

## Ancient Greece in the English Language

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When Shakespeare was in school in the latter half of the sixteenth century, he learned ‘small Latin and less Greek’, or so his friend, Ben Jonson, tells us. Until very recently, it was the norm for educated British schoolchildren to learn at least Latin in school (In fact, it remained a requirement for entrance to many universities until the 1960s -70s). Greek was always less widely taught, and to a smaller elite, but this did not prevent Greek ideas from coming into the English language, most often via the Latin route. The Romans were great admirers of Greek culture, and their poets often wrote of Greek myths and legends in their Latin works.

For this reason, we tend to refer to the Greek deities by their Latin names. Our planets are called e.g. Jupiter, Venus, Mars and Pluto rather than Zeus, Aphrodite, Ares and Hades, and things to do with war are called ‘Martial’ (after Mars, the god of war) rather than by an adjective derived from the Greek name, Ares. Still, some English words do come directly from the Greek, e.g. ‘aphrodisiac’ from Aphrodite, the goddess of love, or ‘erotic’ from Eros, the Greek name of Cupid. In recent years, too, at least one company has chosen to name its brand after a Greek goddess. But then, I suppose ‘Nike’ fits onto a sports shoe better than would ‘Victoria’.

There are many idioms used in modern English that refer to ancient Greek literature, mythology or history. If we are discussing a political situation, we might say that the government plans to bring in ‘draconian laws’ (after the harsh Athenian tyrant, Draco). Or we may choose an image from the myth of the twelve labours of Heracles

(Hercules) to describe difficult endeavours, all of which can be referred to as ‘Herculean tasks’. Heracles was a Greek ‘superman’ who killed his wife and children in a fit of temporary madness. When he regained his sanity, he had to perform twelve extremely difficult tasks as a penance. Most of these involved killing man-eating monsters, though a more flirtatious (but no less risky) one involved stealing the girdle of the Amazon Queen, Hippolyta. If the government is trying to root out corruption, we might say it is trying to ‘cleanse the Augean stables’ (The least heroic of the twelve labours was to muck out some very dirty stables). However, if after each problem the government solves, two more seem to spring up in its place, we may say it is like fighting the ‘many-headed hydra’ (after the monster that grew two new heads for every one Heracles cut off).

The government could, on the other hand, be facing a complex situation and decide to take a short cut. Then we would say it has decided to ‘cut the Gordian knot’ (derived from a story told about Alexander the Great). If it is attempting to introduce a system which is supposed to fit everyone, but in fact fits no-one, then we might refer to the system as being like ‘Procrustes’ bed’ (a one-size-fits-all bed used to torture and kill guests by a particularly unpleasant character in the myth of the hero, Theseus). However, if we believe all social, financial and environmental problems can be solved quickly and easily, we are living in ‘Cloud Cuckoo Land’ (from Aristophanes’ satirical comedy *The Birds*). In any case, we are probably looking back to an imaginary ‘Golden Age’ when everyone was prosperous and happy (This goes back to the poet Hesiod’s idea that there had been

