ENGLISH IDIOMS OF MYTHOLOGICAL ORIGIN

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Abstract: As in most European languages, in English we still encounter phrases and expressions that contain references to stories, characters or creatures from ancient Greek or Roman mythology. Most of these have acquired a more general meaning and are today idioms applied to situations, events or relationships because they depict or characterise them so suggestively. As linguistic devices they also make the phrasing more colourful and expressive. Discovering their origin and background helps us understanding them better and use them more effectively.

Keywords: idiom, phrase, origin, language, mythology

In classical Greek and Roman mythology the Trojan War is one of the major events, subject of a long oral tradition and a cycle of epic poems from which only fragments have survived. It then became the theme of Homer's *Iliad* from around the 8th century BCE, narrating a part of the final year of the ten-year-long siege of Troy. The poem ends with the funeral rites of Hector. Homer's other epic poem, the *Odyssey*, records the adventures of Odysseus (Ulysses) on his long voyage home. Virgil's *Æneid* (written between 29 and 19 BCE) picks up the story where the *Iliad* left it and tells the story of the wooden horse, describes the sacking and burning of Troy and the subsequent flight of the few survivors who managed to escape, notably of Æneas, who eventually settled in Latium, in present day Italy, to become the ancestor of the Romans.

More recent historical and archeological evidence seems to suggest that the story of the Trojan War, much doubted in the 19th century, has a real historical basis and took place in Anatolia sometime in the Bronze Age, during the 13th or 12th centuries BCE. The present paper tries to discover the origins of English idioms which contain references to these events and their literary depiction.

the apple of discord = a cause of dispute, argument, rivalry; something to contend about
the Judgment of Paris= a difficult case or argument to decide, especially one in which there is no solution that would satisfy all parties

The story of Trojan War reaches back to the marriage of the sea-nymph Thetis and the hero Peleus (later the parents of Achilles), where all the gods and goddesses had been invited except Eris, the goddess of strife and discord. She took umbrage at being left out and, in a fit of pique, "crashed" the wedding and threw a golden apple with the inscription 'for the most beautiful' on the table. Hera, Pallas Athene and Aphrodite (Juno, Minerva and Venus, respectively), each felt they were entitled to the apple and a heated argument ensued. Eventually Zeus decided

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that Paris, prince of Troy, should be the judge. When he couldn't make up his mind, the goddesses reverted to bribes: Hera promised him power, Athena wealth and Aphrodite the love of the most beautiful woman in the world. Paris decided in favour of the latter. Thus Hera and Athena became sworn enemies of the whole Trojan race and as a vengeance they actively contributed to the fall of Troy.

a/the face that launched a thousand ships = a very beautiful woman

The expression is rather literary (possibly even pompous-sounding). The original face belonged to Helen of Troy, the daughter of Zeus and Leda, whose love Aphrodite had promised to Paris. Unfortunately, Helen was already married to King Menelaus of Sparta, who became understandably upset when she eloped with Paris. He and his brother Agamemnon, king of Mycenæ, convinced all the Greek chieftains to gather a fleet of more than a thousand ships and set out on an expedition to retrieve her from the Trojan king Priam and avenge Paris's insult.

In Christopher Marlow's 'The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus' (1590-1604) Faustus greets her with the words: "Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships/ And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?"

More recently the expression has also been 'paraphrased' in a facetious, if irreverent manner into *a face that sank a thousand ships*.

There were brave men before Agamemnon / Brave men lived before Agamemnon= the saying implies that we are not to suppose that our own age or locality has the monopoly on all that is good, on achievement or glory

In Horace's *Odes* (IV, ix) the original Latin is *"Vixere fortes ante Agamemnona"*, which Byron paraphrased in *Don Juan*:

> "Brave men were living before Agamemnon
> And since, exceeding valorous and sage,
> A good deal like him too, though quite the same none;
> But then they shone not on the poet's page,
> And so have been forgotten."

Agamemnon was in Greek legend the King of Mycenæ, brother of Menelaus, and the leader of the Greeks in the Trojan War.

(an) ***Achilles' heel***= a weak or vulnerable spot in something or somebody who is otherwise strong

According to Greek mythology, the nymph Thetis held her young son Achilles by the heel while dipping him into the river Styx to make him invulnerable. His heel, however, was not touched by the water and remained his only weakness. After years as a brave warrior, Achilles was ultimately killed during the siege of Troy by a poisoned arrow which pierced his heel. His deadly enemy Paris had learned of his weakness and aimed at his weak spot.

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a Cassandra = a person who makes correct statements about unpleasant future events but is never believed by anyone

The prophetess Cassandra was the daughter of Priam, king of Troy and his second wife, Hecuba. She was loved by the god Apollo but refused his advances and the jilted lover cursed her in his anger that nobody should believe her predictions, although they always proved to be correct.

the wooden horse of Troy – a Trojan horse = something that is intended to subvert or defeat from within: a disguised way of introducing something dangerous or harmful
a Greek gift = a treacherous, dangerous gift

The story of the Trojan horse features in Virgil's *Æneid*. In the last year of the decade they had spent besieging Troy, after the death of Hector, the Greeks were advised by the shrewd Odysseus (Ulysses) to indicate that they had had enough and would withdraw. He also had a monster wooden horse made by Epios, allegedly an offering to the gods to secure a prosperous voyage back to Greece. It was offered the people of Troy as a (parting) gift. Some of the wiser Trojans (among them Laocoön, their priest and Cassandra, Priam's daughter) urged the people to reject it, saying, *"Beware the Greeks, even when they bear gifts"* or *"I fear the Greeks, even when they offer gifts"*. (In Virgil's *Æneid* it appears as "*Timeo Danaos et done ferentes"*) However, the horse was accepted and the Trojans dragged it within their city. The Greek soldiers hidden in it, including Menelaus, emerged unexpectedly during the night, killed the guards, opened the city gates, sacked and set fire to Troy, thus victoriously completing their prolonged assault on it. Unfortunately, they also desecrated the temples and thus incurred the wrath of the gods. Few of the surviving Greeks returned home safely; it took Odysseus ten years to get back to Ithaca. His voyage and adventures on the way are described in Homer's *Odyssey*.

siren voices / song / call = the temptation or appeal of something that seems very attractive but which is also dangerous and, if yielded to, will have bad results

Sirens (from the Greek *sirens*, meaning 'entanglers') are mythical monsters, either half woman and half bird, or half woman and half fish who can tempt unwary seamen with their sweet alluring song to sail towards them and then perish on rocks or dangerous waters. The other possible outcome of listening to their song is that you forget everything and eventually die of hunger. Thus a 'siren' can be an attractive but deceitful woman.

Odysseus (Ulysses), however, was curious to hear their song so he filled the crew's ears with wax and made them tie him to the mast of his ship to make sure he wouldn't succumb to their enticements.

between Scylla and Charybdis = between two courses of action, alternatives or dangers when trying to avoid either of them would mean risking the other

These two monsters lived on either side of the Strait of Messina, on the coasts of Italy and Sicily and Odysseus managed to pass between them on his way home, which was no mean

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feat. There are two variants of the story which tells how Scylla, originally a beautiful nymph, was turned into a monster. It was either done by the goddess Amphitrite, who was jealous of her husband, Poseidon, god of the sea, or by Circe who saw her as a rival for the affections of Glaucus. Thus Scylla became a hideous creature with twelve legs and six dog's heads, each with three rows of teeth, constantly barking and devouring the sailors on the ships that passed in front of her. On the opposite bank under a huge fig tree dwelt the formless Charybdis who swallowed the waters of the sea, sucking ships into the depth, and threw them up again three times a day. Presumably they were the personification of a dangerous rock side and a whirlpool on the two sides of the strait. Sailors who tried to avoid one danger fell into the other one.

lotus eaters = lazy dreamy people who are concerned only with their own pleasures and comfort and can afford to live in ease and luxury

In Homer's *Odyssey* the eponymous hero encounters a people, the Lotophagi, who eat the fruit of the lotus tree and so forget about their friend and homes, lose all desire of returning to their native country, their only wish is to live in an inactive dreamy state in Lotus-land.

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