanization, especially when it comes to daily habits or even their very own powers: for instance, Apollo sleeps on a futon, and frequently eats a *bento* – a Japanese boxed lunch – with chopsticks; similarly, when they are about to perform a miracle, the deities often use a Shinto wand, or Buddhist prayer beads, or even a voodoo bamboo doll. The strength of Eastern heritage manages to reach even the storyline of the myth; it is an isolated case, but in one episode we can witness the blending of legends coming from the two worlds: when Apollo realizes that his love for Daphne is fruitless, he shuts himself in a cave, depriving the world of sunlight, just as Amaterasu, the Japanese goddess of light, did after suffering an offence.[18]

Likewise, there is a diffuse presence of a phenomenon that was already noted with regard to Tezuka's production, which we defined as the monolithic perception of the Western heritage: beside people getting married in a church, the plot is sometimes an echo of biblical episodes, or European tradition and literature, often mediated through previous Western media. So, whilst Poron makes an ark to save the animals during the Flood, the Minotaur uses a giant cake – almost like the Grimm brothers' witch from Hansel and Gretel – in order to lure in children; more to the point, Chimera's story is based on *Beauty and the*

Beast, and Pyramus and Thisbe's story becomes inn essence a retelling of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, as if that were the one and only paradigm for unfortunate love coming from the West.

The most symptomatic hint of the liberty with which classical heritage is dealt is, in fact, the role given to the personification of Hope, a mere *daimon* in Greek mythology, who becomes *Megami no naka no Megami*, the 'Goddess of the Goddesses', a central figure in the pantheon, a bit of a Virgin Mary and a lot of a Grimms' – or better Disney's – fairy godmother: just as Disney taught to whole generations that a young, lovely and brave heroine on a quest to reach her goal and untangle her future *must* have a fairy godmother, in a work directed toward children this role could not fall better than upon *Elpis*.

By the second half of the decade, things start to change again. The new creative process will appear clearly in later series, but some early hints can be found in the next title that we are about to analyse: *Arion*. This *anime*, as we will see, is a somewhat innovative product; however the mythological narration still holds a central role in the construction of the whole work, and this trait makes it still closer to the model recognizable in the series aired in the first half of the decade.

Arion is an animated movie dating to 1986, based on a *manga* by Yasuhiko Yoshizaku,[19] an ambitious project that offers a revision of the Hesiodean cosmogony in a fantasy perspective, in which the gods' ruling system is perceived as a cyclic scheme that ends with Apollo murdering Zeus.

In this *anime* the Greek Olympus mainly works as a setting where a cruel battle takes place and where the hero must prove his value in order to obtain his place in the world. Such a *topos* is particularly recurrent in the *shonen* genre and appears equally in series set in any age or scenario, from historical to post-apocalyptic: the 'lone samurai' fighting against the system – be it for revenge, to defend his values or to protect his loved ones. This is a figure that emanates strength and moral integrity which has undying appeal to Japanese youth and can be found in *manga* and *anime* dating from any period, from *Kurenai Sanshiro*[20] (1969), passing by *Hokuto no Ken*[21] (1984), until the relatively recent *Gintama*[22] (2006), to name just a few examples.

Furthermore, Greek myths are approached in a double perspective. On one side there is an almost exuberant show of erudition that shines through the choice of some 'minor' figures of Greek heritage: Arion himself and the Erinyes – judging from previous productions – aren't among the classical characters that gained a prominent position in Japanese imagery. On the other side the original storyline of myths is freely modified: Arion, the divine horse born from Poseidon and Demeter, is represented here as a boy. On top of that, he

is in love with his supposed twin sister, Lesphina, which stands for Despoina; besides, he happens actually to be the adoptive son of Demeter, who raised him on behalf of his real parents, Prometheus and Pandora. Also, Arion ends up being kidnapped by Hades who brings him to his kingdom, just as happened in the Greek myth to Demeter's daughter, Persephone.

Although (unlike what we have seen so far) there is no particular trace of contamination with other Western traditions, Japan's culture still shows itself openly on multiple occasions throughout the unfolding of the story. The most astonishing element is the identity of one of Arion's companions: Geedo, a monster that the hero defeated and tamed on his journey to Hades, is indeed an *oni*, a Japanese demon. However, above all, Japan can be found in the use of several clichés that are typical of contemporary animated production and suggest that putting on stage the classical heritage was nothing more than an excuse to create an epic show. First of all, the source of Zeus' power is the Thunder Tube, a fire machine made by Prometheus that allows him to overcome all his enemies and thus maintain his power through terror; the idea that a restricted elite can control the mass of the population thanks to their exclusive access to a secret and superior technology is quite common in Japanese fiction; such an idea also constitutes the basis of a peculiar genre, the 'steam production', with which this *anime* also shares a preference for dark atmospheres. In addition, the second companion escorting Arion on his journey, a little youngster called Seneca – significantly a random classical name, as if Greek and Roman culture were one and the same – is actually a girl disguised as a boy: the fighting girl who hides her real gender is a recurring theme in the 1970s and the 1980s, which found its higher expression in earlier masterpieces like *Ribbon no Kishi*[23] (1967) and *Versailles no Bara*[24] (1979).

Arion, though being still partially bound to an older view of the interaction with the classical, shows that the tim was ripe for a new revolution: such a transformation will be set in motion in those very same years, with the creation of some stunning successes, the fame of which will literally cross the world.

The 80s–90s revolution: the resurrection of Japanese pride

In the late 1980s and the early 1990s, the worldwide success obtained by several series brought new attention to genres otherwise languishing in obscurity: the warrior *shounen* and *majokko* – little sorceresses. Both genres benefitted from newly-introduced features: co-protagonists – characters other than the main

one equally defined and well-characterized – and, from the perspective of a Japanese audience, an exotic setting. Such choice for the setting was a 'bait' for new generations of Japanese customers, to whom the series appealed superficially by the look of the Western world.[25]

The plot, on the other hand, is in pure Japanese style: traditional quests carried out by young protagonists, bound by friendship and loyalty, who must continuously fight enemies whose strength increases in each episode. Similar plots had already been presented in Bruce Lee's movies[26] and are strongly reminiscent of Samurai brotherhoods, an essential part of Japanese epics. In these *anime* productions, the Western world is reduced to a mere backdrop and is still represented according to the monolithic reception model discussed above. The real protagonist is Japanese heritage, with numerous references to traditional myths, lifestyles and other social and cultural phenomena. The great emphasis given to the Eastern world is a sign of the great pride which invested Japan in those years:[27] technological superiority, which characterized Japan in the 1980s, brought it back to a leadership role, marking its greatest importance since it was defeated at the end of World War II.[28]

The *anime Saint Seiya* and *Bishoujo Senshi Sailor Moon*, respectively broadcast since 1986 and 1992, initiated the change discussed above. They achieved an extraordinary success, which attracted the attention of sociologists and psychologists; in Europe the diffusion of these works even generated great controversies regarding, for example, the homosexuality of some of the protagonists, and the supposed influence that such a topic could have on the development of a pre-adolescent audience: such polemics, which we will not scrutinize any further, are a clear hint of the inability of Western people to comprehend behavioural models different from their own.[29]

In *Saint Seiya* the protagonists are the young knights serving a Japanese girl, who is the present-day incarnation of the goddess Athena. They fight against warriors serving other Olympians – Hades, Apollo and Poseidon – in order to bring peace, hope and justice to the Earth. The *anime* achieved outstanding success and was highly appreciated by a female audience, thanks to the appeal of its characters. Greek mythology seems to dominate every aspect of the *anime* from the intro to the names, features and powers of every protagonist (each of whom incarnates a mythological character).[30] A careful analysis, though, shows how each Western element is stereotypical, recalling the monolithic representation of the Western world typical of the *anime* of the previous decade. For example, in the chapter dedicated to the war between Athena and Hades, hell is depicted as in Dante's *Comedy* rather than resembling the otherworld described by Virgil or

Homer. Even though it lacks the typical pyramidal structure, Dante's model, with its circles, prisons and punishments for the seven Christian capital sins, was more familiar to the Japanese audience. On top of that, the writing shown on the gate leading to hell is another example of Western potpourri: Dante's phrase '*Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'entrate*' is written in modern Greek on a Roman-looking arch!

Athena does not really recall the Greek goddess of wisdom. Incarnated in a teenager's body, she resembles the charismatic, renowned women of the Western tradition, like the Virgin Mary, Joan of Arc, Elizabeth I and Morgana from the Arthurian saga. She is not a warrior-goddess but rather, according to the Japanese tradition, a goddess of peace, justice and, above all, hope. Her knights, characterized by ascetic traits, present many similarities with Christian Templars.

In conclusion, to reiterate the concept of monolithic reception of the Western world by the Japanese, it is worth highlighting some references to ancient Egypt – embodied by the knight Pharaoh, who is depicted with the traditional Egyptian hairstyle and a snake on his helmet – and to the Arthurian saga, extremely relevant for a *manga* dealing with knights devoted to the Virgin Mary. In fact, the knight of Capricorn, one of the characters, is given a holy sword by a woman: not Viviane, as in the original version, but Athena.

This work can be considered a typical example of 'pop-reception': single shreds of Western culture, coming from different traditions, are received and collected one by one and then rearranged among the different characters without any apparent philological thread.

Far more emphasized, in terms of the storytelling aspects, are the continuous references to the Japanese world and Japanese culture. As discussed before, the plot is an evident trademark of Japanese productions and more specifically of the *shounen* genre: a quest carried out by very young and usually orphan protagonists.[31] Also, there is a massive presence of *boushido*, the warrior path: a severe code disciplining Samurai training since the twelfth century. In this *anime*, the *boushido* code shows through in the frequent references to one of the main characters of Japanese tradition: Yamato Takeru, a legendary Japanese hero, probably based on a historical character who lived between the fourth and fifth centuries CE. He is the protagonist of many sagas revolving around his epic adventures,[32] which are all very similar to the ones lived by Athena's Saints. Moreover, Yamato Takeru received a wondrous sword from a deity:[33] the above-mentioned episode, where Capricorn is given Excalibur by Athena, thus acquires a new level of significance with a direct reference to Japanese myths.

Typical Japanese elements include recurring mentions of traditional myths and tales, for example the story of the hare who sacrificed itself to feed a

traveller;[34] or even the ideal of masculine beauty suggested: an androgynous and feminine man, very popular in Japan.[35] Finally, it is worth mentioning the peaceful coexistence between different faiths and religious beliefs and their reciprocal integration which generates peculiar syntheses. Beyond the already mentioned Christian elements the *anime* is pervaded by references to other religious beliefs: Buddhism is embodied by the knight of Virgo, Shaka, who was Buddha's disciple; Hinduism by Krisaore, a general of Poseidon's army. Each of them wears armour and weapons associated with their beliefs. If the sporadic addition of Shinto elements is also taken into account, the *anime* reflects a situation of religious syncretism and interfaith coexistence still present in Japan today.

All the elements discussed so far are present in *Bishoujo Senshi Sailor Moon* as well. The *anime*, first broadcast in 1992, achieved worldwide success. It presents a smooth and harmonized coexistence of Western and Eastern cultural elements. The story is filled with the battles fought by nine warrior-girls (the *senshi* mentioned in the title) belonging to the ancient Moon realm. Their names derive from the planets of the solar system and the Greek divinities associated with them, whom the young girls embody.

Although it might look like a war story, *Bishoujo Senshi Sailor Moon* is a *shoujo* about the love between Serenity/Selene (goddess/queen of the Moon) and Endymion, reincarnated respectively in Tsukino Usagi and Mamoru Chiba. Moon mythology is also referenced in the names of Usagi's cats: Luna, Artemis and Diana.[36]

As seen already in *Saint Seiya*, in *Sailor Moon* classical mythology deviates much from the original: it is once more employed as an exotic element to attract the attention of a Japanese audience. Endymion, unlike the Greek original, is neither a hunter nor a king; instead he is a commander of the Moon army. Sailor Mercury is not associated, as one would expect, with fire or with a harbinger role – a classical feature of the Greek Hermes or the Roman Mercury; she is linked instead to the aquatic element. In the same way, Sailor Pluto is not associated with the otherworld, wealth and fortune: the distinctive trait of this warrior – time control – reminds us instead of Chronos.

Besides the revisions of the myth, the *anime* shows the usual monolithic reception of Western models by featuring characters perceived by Japanese as archetypes of the Western world. To provide just one example, Endymion, in his first appearance as masked hero – Tuxedo Kamen (tuxedo knight) – pulls his weapons out of a top hat, recalling Mandrake the Magician, whose iconographical similarity with our character is striking. Moreover, the Snow Princess – *Kaguya*

Hime – one of the most popular figure of the Japanese universe, strongly resembles Grimhilde from Snow White, an extremely popular character in Japan, who represents the archetype of evil stepmothers and witches, as already suggested by her early presence in works dating to the 1970, such as the already mentioned *Unico*.[37]

Much more emphasized and better appreciated by the Eastern audience are traditional Japanese elements, which range from everyday scenarios to ancient cultural traditions. The most striking example belonging to everyday life is the sailor school uniform, also referenced in the title. As for the second topic, we witness a major distortion in the classical myth, which is strongly influenced by elements coming from Japanese heritage. However, unlike the previous productions, Japanese elements take on a dominant role, being much more emphasized than their Western counterparts. Sailor Mars, for example, is associated with the element of fire, as expected from the link she has with Mars/Ares. However, such an association appears to be a mere coincidence. She is, in fact, depicted as a Shinto priestess specializing in exorcisms achieved through the purifying power of fire, usually in the form of fiery arrows or *sutra* (religious formulae able to set demons on fire). Another example is the recurring reference to the lunar myth, which names like Selene, Endymion, Diana and Artemis link to the Western tradition. Nonetheless, as the plot develops, the Japanese interpretation of the myth outshines the Western one. The legend of the Moon rabbit, whose profile is visible on the Moon's surface, is recalled in the name of the main character – Tsukino Usagi, or *Tsuki no Usagi* in the original version – which literally means 'rabbit from the Moon';[38] it is no coincidence that she is associated with many stylized rabbit images.

The elaborate and syncretistic work just described clearly reflects the cultural change happening in Japan in those years. *Anime*, as well as other media, are important records of such cultural transformation.

The new frontier: interacting with the classics at the turn of the millennium

After the impressive success of the *anime* whose diffusion spread over the late 1980s and the early 1990s, the fortune of animated productions involving the classical heritage seemed to fade somewhat. The last years of the last millennium were actually an incubation period, during which the metabolizing process that

took place when the great seasons of classics-related series were aired, started to bear fruit, materializing in a widespread diffusion of Greco-Roman themes, characters and topics through different media.[39] Although the references to classics spread widely, output solely or at least mainly dedicated to this heritage became rarer and rarer, especially in the animation industry. This does not mean that the classical figures and subjects were simply relegated to the role of incidental characters or frame themes; on the contrary, they were the object of a process of appropriation and started to be felt as part of a shared knowledge which was now barely felt as Otherness.

A quite interesting exception to this trend can be found in *Sousei no Aquarion* (*The Genesis of Aquarion*), broadcast in 2005, an *anime* that narrates the battles fought by a group of adolescent robot-pilots against enemies called Shadow Angels. This work represents the latest generation of Japanese animation dealing with classical themes and can be considered the final result of the evolution that we have followed through the ages. This series is undeniably influenced by the lesson taught by the masterpieces aired in the previous decade. In this *anime* we can find, indeed, a strong mix of classical and Japanese elements; at the same time it is clear how the Western world is perceived as a monolithic universe. In any case, what appears more strongly is that the heritage from classical mythology offers no more than an excuse to set part of the story in a somehow distant past, which allows epic battles and a magic touch to feature in the plot. The storyline follows one of the most abused clichés of Japanese fictional works: the reincarnation of two past lovers, especially two unlucky ones, who are fated to meet each other again and have a new chance to bind their fates.[40] The main characters, Apollo and Silvia, are indeed the reincarnation of the ill-fated Selenia, a human, and Apollonius – or *Taiyou no Tsubasa*, meaning 'Wings of the Sun' – an angel with features reminiscent of a Sun deity, just as his name would suggest.

This *anime* combines memories from the classical past – the protagonists, whose forbidden love met with a tragic epilogue, are clearly inspired by Apollo and Selene; moreover, their original world, Atlantia, blessed with a superior technology that was lost after its destruction, is an echo of the Atlantis myth – and elements taken from the biblical and Christian world: the enemies of mankind are angels, and their soldiers, meaningfully called Cherubim, kidnap children in order to feed their Tree of Life, the only tool able to keep their world alive and running. Meanwhile, the character of Apollonius, though sharing with the Greek god Apollo his connection with sunlight, more resembles Prometheus and his favour for mankind, even at the cost of getting punished by his peers; furthermore, the young supernal being, by betraying the other angels and getting

punished by losing his wings, appears somehow closer to Lucifer than to any Greek deity.

Lastly, there are several elements typical of the *mecha* genre – a definition under which all the series concerning robots falls – that transcend any kind of location and time setting: aside from the fact that the main characters are orphans, a trait that is widely spread through different subgenres of the *shounen* production, all the robot-pilots are young boys and girls who are given the mission to save the world, a cause in which they believe at the cost of their own lives.

The twenty-first century, going beyond *anime:* myth as a teaching tool

As we have seen, since the beginning of twenty-first century, works mainly referring to the Western world in Japanese productions dropped drastically (with the exclusion of the new series of *Athena's Saints*, which is not an original production, and of the already mentioned *Aquarion*). Even though it could be a case of a 'physiological' regression after the abundance of Western references in the works of the previous decades, the main reason is likely to be different: in this century Japan has become culturally more and more independent from the Western world.[41]

Whatever the reason – yet to be determined – the only production with classical references which has made it to Japanese home screens, in recent years, is the live show (not even an *anime*) *Zettai Yareru Greece Shinwa* (*Absolute Greek Mythology*). A 2008 production, the show includes animations where myth is presented as a refined and exotic seduction strategy. The target was the mature audience (it was in fact a late-night show) that clearly influenced the decision of which myths were to be presented: the ones dealing with love, seduction or rape were preferred. An element of novelty, which distinguishes this production from the works of previous decades, is the accurate representation of myth. The lack of any distortion of the original plots recalls the old *Hoshi no Orpheus*. On top of that, *Zettai Yareru* presents a faint aetiological intent in the way that myth is employed: as back in ancient times, even though within a different frame, myth explains the origin of contemporary phenomena such as the Olympic Games.

Zettai Yareru clearly shows how, even if they are not taken as reference models any more (as they used to be in the 1970s and 1980s), myth and, more generally, Western culture still fascinate the Japanese world. Moreover, this particular work

indicates that animation is still the preferred media with which to present Western classics to a Japanese audience.

Conclusions

This brief overview of *anime* dealing with classical myths allows the drawing of a few conclusions about the historical evolution of the reception of Western cultural heritage in Japan.

First, it is evident how traditional Japanese elements, ancient and modern, are continuously referenced throughout *anime* productions. Cultural and narrative Japanese *topoi* are often presented: young protagonists are always orphans (as in *Toriton*, *Saint Seiya*, *Aquarion* or in the robot-themed production by Go Nagai); the *boushido* code is always present in *shounen anime* (*Saint Seiya*, *Ulysses*, *Arion* and, in some ways, *Sailor Moon*). Amongst the elements coming from daily life it is common to find references to circumstances or objects such as chopsticks or futons (*Poron*). Japanese sensibility is particularly evident when it comes to religious tolerance: *Poron*, *Sailor Moon* and *Saint Seiya* all show a religious syncretism inconceivable in Western society where different faiths are strictly separated and often in conflict.

Regarding myth, its use (and abuse) and its alteration depend on the *anime* genre and on the plot, as in the *kodomo Poron* or in the *shounen Sant Seiya* and *Arion*, myth is accurately reported only when it is not the cornerstone of the *anime*, as in *Zettai Yareru*, or, opposingly, when its narration constitutes the main intent, as in *Hoshi no Orpheus*.

Japanese animated productions show how the Western world is perceived as a monolithic entity: a potpourri made of colosseums, Walt Disney, the Marvel universe, the Grimm brothers and Christianity, where everything is taken out of its context and merged together.

Moreover, the topics discussed allow us to draw a few conclusions about social and historical nature, as well. Japanese animation was born between the end of 1950s and the beginning of 1960s, when Japan was still recovering from the post-war crisis. Several reasons made the Western world a reference model to look up to, media production included: that explains why characters show some Western elements and why myth, when present, is accurately described, as in *Hoshi no Orpheus* and in *Poron*.

From the mid-1980s, the trend changed: Japan was at its economic peak and was once more proud of its cultural identity. References to the Western world

and its myths became less frequent and, when present, a mere frame of the animated production (*Arion*, *Sailor Moon*, *Saint Seiya*). During the same years, authors like Rumiko Takahashi (*Lamù*, *Ranma 1/2*) and Akira Toriyama (*Dragonball*), who focused on Japanese traditional culture, achieved great success.

From the late 1990s, the situation started to move in another direction again. The new frontier of Japanese animation with regard classical themes was the creation of a completely new language. Greco-Roman figures had become part of a shared popular culture, that included elements from both Western and Japanese heritage. In the last two decades we have witnessed the birth of a new pop-*koine* made up of syntactical minimal unities coming from different traditions, shaping a new, shared knowledge. The result is a symbolic language that expresses itself through metaphors, understood and acknowledged by the audience. In this process, the mention of a specific character – whatever his cultural origin – rings a precise bell in the ears of the spectator: thus, saying Apollo is no different from saying Yamato Nadeshiko,[42] in the same way that the name Alice[43] became equally reminiscent of the name Hijikata Toshizo.[44]

In the development of this language, the Greek mythological figures were marked and became iconic of specific characters, not necessarily linked to their real *personae*. For example, Apollo became the eternal and perfect beauty; Zeus the symbol of an old womanizer and Eros a mischievous child who plays with people's feelings. This shared language allowed *anime* creators to use a certain archetype – Japanese as well as Western – or just to assign a name to one of the characters in order to convey to the audience a specific image.

Is this really 'declassicizing'? Perhaps, but it is only the first part of the process: what really occurred was a profound integration, where fragments of the classical past became avatars of human behavioural traits. In other words, we are now witnessing a cultural innovation: it took almost forty years and educational works like *Poron*, but it is now implemented in many *manga* and *anime*. This is just the beginning of twenty-first century: what can we expect from the post-Fukushima generation?

List of *anime* dealing with classics cited in the chapter

Title (Japanese/English)	Authors	Production studio	Year Episodes Genre
Umi no Triton *Triton of the sea*	Yoshiyuki Tomino (director) Osamu Tezuka (original story)	Animation Staff Room	1972 26 *Shounen*
Tanpen Unico: Kuroi Kumo to Shiroi Hane *Unico: Black Clouds White Feathers*	Toshio Hirata (director) Osamu Tezuka (original story)	Tezuka Production	1979 1 *Shounen*
Hoshi no Orpheus *Orpheus of the Stars* *Winds of Change* (version II)	Takashi Yanase (director) Publius Ovidius Naso (original story)	Sanrio	1979 1 *Shounen*
Uchuu Densetsu Ulysses 31 *Ulysses 31*	Bernard Deyries Kazuo Terada Kyosuke Mikuriya Tadao Nagahama (directors) Shingo Araki (animation director)	Tokyo Movie Shinsha	1981 26 Sci-fi *Shounen*
Ochamegami Monogatari Korokoro Poron *Little Pollon*	Takao Yotsuji (director) Hideo Azuma (original story)	Kokusai Eigasha	1982 46 *Kodomo Shoujo*
Arion	YoshikazuYasuhiko (director and original story)	Sunrise	1986 1 Fantasy *Seinen*
Saint Seiya *Saint Seiya – Hades* *Knights of the Zodiac*	Kazuhito Kikuchi (director) Masami Kurumada (original story)	Toei Animation	1986 2003 114 + 26 *Shounen*

Title (Japanese/English)	Authors	Production studio	Year Episodes Genre
Bishoujo Senshi Sailor Moon *Pretty Soldier Sailor Moon*	Naoko Takeuchi (original story)	Toei Animation	1992–1997 200 (5 TV Series) *Shoujo*
Sousei no Aquarion *Aquarion*	Shoji Kawamori (director and original story)	Satelight	2005 26 *Mecha Shounen*
Zettai Yareru Grécia Shinwa *Absolutely Greek Mythology*	Ken Ushikusa (director)	Hoichoi Productions	2008 13 (TV show)