

The Romantics and Classical Greece

Article by: Stephen Hebron

Theme: [Romanticism](#)

The Romantic period was one of growing interest in ancient Greece. Stephen Hebron explores how this shaped the subject matter and forms of the era's poets.

In the Romantic period it was taken for granted that the intellectual and artistic achievement of ancient Greece and Rome was one of the foundations of western culture. The Classical world permeated almost every aspect of life, from political institutions and philosophical enquiry to scientific method and the basic forms of architecture. The classics of Latin literature, such as Virgil's *Aeneid*, the Odes of Horace and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, were standard texts. At Hawkshead Grammar School, [Wordsworth](#) received a thorough grounding in Greek and Latin as part of his general education. At Christ's Hospital school in London, [Coleridge](#) was discovered reading Virgil for pleasure and was made a 'Grecian', or scholar, and at Cambridge University won a medal for an ode in Greek. As a schoolboy, [Keats](#) decided to translate the whole of the *Aeneid* into English. [Shelley](#) was an excellent classicist, and sufficiently proficient in ancient Greek to make, as an adult, a fine translation of Plato's *Symposium*.

The ruins of ancient Greece

The ways in which classical literature, art and philosophy inspired the thought of the Romantic poets influenced their subject matter and determined their verse forms, which are many and various. Of particular note, however, is the increasing interest that was taken in ancient Greece, often referred to as Hellenism. General knowledge of ancient Greek civilisation was greatly increased by publications such as Johann Joachim Winckelmann's *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks* (translated into English by Henri Fuseli in 1765) and James Stuart and Nicholas Revett's *Antiquities of Athens* (1762–1830). Greek art could also be seen at first hand in museums, most spectacularly at the British Museum, where from 1816 visitors could see the newly acquired Elgin Marbles. There was an enthusiasm for the ruins of Greece, one of the few countries that could be visited during the Napoleonic wars.

Ancient Greek poetry and visual art

Ancient Greek poetry and visual art was admired for its serenity and simplicity, and what was seen as a kind of elemental vigour and purity. In *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley described the culture of 5th-century Athens as a golden age:

... never at any other period has so much energy, beauty, and virtue, been developed; never was blind strength and stubborn form so disciplined and rendered subject to the will of man, or that will less repugnant to the dictates of the beautiful and the true, as during the century which preceded the death of Socrates. Of no other epoch in the history of our species have we records and fragments stamped so visibly with the image of the divinity in man.¹

His poetic drama *Prometheus Unbound* is directly influenced by ancient Greek drama, and especially the tragedies of Aeschylus. His elegy for John Keats, *Adonais* (1821) begins with an epigram attributed to Plato, and is rich in Platonic imagery.

¹ Shelley's Poetry and Prose, ed. by Donald H Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York and London: W W Norton & Co., 2002), p. 518.



Keats and the 'grecian Manner'

Keats, while he was planning 'Hyperion', a projected long poem on the overthrow of the Titans, told Benjamin Robert Haydon that he would write in a 'naked and grecian Manner' (*Letters*, I, 207). He soon abandoned 'Hyperion' however, deeming the language too unnatural. More successful was his inclusion in his shorter poems of figures from Greek mythology, which, like many non-Greek readers of the day, he learned about from Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary*, Tooke's *Pantheon* and Spence's *Polymetis*. He did this rather clumsily and sentimentally at first, in the manner of an early influence, Leigh Hunt, but his use of Greek myth in later poems such as the great odes of 1819 is exceedingly apt and successful.

Some writers, including Wordsworth and Coleridge, distrusted this attachment to Greek mythology, seeing it as an inappropriate preference for pagan mythology over Christianity. After hearing Keats read from *Endymion* Wordsworth commented drily that it was 'a Very pretty piece of Paganism'.² Others were more savage, dismissing Keats as ill-educated, as someone who could only read Greek texts in translation and whose use of myth was presumptuous and lazy.

What we now consider the most original aspects of the Romantics' use of the classical heritage were, at the time, often the most controversial and derided.

² The Keats Circle, ed. by H E Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), ii, p.144.

