

## Modern Culture and the Reality of the Past

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Stories of the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations and their myths have dominated Western culture for millennia. Until the works of Shakespeare, Greco-roman myths served as the de facto classics stories to adapt and imitate, and they still hold a prominent spot in the Western Canon. We often use and adapt ancient myths to carry ideals and moral lessons, but this carries two risks. Unfiltered myth often carries backwards ideas and unsavory details that we'd rather not retell, generally either to protect our sensibilities or to suppress harmful ideologies. On the other hand, adapted myth risks removing important context and glorifying societies that were far from flawless. This means that recognizing the accumulated adjustments and misconceptions of ancient myth is critical to evaluating any modern adaption or retelling of the myth.

One of the primary features that comes to mind when thinking of a "backwards" society is an imbalance of power. Ancient myths display the imbalanced power dynamics of the societies that birthed them. While female gods were generally granted power and autonomy in myths, human women are essentially treated as property throughout Roman, and especially Greek, myth. These elements are built into the fundamental pieces of a lot of the myths, which makes them hard to remove for modern audiences. Not addressing these themes can normalize them, but diverting the story to confront these problems can be tedious. This is something that Natalie Haynes' "A Thousand Ships" manages really well. The complete subversion of the Iliad challenges the problematic themes while avoiding being monotonous.

Rape features predominantly in ancient myth, often with plot lines that glorify or romanticize non consensual encounters. Modern retellings gloss over these details, either to eliminate sexual elements

as a whole or to prevent the normalization of rape and sexual assault. This is understandable, but it can normalize the factors that lead up to those situations. Rape is an issue that is important enough to mitigate that ignoring it is problematic. Doing anything to bring it up or challenge it, however, forces the adaptation to take on a dark tone, which creates a huge hurdle for prospective adaptive media. We can see our modern culture grappling with this issue by looking at media over the last few decades. While 20th century retellings of the Iliad generally sought to overlook the women's feelings about the situation or portray them as star-struck and eager to be with these "good heroic" men, recent portrayals such as "The Silence of the Girls" or "A Thousand Ships" provide a more realistic and humanizing portrayal of the women's thoughts and consent.

The evolution of other themes provides a window into the great moral and ethical struggles of the time. While the patriarchal elements stand out to us today as incredibly backwards and intolerable, there are many topics in myth that represent issues similarly to how they are viewed today. A classic example is the government and politics of ancient Greece and Rome, which is similar, at least in theory, to some of our modern systems. We can appreciate the myths as abstractions of modern problems, but it's easy to fall into the comfortable trap of doing this while ignoring that these societies also owned slaves, oppressed women, and viewed rape as mostly standard behavior. These are certainly societies that we can learn from, but we shouldn't be tricked into emulating them.

Greek and Roman myth has proven time and time again that it can capture the attention of modern audiences with its timeless themes. Despite the massive difference in time, and in many cases space, that separates us from the creators of these stories, the tales of adventure, betrayal, and the struggle for power is still intriguing. In addition, myths are, by nature, flexible, allowing us to easily infuse old stories with modern commentary and lessons. For better or for worse, we attribute a lot of the core tenets of our modern society to the Greco-roman world, like our governments, educations,

philosophies, and morals. This can easily turn into blind approval of their complexities and flaws.

Without an accurate picture and a critical eye, we run the risk of revitalizing regressive philosophies that we rightfully abandoned years ago.

In conclusion, the cultural reception of Greek and Roman society is nuanced, as it should be. We can appreciate the timeless nature of their stories, and we're learning to understand and pick apart the misogyny and oppression that forms the roots of a lot of modern injustice. We are moving in the right direction by building a culture that engage with, critique, and really sink their philosophical teeth into the genuine works of the past.