Of Monsters and Men: A Comparison of Greek and Norse Mythology in the Western Canon

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Introduction
Greek literature has long been considered the most valuable to Western culture, and it has been held up through the ages as a literary exemplar. While the western literary canon has often been revised and added to, we have never truly questioned the place of Greek mythology in it, nor have we considered that other mythologies, particularly Norse, may deserve a place in our canon alongside their Greek peers. Although we must acknowledge the merit of Greek mythology and the vast influence it has had on literature and art, this does not necessarily mean that Norse mythology and its peers are of lesser importance.

The Supernatural
In modern study, there is still and unwillingness to take both realistic and fantasy elements together as equally important. The inclusion of the supernatural is praised in Greek myth as a by-product of Greek rationality, yet it is criticized in mythologies created by more “savage” people. However, bizarre imagination is not a fault of primitivism, but it is a valid part of mythological imagination by which some tales fulfill their sociological or psychological functions. A feud between a human and a supernatural being, or one between two supernatural beings, can still reflect the same complexity and tension of interpersonal relationships that a conflict between two human characters would.

Limitations of Greek Myth
For all its merit, Greek myth does lack in some areas. It struggles with thematic limitations and depth of character. Greek myth deals most often with themes of heroism, determination, and other noble ideals. However, it fails to deal with less noble themes like death, betrayal, and mortality with the same vigor that Norse mythology does. When examined closely, deity characters in Greek myth appear rather conventional. They lack stories that delve into their personal histories, and they ultimately fail to do anything that surprises an audience. Their presence in the narrative is weak, and thus the essential element of story is diminished. This lack of development occurs because of the derivative nature of Greek deities. Many Greek gods were borrowed from abroad. Often these gods did not quite fit Greek needs, so they were trimmed of their histories and intricate associations in order to fit the Greek mold.

Njord and Poseidon – Gods of the Sea
Though there are not as many stories about the Norse sea god Njord, he is argued to be better developed than Poseidon. When Njord marries the mountain goddess Skaldi, he moves with her to her wintery homeland. However, Njord becomes so depressed about being away from the sea that he chooses to live apart from his wife, ultimately sacrificing his marriage to return to the sea. We do not see an inkling of this sort of integration in the stories of Poseidon.

The Norse & Their Stories
While the Greek gods sit on Mount Olympus, enjoying the pleasures of ambrosia and immortality, the Norse gods spend their finite time in Asgard, nurturing an intimate relationship with darker aspects of life and the human condition – doom, destruction, mortality, and loss. Because they are mortal, the Norse gods must face the same fears and dilemmas that humankind does. This is illustrated in two major Norse myths – the death of Baldur and the story of Ragnarok. These stories illustrate the destruction of a supposedly immortal god, and the destruction of the gods and the world, respectively. There are no Greek parallels to these stories and these mortal themes do not appear as often in the whole of Greek myth.

References: