

The Allure of the Sirens in Greek Classical Literature

Yoshinori SANO

1 Introduction

The Sirens are liminal creatures. They live far out on the sea, at the outer edge of the known world, where rarely sailors reach. Their physical feature, i. e. human face on bird's body, strengthens the liminality of their existence. Beautiful songs come out from their mouth, so they belong to culture, but they can fly away in the natural world.

There have been attempts to cover representations of the Sirens in Ancient Greece, in literary works, vase paintings, grave sculptures and others under one interpretation, for example as human souls of the deceased (Weicker, 1902) or as benevolent fairies who welcome the souls of the deceased in the nether world (Buschor, 1944). But Sirens, appropriately for liminal beings, slip out of such comprehensive categorizations. Rachewiltz (1983, pp. 4-5) reasonably suggests that it is better to recognize the difference among depictions and to inquire how and why each author depicted the Sirens differently with particular emphasis.

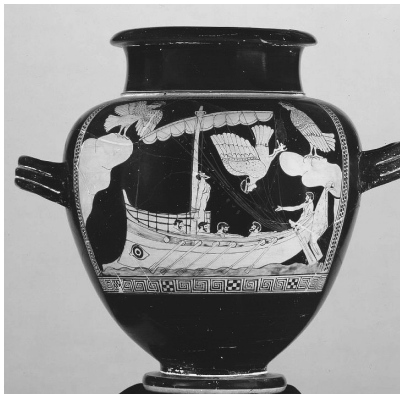


Figure 1. Attic Red-figure Stamnos (475-460 BCE) at British Museum.

Retrieved from http://www.britishmuseum.org/collectionimages/AN00007/AN00007497_001_1.jpg

The Sirens lure sailors. But their allure has been expressed with different emphases in pictorial representations. A Greek vase painting (Figure 1) depicts the Sirens singing from rocks above Odysseus' head, while in Waterhouse' painting (Figure 2) the Sirens surround Odysseus from close range, and their ardent gaze seems to add to the charm of their song. In Draper's painting (Figure 3), bodily charm is overtly emphasized.



Figure 2. J. W. Waterhouse "Ulysses and the Sirens" (1891) at National Gallery of Victoria.

Retrieved from <http://content.ngv.vic.gov.au/col-images/api/E PUB000727/1280>

In the extent ancient Greek texts, longer depictions of the Sirens can be found in Homer's *Odyssey* (book 12), Plato's *Republic* (book 10) and Apollonius' *Argonautica* (book 4).¹ In this paper, I will try to elucidate what are notable features in different depictions of the Sirens, and explore what might be the reason for choosing these features in each text.



Figure 3. H. J. Draper, “Ulysses and the Sirens” (1909) at Ferens Art Gallery.

Retrieved from https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a3/Draper_Herbert_James_Ulysses_and_the_Sirens.jpg

2 Homer's *Odyssey*

Odysseus plugs the ears of his companions and let them bind himself on the mast of his ship, as Circe advised him. As Odysseus' ship draws near the island of the Sirens, their song reaches the ears of Odysseus:

Come hither on your way, renowned Odysseus, great glory of the Achaeans; stop your ship that you may listen to the voice of us two. For never yet has any man rowed past the island in his black ship until he has heard the sweet voice from our lips: instead, he has joy of it, and goes his way a wiser man. For we know all the toils that in wide Troy the Argives and Trojans endured through the will of the gods, and we know all things

that come to pass upon the fruitful earth. (12. 184-191, translated by Dimock)

Hearing this, Odysseus desires to listen more, and signs with his eyes to his companions to untie him. The companions bind Odysseus tighter as previously arranged. Thus Odysseus and his crew safely pass the Sirens and avoid death.

It is notable that the content of the song, rather than the beauty of the voice, is overtly emphasized (Heubeck & Hekstra, 1989, p. 128). The Sirens know the toils of the Argives (i. e. the Greeks) and the Trojans in the Trojan war. Odysseus was a participant in that war, and is moved by hearing his past experience. One may recall that when Demodocus the bard sings of the quarrel between Achilles and Odysseus during the war, Odysseus sheds tears (*Odyssey* 8. 73-94), and that Odysseus requests the same bard to sing of the famous strategy of the Trojan Horse, and hearing the song Odysseus again sheds tears (*Odyssey* 8. 485-536).

The song of the Sirens appeals not only to Odysseus' personal experience. They claim that they know all that happen on earth. In this connection, one should recall that Odysseus is a man of inquisitiveness. This aspect of Odysseus is clearly set out at the very beginning of the *Odyssey*:

Tell me, Muse, of the man of many devices, driven far astray after he had sacked the sacred citadel of Troy. Many were the men whose cities he saw and whose minds he learned, and many the woes he suffered in his heart upon the sea. (1. 1-4, translated by Dimock)

The song of the Sirens, as represented in the *Odyssey*, appeals to Odysseus' strong desire for knowledge.

3 Plato's *Republic*

Socrates and his interlocutors discuss on justice and its implication for life in great length. At the end of the long discussion, Socrates tells a curious story

about the punishment and rewards after death. He claims that his story was reported by a man called Er, a Pamphylian, who was once killed in a battle, saw the world after death, and came back to life. This story includes an account of the structure of the orbits of celestial bodies, where the Sirens feature. There is a vertical column of light in the shape of a spindle at the center of the universe, and this spindle is encircled by eight orbits, respectively of fixed stars, Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Mercury, Venus, Sun, and Moon. The Sirens stand one each on these orbits:

And the spindle turned on the knees of Necessity, and up above on each of the rims of the circles a Siren stood, borne around in its revolution and uttering one sound, one note, and from all the eight there was the concord of a single harmony. And there were other three who sat round about at equal intervals, each one on her throne, the Fates, daughters of Necessity, clad in white vestments with filleted heads, Lachesis, and Clotho, and Atropos, who sang in unison with the music of the Sirens, Lachesis singing the things that were, Clotho the things that are, and Atropos the things that are to be. (617b-c, translated by Shorey)

Eight Sirens together sing one note, in harmony with the tree goddesses of fate. The contents of this cosmic song are the past, the present, and the future. It has been pointed out that the Pythagorean idea of the Cosmic Harmony (or 'Music of the Spheres') is reflected in this passage (Adam, 1963, p. 452).

There was no such representation of the Sirens before. Why did Plato choose to set the Sirens on the celestial orbits and make them sing the Cosmic Harmony? Perhaps the Sirens were thought to be appropriate for moving through the space on the orbits because they were winged. Also perhaps they were thought to be appropriate to sing the Cosmic Harmony because they sing beautifully. Another notable feature about this representation is that the Sirens participate in singing of the past, the present, and the future. This may be seen as an

passage gives an image of the singing voice of the Sirens and the sound of Orpheus' lyre are wrestling on the arena of the Argonauts' ears.³

Orpheus is excellent both in song and lyre. In the *Argonautica*, there are passages where Orpheus is represented principally as an excellent singer. When Orpheus is introduced for the first time, he is said to have charmed rocks, rivers and oak trees (1. 23-31). When a quarrel was about to happen between Idmon and Idas, Orpheus sings how the earth, the sky and the sea were separated, how mountains arose, how rivers appeared, and how the rulers among the gods shifted and eventually Zeus became the ruler. This song charms the Argonauts and the quarrel ceased (1. 494-515). There are other passages where the sound of his lyre is the center of attention. After the boxing match of Polydeuces and Amycus and its aftermath, the Argonauts sing a praise of the victor Polydeuces accompanied by Orpheus' lyre (2. 159-163). At Sthenelus' tomb, Orpheus dedicates his lyre, after which this place is called Lyra (2. 928-9). At the marriage ceremony of Jason and Medea, the Argonauts sing a wedding song accompanied by Orpheus' lyre (4. 1159-1160). In the contest between the Sirens and Orpheus, Apollonius chose to focus on Orpheus' lyre, rather than his song. Perhaps, the pure beauty of the Sirens' voice, rather than the allure of the content of their song may be thought appropriate for the nature of this match. This offers a variation to the representation of the Sirens in the *Odyssey*.

It should also be noted that there are some passages where Orpheus acts as a wise advisor.⁴ Once he recognizes a divine portent and says an appropriate prayer.⁵ Similarly the quick judgment of Orpheus saves other Argonauts from the allure of the beautiful singing voice of the Sirens. Thus the way the Sirens' song is represented in this scene contributes also to the characterization of Orpheus as a hero of wise judgment in the *Argonautica*.

5 Conclusion

As the above brief examination reveals, the allure of the Sirens have been represented differently, and the distinct emphasis in each representation

corresponds to those who are confronted with the Sirens. The Sirens in the *Odyssey* reflects Odysseus' quest for knowledge. The Sirens in Plato's *Republic* points to the ideal harmony which human soul should aspire to. Apollonius represented his Sirens with conscious variation from the *Odyssean* ones, and they shed light on one aspect of Orpheus' characterization. The evasiveness of the Sirens who elude one all-inclusive definition may be seen as facilitating this flexibility in the representation of the nature of their allure.

Footnotes

- ¹ Other mentions of the Sirens include [Hesiod] *Catalogue of Women* fragments 28 and 150 MW, Alcman fragments 1 and 30 *PMGF*, Pindar, *Partheneion* 2, Euripides, *Helen* 167-178, Sophocles fragments 852 and 861 *TrGF*, and Plato, *Cratylus* 403d-e.
- ² The Argonauts are warned about Planctae “the Wandering Rocks,” but not about the Sirens (4. 856-884).
- ³ The verb translated by Race as ‘overpowered’ is *ebiēsato* (< *biaomai* ‘to force’ derived from the noun *biā* ‘force, violence’). The rivalry in music between the Sirens and Orpheus may be enhanced by their genealogical background stated in Apollonius’ *Argonautica*. The Sirens’ mother is Terpsichore, one of the Muses (4. 895-6), while Orpheus is said to be a son of Calliope (1. 24-5). Thus both of them are children of Muses.
- ⁴ 1. 915-8, 1134-8, 2.684-693, 4. 1547-1561.
- ⁵ 4. 1409-1421.

References

- Adam, James. (1963). *The Republic of Plato*, 2nd edition, 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Buschor, Ernst. (1944). *Die Musen des Jenseits*. München: Bruckmann.
- Dimock, George E. (ed.). (1995). *Homer: The Odyssey*, 2 vols (Loeb Classical Library). Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Heubeck, Alfred & Hoeskstra, Arie. (1989). *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey*, vol. 2. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hunter, Richard. (2015). *Apollonius of Rhodes: Argonautica Book IV*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Race, William H. (ed.). (2008). *Apollonius Rhodius: Argonautica* (Loeb Classical Library). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rachewiltz, Siegfried Walter de. (1983). *De Sirenibus: An Inquiry into Sirens from Homer to Shakespeare* (Ph. D. Dissertation). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.
- Shorey, Paul (ed.). (1935). *Plato: The Republic*, 2 vols, (Loeb Classical Library). Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Thalmann, William G. (2011). *Apollonius of Rhodes and the Spaces of Hellenism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Vian, Francis (ed.). (1981). *Apollonios de Rhodes: Argonautique, Tome III*. Paris: Société d'édition «Les Belles Lettres».
- G. Weicker, *Der Seelenvogel in der alten Litteratur und Kunst*. Leipzig, 1902.

ギリシア古典文学におけるセイレーンたちの魅惑 佐野好則

セイレーンの魅惑は様々な仕方でも表現されてきた。セイレーンたちを描く古代の壺絵から現代の絵画にいたる代表的な作品にも、彼女たちの魅惑に異なる強調点をおいて描かれてきたことをたどることができる。ギリシア古典文学の中でホメロスの『オデュッセイア』においては、セイレーンたちの博大な知識に基づく歌の内容に強調点がおかれる。これは主人公オデュッセウスが知識を求める英雄であることを反映する。プラトンの『国家』においては、セイレーンたちは天体の軌道上で、運命の女神たちとともに、現在・過去・未来を妙なるハーモニーで歌い続けている。『国家』において、人間の魂がその構成部分間の調和を求めるべきであるとされるため、セイレーンたちの歌は人間の魂の目指すべき理想のあり方を示している。アポローニオスの『アルゴナウティカ』においては、セイレーンたちの歌の内容は示されず、純粋な歌声の美しさが強調される。これにより、この歌声の危険を即座に察して豎琴を強く鳴らしてアルゴー号の乗組員たちが誘惑されることを防いだオルフェウスの賢い判断が印象づけられる。

Keywords:

セイレーン、ギリシア古典文学、『オデュッセイア』、『国家』、『アルゴナウティカ』