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Percy Jackson and Perseus:
the comparison of characters in the modern fiction and Greek mythology

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I. INTRODUCTION

Percy Jackson and the Olympians, often abbreviated to Percy Jackson, is an adventurous pentalogy of teenage fiction written by Rick Riordan. It has received numerous awards and recognitions including Mark Twain Reader Award and the recommendation from President Obama. Its charms swept over children and adults alike and the series was adapted into audio books and films. The adventures revolve around Percy Jackson, a teenage boy with ADHD and dyslexia in the modern world. However, instead of being an ordinary teenager, he is the son of a mortal Sally Jackson and an immortal Poseidon. The setting of the protagonist is based on Perseus in the Greek mythology. He was the hero who bravely slaughtered Medusa and saved Andromeda. Though both Percy Jackson and Perseus are the half-human demigod, there are many intriguing adaptions from Rick Riordan in terms of the character. This essay is going to investigate the comparison and contrast of Percy Jackson in the Percy Jackson and the Olympians and Perseus in the Greek mythology, centering on the descriptions of their appearance, personality, and the relationships with others. The following analysis will be based on *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* by Rick Riordan and Myths and Legends of Ancient Greece and Rome, by E.M. Berens in 2007.

II. THESIS

i. Appearance

There are many descriptions of the protagonist's outward appearance, including what he wears and how he looks. Trivial as they may seem, the information about the protagonists' appearance in two texts help readers visualize the stories. Moreover, these details reveal the social status, the social values and more importantly, imply these heroes' heredity.

Firstly, the clothes by Percy Jackson and Perseus act as a social indicator, implying the social status of the two characters. Percy Jackson, for example, tends to wear casual and ordinary cloth. For example, in sentences such as "I paced the room, feeling like ants were crawling around inside my shirt" (Riordan, 2005, p.18), or "You think those socks would fit me?"(Riordan, 2005, p.26) These unobtrusive clothes not only signal the modern background Percy Jackson is in, but make the character look like an ordinary young boy readers would encounter on the street. His nobility is hardly emphasized from his wearing; instead, it adds approachability to the character.

In contrast, Perseus almost wears nothing but the gifts given by the celestial immortals, such as "the magic helmet and wallet, and armed with a sickle, the gift of Hermes" (Berens, 2007, p.206). It can be inferred that the social status might play a significant role in the traditional heroic saga. The heroes in the Greek mythology are often adorned by their eminent family background through clothes and accessories; however, the modern heroes depend less on dressing. There seems to be a trend that cloth is losing its role as a social indicator in the modern era.

Second, the descriptions of their physical appearance unveil the diverse definitions of heroic image in their corresponding time. Percy Jackson is described as a handsome young man. Sally, Percy Jackson's mother, once told him "[Your dad is] T[t]all, handsome and powerful. But gentle, too. [...]. You look just like him" (Riordan, 2005, p. 38). Nevertheless, except for his looking, there is little description of Percy Jackson's body figure (See Appendix 1). In comparison, Perseus is described as a "noble and manly youth" who "endeavored to instill into his mind a desire to signalize himself by the achievement of some great and heroic deed."(Berens, 2007, p.206). The illustration portrays him as a sturdy and vigorous man with a combative spirit (See Appendix 2). This comparison illustrates a changing concept of heroes, or to be specific, what is acknowledged as a "manly" man. It seems that the heroic image, or the definition of a manly man, goes from unitary to diverse from ancient to contemporary time. While the ancient society admired a macho male who should be sturdy, combative and vigorous, the contemporary time values a man under a general frame of being "tall and handsome" (Riordan, 2005, p. 38). Nevertheless, Percy Jackson is allowed to be young, inexperienced and of any body figures.

Third, the outward appearance of these heroes also implies their heredity. For example, Annabeth, the daughter of Athena, has grey eyes and blonde hair, which remind the readers that her brilliance may be as outstanding as Athena. For Percy Jackson, not only do his black hair and green eyes reveal that he is the son of the sea god, Poseidon, a telltale mark also appears from time to time. "The sign was already fading, but I could still make out the hologram of green light, spinning and gleaming. A three-tipped spear: a trident."(Riordan, 2005, p.126). These details justify his superpower of being able to control water. Similarly, Perseus is brave and brilliant, just like his immortal father, Zeus. However, he needs to achieve some heroic deeds to signal himself to be the offspring of Zeus. In comparison, the modern text rely on these inborn traits to signify Percy Jackson's heredity, as clothes do to Perseus. On the other hand, the biological resemblance is not mentioned in the Greek mythology. Heroes in ancient context have to live up their heredity through physical strength and

individual efforts.

ii. Personality

Aside from their appearance, the portrayal of Percy Jackson's and Perseus' personalities are decisive in these stories. It fleshes out the characters, which not only adds the width and depth to the plots, but lures the readers to engage in the story. The details of their personalities can be observed when the two characters face their enemies, unknown strangers, and are provided with a tantalizing offer.

Firstly, both Percy Jackson and Perseus consider the fiery monster, Medusa, as their enemy. However, the slaughtering of Medusa by the two characters creates different impressions to the readers. Renowned for her ability for turning people into stones, Medusa poses a life threat to Percy Jackson. Responding to this, Percy Jackson answers with candid fear. "My hand trembled. I felt like a coward, but I took the Yankees cap and put it on" (Riordan, 2005, p. 163).This frankness reminds the readers that at this time, Percy is only a 12-year-old teenager coming from a single-parent family. Though he is brave enough to fight, his worries and fears are obvious. On the other hand, these worries can hardly be found on the Greek hero, Perseus. He slaughtered Medusa because "that they slaying of the Gorgon, Medusa, would bring him the greatest renown." (Berens, 2007, p. 206) Then, driven by the desire of fame, Perseus "stood with averted face before the sleepers, and caught on his bright metal shield their triple image." (Berens, 2007, p. 206) These details portray that both of the heroes are undoubtedly brave, but Percy Jackson seems to be more hesitant whereas Perseus appears to be more determined and fearless.

Second, the attitude they hold to strangers pictures how they view people in different classes. After fighting with Medusa and returning back, both of the heroes meet unknown strangers. In terms of Percy Jackson, he was revenged by the God of War, Ares, due to a misunderstanding. He acted rather forceful in fighting back. Otherwise, he stayed alert to most of unknown strangers. In comparison, Perseus is more adamant and irascible when facing strangers. When being rejected to rest in a kingdom, Perseus "produced from his wallet the head of the Medusa, and holding it towards the king, transformed him into a stony mountain." (Berens, 2007, p.206). This may seem very unbelievable in the contemporary era. Interestingly, both of the heroes appear to be fearless to challenge the authority from upper class. However, Percy Jackson is described to be more vigilant while Perseus is presented to be more hot-tempered to strangers. It may relate to how heroes are expected in different epoch.

Third, after coming back to their hometown, they are both provided with a "promotion". Interestingly, both of the heroes refuse the offer. After slaughtering the nefarious monster, Titans, Percy Jackson is offered a promotion: "if you wish it—you shall be made a god" (Riordan, 2009, p.350). If Percy chose to be a god, he would be a member of the celestial immortals and who "serve[s] his father's lieutenant for all time."(Riordan, 2009, p.351). Tantalizing as it may seem, Percy Jackson refused it; instead, he chose to be a human in order to protect and cherish his friendship. Another side, Perseus is offered to be the king of Argo when he returned from his grandfather, Acrisius', funeral. However, he "loath[s] to occupy the throne of one whose death he had caused". (Berens, 2007, p.209) As a result, he exchanged the kingdom with Megapenthes, king of Tiryns. Intriguingly, both of the heroes refused the promotion for their relationships with others. Though for Perseus, he is still the king of another empire; the refusal adds some humanities to both heroes, especially Perseus.

iii. Relationship with Other

Nowadays relationship is a significant thing in our social life, including communication and friendship. No one can escape the life of community, therefore, how to associate with others can be a lesson that everyone needs to take part in. Percy Jackson and Perseus lives in difference age, yet they both met many characters when they were in their adventure. Although they do not have the exactly same encounters, the relationships they have can be generally classified in to three categories: friends, families, and the lovers.

Firstly, Percy cooperated with his teammates when he was fighting with their enemy, Medusa. They met many dangers throughout the adventure. One of the most dangerous incidents was when Annabeth, Percy's partner, saved Percy from a poisonous weapon. They nearly lost the fight, but because of the trust and the relationship they have, eventually, they made up and completed the mission. In other words, friendship is the incentive for Percy to reach the goal. Compared to Perseus, he killed Medusa by himself, and he didn't have anyone to assist except for gods. In the modern world, we stress on teamwork to finish most of the tasks because "one plus one will definitely more than two" (李 & 賴, 2006), but comparatively, the Greek mythology adores individual success rather than teamwork.

Second, the bonding they have toward their parents is worth investigating. It unveils whether the protagonist shares intimacy with their families, which determines

their abilities to develop other relationships. Percy appears to be closer with his parents, including his immortal father. Sally, Percy's mother, marries a guy whom she doesn't love to cover Percy's celestial breed. Poseidon offers many helps while Percy was in danger. At the critical moment of fighting Ares, Percy suddenly feels that "T[t]he water seemed to wake up my senses, as if I'd just had a bog of my mom's double-espresso felly beans."(Riordan, 2005, p.121) So his power to control the water was unleashed. In return, Percy provides Medusa's head to Sally in case she is violently-treated by his stepfather. Conversely, Perseus' mother is hardly mentioned in the mythology. And his biological father, Zeus, fails to pay any attention to him. Fortunately, his stepfather, Polydectes, has enacted the role of a father successfully. He not only "bestowed upon Perseus an education befitting a hero", moreover, he plans most of the strategies to ensure Perseus' victory. However, after Perseus' victory, the interaction between him and his family is unseen. Generally speaking, in the modern version, the devotion of the parents and children is equally stressed. While in ancient version, it portrays a traditional familial relationship in which the responsibility of giving love is on parents' side. As a result, the familial relationship is changing.

Third, how they treat their lovers differs tremendously. Percy is rather timid when he met with his girlfriend, Annabeth. She is not only his lover, but also his comrade. When facing her, he appears to be uneasy. This can be seen in the sentence like "Annabeth was laughing, and I couldn't help laughing too, even though my face was completely red" (Riordan, 2009, p.374). In contrast, Perseus seems to be tougher and more determined to get the woman he wants. Nevertheless, the way he adopts may not be that approvable in our time. When Cepheus, the king whose kingdom is inundated with disastrous floods, begged Perseus to slay the dragon, Perseus agreed "on condition that the lovely victim should become his bride." (Berens, 2007, p.208). The divergence may be influenced by the social values in the two eras. In modern time, mutual-trust and mutual-respect are valued between couples. However, in the ancient period, it seems that woman was more like a commodity rather than a human compared to man.

III. CONCLUSION

A few patterns emerge as we scrutinize the comparison of Percy in Percy Jackson and Perseus in the Greek Mythology in this essay. Generally, not only does the image of heroes, but also the depiction of gender roles in the stories and the class awareness change significantly.

It is reasonable to conclude that the image of heroes, whether in terms of outward appearance or inward personality, change fundamentally. This may result from two possibilities. Firstly, there is a tradition in the literature to frame what a hero is. The perceptions and values, therefore, are transmitted from one generation to the next. The inequalities and disappointments across ages keep attesting the power of stories in different societies. What may be deemed to be heroic in the Greek mythology may seem ridicule for modern readers, and vice versa. In other words, the societies evolve, and so do people. Another possibility is that Rick Riordan was aware of the role of the genre, the "teenage fiction". In order to cater to young readers, he adapted the issues adolescents may face when growing up in the series, such as parents, friendship, love, jealousy, cooperation and sometimes, fear. This is close to what was defined as "antihero", which, refers to the hero "who is the opposite or reverse of a hero" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2015). In other word, the hero in modern texts tend to be flawed in order to be more lovable and approachable for readers.

In addition, the descriptions of gender roles seem to more complex in contemporary society. Hsieh (2004, p.4) criticized that the traditional mythology tends to be "male-centered." The portrayal of characters in Greek mythology is often simplified into the dichotomy of the flat figures between integral and brave men versus weak and jealous women. This can be observed in the essay. Women were mostly presented as a monster (such as Medusa) or a weaker (such as Andromeda) while men were skillful (Perseus) or strategic (Polydectes). Nevertheless, in modern texts, female protagonists may be presented to be more capable and perseverant than their male counterparts without outshining them. This adds great possibilities to the plots. This phenomenon echoes to Gannon's research about the status change of females in literature in 20th century. Moreover, these descriptions reflect the evolution of gender roles from ancient to modern period.

Lastly, the boundary of class in the contemporary seems to be blurred in compare with ancient one. Many descriptions are devoted to describe Perseus' respectable heredity, which correspond to the classic definition of heroes that they often "belong to a princely class" (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2015). In comparison, the heroes in modern texts can be a nonentity. Despite of being a nobody, he or she is fighting their daily battles and constant challenges, just like every reader does in their countless daily lives. Readers can easily relate the sorrow and joy of the homely heroes to themselves.

These adaptions, some reflect the broad trend and some are trivial, provide a scope for us to consider the how individuals discover their talents and what social norms are in the modern society. These are the pressing issues across genders, races, nationalities and religions. It might help to explain why the charm of Percy Jackson has swept the teenage world.

As for the differences in characters in the modern fiction and Greek mythology, there is a table summed up as follows:

	Modern fiction(Percy)	Greek mythology(Perseus)
Appearance	1. Ordinary 2. Handsome and young 3. Superpower of being able to control water	1. Handsome 2. Focus on body figure 3. Brave and brilliant
Personality	1. Worries and fears obvious 2. Stay alert to most strangers 3. Be more vigilant 4. Be a human in order to protect and cherish his friendship	1. Appears to be more determined and fearless 2. Be more hot-tempered to strangers 3. Occupy the throne of one whose death he had caused
Relationship with other	1. Teamwork 2. Appears to be closer with his parents 3. Appears to be uneasy 4. Mutual-trust and mutual-respect are valued between couples	1. Killed enemy by himself 2. Having no assist except for gods 3. His father fails to pay any attention to him 4. Woman was more like a commodity rather than a human

IV. APPENDIX

1.

John Rocco, the cover of *The Son of Neptune*, 2011

2.

Perseus by Benvenuto Cellini, Loggia dei Lanzi, Florence, Italy, 2005

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