

## Do You Know “Achilles’ Heel”?

### —— Analyzing the Relationship between Greek Myths and English Language

**Abstract:** Do you know “Achilles’ Heel”? It’s an allusion from Greek myths. Instances like this are not difficult to find in English language. They are terse and vivid because of Greek myths and legends behind them. Therefore, they enjoy popular use. But these words and phrases are peculiar to the native culture and language, they appear exotic to foreign learners. So let’s share some words and idioms which are relevant to Greek myths in view of knowing the ins and outs of them and understanding how to apply them. In the meanwhile, they can help you understand English history and English culture more thoroughly and deep and taste the wisdom and humor of the English people.

**Key words:** relationship, Greek myths, English language, English idioms

Once the Republican supporter made comments on Clinton’s scandal, “A misbehaving president is regarded as a government’s Achilles heel and is expected to resign.”

What is *Achilles’ heel*? If you don’t know it, you will not understand the meaning of the supporter’s comments. The idiom means the weak or vulnerable point of a person, organization and country, etc. which comes from Greek myths. The story is about Achilles, one of the Greek heroes in the Iliad. When he was a child, he was taken by his mother Thetis and dipped in the river Styx to make him invulnerable. The water washed every part of his body except the heel in his mother’s hand. It was precisely at his vulnerable point that Achilles was later killed in Trojan battle.

Greek mythology is a set of legends about the gods, heroes, natural events and universal history of Hellenic civilization. The myths of Greece mostly come from Hellenic literature such as Homer’s Iliad, Hesiod’s Theogony and Sophocles’ drama. From the Renaissance to now, Greek Myths is one of their required courses when the English people receive classical education. These stories and myths are so enjoyable that they impress themselves upon the English. Therefore the myths of Greece become the abundant supply of English language.

Let’s take *Europe* for instance. Sometimes it is also called Europa, which originally comes from Greek Mythology. In it, Europa is a princess who is abducted and carried off by a white bull to Crete, the cradle of Hellenic civilization. And the bull is actually Zeus, king of the Gods. In the same way, *Paris* is a person’s name also from Greek myths. Paris is the son of the King of Troy. These two are place names. And the main characters from Greek mythology also appear in everyday speech. For instance, a huge or heroic task is said to *herculean*. This is in tribute to the Greek mythological hero Hercules. And when you talk about a book of maps, *atlas* will occur to you. It is named after Atlas, a titan who supported the heavens on his shoulders. Here’s one you are probably familiar with it. It’s the word *promethean* which describes a daringly creative or defiantly original act, because of the Titan

Prometheus, who defied the wrath of Zeus and stole fire in order to benefit humankind. And another word you may have used before without realizing your debt to Greek mythology. The word *panic* comes from Pan, the God of shepherds. Pan was always considered to be the cause of the sudden fear especially in lonely places. That's why it's called panic.

Then more attention will be paid to the relationship between Greek myths and English idioms. Idioms consist of set phrases and short sentences, which are loaded with the native cultures and ideas. Therefore, there are a great deal of idioms are relevant to the myths of Greece. And these idioms are not easy to understand from its literal meanings, for example, *Greek gift*. Does it mean a gift made in Greece? Of course not, it symbolizes a dangerous gift. But as they are colourful, blunt, expressive and impressive, they form an important part of the English vocabulary and are now used in different situations. So I will share some of them with you in view of giving you the background of them.

#### ◆ **Oedipus/Electra complex**

As defined by famous psychologist Sigmund Freud, *Oedipus complex* is the unconscious desire of a young child for sexual intercourse with the parent of the opposite sex, especially between boys and their mothers.

The source of this complex is from the Greek legend of King Oedipus. Oedipus was the son of King Laius of Thebes, a city in Greece. There was a Apollo's oracle predicted that he would killed his father and marry his mother. So when he was born his father Laius bound his feet together and had exposed him on a lonely mountaintop where it must soon starve. Then the poor infant was rescued by a shepherd and raised by Polybus, King of Corinth. And he was called Oedipus. Years later, Oedipus, too, like Laius, thought to make it impossible for the oracle to come true and resolved never to see Polybus. But on his journey he unwittingly killed King Laius with whom he quarreled. He arrived at Thebes shortly thereafter and saved the city from the ravages of the Sphinx. He was proclaimed king in Laius' stead, and he took the dead king's widow, Jocasta, as his own wife. After several years a terrible plague struck Thebes. The Apollo declared that the plague would be stayed upon one condition: whoever had murdered King Laius must be punished. In the course of his investigation, Oedipus discovered that he himself was the killer and that Laius had been his real father. Finally he couldn't act against the decrees of fate. In his despair at this discovery, Oedipus blinded himself.

Girls have a similar sexual desire for the father which is repressed in analogous fashion and is called Electra complex. It also comes from Greek mythology. Electra is the daughter of Agamemnon, the king who led the Greeks against Troy in the Trojan War. To obtain favorable winds for the Greek fleet sailing to Troy, Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia to the goddess Artemis and so came under a curse. After he returned home victorious, he was murdered by his wife, Clytemnestra, and her lover. To avenge his father's death, Electra helped her brother kill their mother and her lover.

### ◆ Sphinx's riddle

The allusion also comes from the Greek legend of King Oedipus. The Sphinx is winged monster having the head and breasts of a woman and body of a lion. She lay in wait for the wayfarers along the roads to Thebes and whoever she seized she put a riddle to, telling him if he could answer it, she would let him go. No one could, and the horrible creature devoured man after man until the city was in a state of siege. And at that time, Oedipus heard what was happening in Thebes in his lonely wanderings. He was a homeless, friendless man to whom life meant little and he determined to seek the Sphinx out and try to solve the riddle. "What creature," the Sphinx asked him, "goes on four feet in the morning, on two at noonday, on three in the evening?" "Man," answered Oedipus. "In childhood he creeps on hands and feet; in manhood he walks erect; in old age he helps himself with a staff." It was the right answer. The Sphinx, inexplicable, but most fortunately, killed herself. The Thebans were saved. It is so called *Sphinx's riddle* which means difficult problems. And *Sphinx* is also used to describe an enigmatic person. The following are a few examples in actual uses.

- I've always found her rather sphinx-like.
- How the massive stones were brought here from hundreds of miles away remains a Sphinx's riddle. (Zhuang Hecheng, 2002)

### ◆ Midas touch

The idiom is named for a legendary of Greece. Midas was a king of Phrygia, a region nowadays part of Turkey. He was greedy for riches. Because he befriended Silenus, a teacher of Dionysus, Dionysus granted him the power to turn everything into gold by touch. But when he tried to eat, his food became inedible metal and when he embraced his daughter, she turned into a golden statue, Midas begged to be relieved of his gift. Dionysus allowed him to wash away his power in the Pactolus River. According to this story, a person who is very successful or easily acquires riches is said to *have the Midas touch*. Let's take some examples to illustrate it.

- The poverty-stricken boy turned out to have the Midas touch and was a millionaire by the time he was twenty-five. (EID)
- Let's follow his stock tips, he seems to have the Midas touch.

### ◆ Pandora's box

In Greek mythology, Prometheus stole fire from the gods and gave it to humans. Having found it, Zeus felt very angry. He punished Prometheus for the theft; in the meantime, he planned to take revenge on man. He made for man a woman. She was named Pandora, which meant All-Gifted, since each of the gods had given her something. One of the gifts was a chest which Pandora was told never to open. Then she was brought to Epimetheus, the brother of Prometheus. Although he had been warned by his brother to receive no gifts from Zeus, he married Pandora and lived in happiness. However, Pandora's curiosity got the better of her and opened the chest. All the miseries and hardships flew out of the box and flew into the world. At last,

Pandora found the strength to shut the box. The only thing left in it, however, was the one good gift---hope. Since that time the hope in man's heart is the only thing which has made him able to bear the sorrows which Pandora brought upon him. Today we use *Pandora's box* to symbolize the source of the miseries and hardships and use *to open Pandora's box* to mean to create an uncontrollable situation that will cause great grief. For example.

- Money may bring you happiness, but sometimes it is a Pandora's box. (Zhuang Hecheng, 2002)
- Abolishing the regulations on financial dealing was like opening Pandora's box---it was chaos. (CID)

### ◆ **Horn of plenty**

In Greek myths, when Zeus was born, his mother Rhea brought him to Amalthea in order to save him from being swallowed by his father, Cronus. Amalthea brought him up on the milk of goat in a cave in Crete. This goat having broken off one of its horns, Amalthea filled it with flowers and fruits and presented it to Zeus.. When Zeus overpowered his father and became the father of all gods, he also brought Amalthea and the horn to the sky. And nowadays *the horn of plenty* is regarded as a treasure because the horn has the power to give to the person in possession of it whatever he or she wished for. Let's look at an example in actual uses.

- Nature, very oddly, when the horn of plenty is quite empty, always fills it with babies. (Zhuang Hecheng, 2002)

English language is abundant in words and phrases which are related to Greek myths. Since these words and idioms are peculiar to the native culture and language, it is difficult for foreign learners to master them. However, if you read the myths of Greece, you will be clear about the relationship between Greek myths and these words and idioms. It will help you know how to apply them. In the meanwhile, it can also offer you a good opportunity to understand English history and English culture more thoroughly and deep and taste the wisdom and humor of the English people.

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