

How British is 'Rule Britannia'?

April 14 2011



Last night of the Proms

(PhysOrg.com) -- It is seen by many as an unofficial British national anthem – but an Oxford University academic believes she has discovered that Rule Britannia was heavily influenced by Greek literature.

Dr. Cressida Ryan of Oxford University's Classics Faculty has found clear traces of Greek literature and culture in the famous song written by James Thomson – a link that has never been made before.

Dr Ryan said: 'While studying the Greek and Roman influences on William Mason's *Caractacus*, I decided to look at James Thomson, Mason's contemporary, who wrote *Rule Britannia* and I found clear evidence that Thomson's poem had an eye to classical Greek literature. *Rule Britannia*, like Greek literature, contains elements of the sublime – a term used to describe how aesthetic works affect someone drawing on ancient ideas of pity, fear, terror and the soul.'

Dr. Ryan explained: 'In eighteenth-century London he mixed with men such as Robert Walpole, Dr. Arbuthnot, Alexander Pope and John Gay, who focused on the sublime in their writings. The emerging concept of the sublime was shaped by changes in their choices of Greek and Roman philosophical models.

"Thomson combined Greek tragedy with English nationalistic writing early in his career – in 1738 his play *Agamemnon* opened at Drury Lane and although this was unsuccessful, Greek tragic influence remains discernible in his later work such as *Edward and Eleanora*. In *Rule Britannia*, we find the same combination of focus on the country, religion, politics, law, strength against enemies and artistic inspiration that are present in *Caractacus*."

Rule Britannia, which is associated with British patriotism and the Royal Navy, was written as a chorus for the masque *Alfred*, written by James Thomson and his friend David Mallet, and set to music by Thomas Arne in 1740.

Dr. Ryan points to several lines in the lyrics which may have roots in ancient Greece. She said: "Thomson's line 'The blast that tears the skies, Serves but to root thy native oak' portrays the oak as the symbol of Britain, as the olive symbolised Athens. The emphasis on Britain as divinely protected in the first verse – 'When Britain first at Heaven's command ...and guardian angels sung this strain ... as the loud blast, the blast that tears the skies' invokes the power of the thunderbolt, an instrument of the Old Testament God but also of Zeus.

"Biographical and literary links between Thomson and Mason make such a reading more plausible. It is clear that they were both working with similar Greek and Roman models in mind, and that their own work seems to overlap more directly."

Ancient Greece may have influenced the tune of Rule Britannia, in addition to the lyrics. Dr. Ryan said: ‘Thomas Arne, who set the music for Rule Britannia, was also fond of Greek tragedy and composed Oedipus, King of Thebes.’

Provided by Oxford University

Citation: How British is 'Rule Britannia'? (2011, April 14) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-04-british-britannia.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--