

## Fox, Vampire, Witch: Two Novels of Fantasy by Graves and Garnett

David Garnett's *Lady Into Fox* and Robert Graves' *Watch the North Wind Rise* are both novels of fantasy, the one tale of metamorphosis and the other a description of a future utopia. Both novels begin with idealized versions of devotion to female figures and end in cruelty and disillusion. *Lady Into Fox* began as a test of love for a wife who has undergone a horrible transformation; *Watch the North Wind Rise* is a novel thinly disguising a textbook for the worship of a goddess whose cruelties are the slowly revealed mysteries of the novel.

David Garnett's *Lady Into Fox* was published in time for the Christmas trade in 1922 by Chatto and Windus. Its reviews and sales were enthusiastic. It won the Hawthornden Prize in the next summer, and that seemed fitting to critics like Virginia Woolf, Joseph Conrad, H.G. Wells and George Moore. A few months later, the book was awarded the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. None of Garnett's other books, which included a number of fantasies and a textbook on the kitchen-garden, did so well. But despite its immediate success, the book is quite hard to find today, its success short-lived; one subsequent edition, published by Norton in the mid-sixties, was produced as a number in their mystery series.

Garnett's method of composition belied his inspiration for writing this fable. In the spring of 1922, walking in the woods with his newly-pregnant wife, he casually—and inexplicably—suggested that if they were to see a fox, she would have to turn into one. Oddly, Mrs. Garnett pressed him to write a story telling what he would "do with me," as a fox. Garnett began to imagine "how easily my intense love for her would overcome the trifling difficulties that would arise if she actually were transformed into one."

The writing of *The Metamorphosis of Mrs. Tebrick* (the apparent working title of the manuscript) was slow, partly because Garnett emphasized factual accuracy—even travelling into the countryside to study an apple tree to see if a fox could climb it—and partly because he wrote the story in a deliberately archaic diction. He adopted, he said, Daniel Defoe's methods of "inducing credulity." The slight archaism, the addresses to the reader, and the speaker-persona's admission of his limitations help keep the reader from objecting to the fable's basic premise, the metamorphosis.

Garnett made what has become the standard disclaimer for authors of fantasies in the "authors note" to the Norton edition:

The story was written not as a fantasy, or as an allegory, but for its own sake. It was not until

many years later that it occurred to me that the subject was a *reductio ad absurdum* of marital fidelity.

Now, this story can be read in many ways, not the least attractively as a simple, one-dimensional story. But there are a number of clues to direct our reading.

In an invocation of the reader's credulity, Mermaids and Sirens are used in the opening paragraph to prove that other, more startlingly bizarre things have happened.

Unlike Kafka's tale of metamorphosis, here the guilt is felt on the part of the onlookers, not by the victim of the transformation:

One fancy that came to him, because he was so much like a lover than a husband, was that it was his fault, and this because if anything dreadful happened, he could never blame her but himself for it (6).

This pattern, Tebrick's blaming himself, is repeated, even when his wife kills and eats a rabbit he has brought her—as a test of the degree to which the bestial has taken over her mind. He blames himself for testing her.

At one point, he sends out a dove—actually freeing the dove from his wife's hungry gaze—remarking, "Farewell! Unless...you return with good tidings like Noah's dove." These references to beginnings, to "ur-couples" and to their isolation from other human society encourage us to regard this man and woman, of course, as archetypal.

Mr. Tebrick does his best to carry on. He dismisses the servants, shoots his dogs, then dutifully tries to maintain his former domesticity, playing cards with his wife, dressing her in her silk bed-jacket, making his breakfast. Silvia (née Fox) gradually becomes more fox-like, straining Mr. Tebrick's affection, so that he moves to a more rural cottage. However, Silvia runs wild eventually and disappears, only to return later in the season with five little cubs. At first jealous of the dog-fox who has fathered them, Tebrick becomes the foxes' godfather of sorts, until tragedy strikes, of course, with the beginning of fox-hunting season.

At first, Silvia's "womanliness" even as a fox delights Tebrick, even though it is a transformed womanliness. Her taking comfort in his vows of eternal fidelity, her delicacy, her enjoyment of music all show him that she is still womanly, even ladylike, although transformed into a fox. (The only other explicitly stated view of Silvia's personality is her uncle's remark, that hers is "not an affectionate disposition.") When she gradually loses interest in these

things, in religion, and in pleasing him, Tebrick turns to alcohol, transforming himself into a beast too, gamboling on all fours, even though the next day he is consumed by religious guilt, "a true penitent before his Creator." The narrator draws this conclusion:

We know her husband was always trying to bring her back to be a woman, or at any rate to get her to act like one, may she not have been hoping to get him to be like a beast himself or to act like one?

The narrator goes on to suggest that since Silvia had enjoyed such success after the drinking of the night before, perhaps she hated to see her old nurse, who could weaken her influence on Tebrick. In addition, Silvia may have remembered, says the narrator, her strict upbringing by the nurse Mrs. Cork, who will do the same now Silvia is a fox.

Importantly, old Mrs. Cork also blames Tebrick for Silvia's transformation and, interestingly enough, she recognizes Silvia immediately. Mrs. Cork seems to accept the transformation as nothing extraordinary, as something that happens all the time.

As Silvia becomes more fox-like, she becomes more maternal. After the retreat to the rural house with its "walled-in garden," Silvia still takes great delight in play with little Polly, Mrs. Cork's granddaughter, the maternal instinct—"something very motherly in his vixen"—growing stronger, until Silvia, using all the wiles of a fox plus her bared teeth, escapes from Tebrick's "walled-in garden." Just before her escape, Tebrick is before her, on his knees, "she facing him, the picture of unrepentant wickedness and fury." He pleads with her, "If I stand between you and your freedom, it is because I love you."

After her escape, much is made of Tebrick's further slide into monomania. He longs for his vixen, becoming himself more of a social outcast. "Yet this all proceeded, one may say, from a passion, and a true conjugal fidelity, that it would be hard to find matched in this world." No longer thinking of Silvia as a woman, he fixates on her image as a vixen and goes sleepless, foodless, bathless—suffering, in short, all the torments of the frustrated courtly lover. (He even takes to reading *Job*.)

He sees the futility of his way and is about to turn to religion completely, becoming a missionary, when he hears a fox bark. It is Silvia, returning with her cubs, her eyes "shining with pride and happiness." It is after resolving his attitude toward his wife's infidelity—with a fox, no less—that Tebrick becomes most pitiful. Dreaming at home of his previous life, he dreams that he is presented with human children by his wife, and he plans for their education despite knowing that they are illegitimate. During the day, he is allowed by Silvia and her dog-fox to serve as a sort of sexless babysitter—a "godfather"—for the cubs.

Tebrick becomes more beastlike now, running on all fours and eventually sleeping in the foxes' earth. Realizing

the life that faces his vixen and her "children," he is filled with "an agony of pity." He at last does his wife's work again when he carries "little Esther" from one den to a new one. Wishing to be a beast himself, he sees the beasts happy and sinless; he achieves his greatest happiness in watching the cubs grow, even as he learns to hunt with them. Eventually, he returns to his home and there, on the first day of hunting season, Silvia is destroyed by a pack of dogs, literally in Tebrick's arms. Tebrick is wounded, but finally recovers; the narrator says, "And in the end he recovered his reason and lived to be a great age, for that matter he is still alive."

As A.E. Coppard says, to the truly intellectual, the husband of a lady who has turned into a fox is the husband of a lady who has turned into a fox.

One may wonder exactly how many "years later" Garnett realized that *Lady Into Fox* might be read as "a reductio ad absurdum of marital fidelity," since in 1929, seven years after the book's publication, his own fidelity was sorely tested by Robert Graves, Laura Riding, and a third character in their misadventures. In 1929, Garnett was living with a woman, Norah, who remained married to one Geoffrey Phibbs, a poet, entomologist, anthologist—described variously as "pleasantly eccentric," "possessed of zoological quirks," "of low moral character," or "demonic." Seymour-Smith says Phibbs was "unstable, revengeful, and had only an iota of talent and application." (His works would seem to bear out this judgement: A 1951 anthology of Irish Poets of the Nineteenth Century, a book on Irish gardens, and a collection of verse with the "astonishing title," *The Withering of the Fig Leaf*.)

At New Year 1929, Graves, Laura Riding, his four children, and his wife Nancy were living in a ménage à trois which Riding characteristically called a "wonderful Trinity"—the capital letter is hers. Phibbs wrote Riding an admiring letter; Graves was dispatched to recruit this "Irish Adonis"—Frank O'Connor, in *My Father's Son*, calls Phibbs "satanic and cruel"—and to lend him money, and clothes, and eventually Laura, who wanted to dominate and reawaken him emotionally and intellectually, too. "Graves found himself...supplanted as Laura's collaborator—and in other respects—by a man whose intellect he despised."

Norah eventually abandoned "little David Garnett," as Graves calls him in *The Marmosite's Miscellany*, and Phibbs left Riding to return to his wife. The resulting spats, fight, rushes back and forth across England and Ireland, the attempted suicides, start out silly and become tragic. It is this sequence of events that drives Graves from England to Majorca, and the events are treated variously in Riding's poems: "A Joking Word," "Everybody's Letters," and her roman à clef *144*; in Graves; Garnett's own autobiography makes no mention of Graves' meeting with him at a farm at Hilton in Huntingdon, Garnett "gulping his vintage port," Graves "scandalizing him with my soldier's oaths as I denied him a speaking part..." (Seymour-Smith, 155-165, 167).



Perhaps the most objective view of all this is that of the police who investigated Riding's attempted suicide; they thought her a "vampire." The most complete version of this sequence of events available now is Richard Perceval Graves' *Robert Graves: The Years With Laura, 1926-1940* (Penguin, 1990).

Nor was *Lady Into Fox* the only instance when Garnett treated analeptically—to use Graves' description of the transformation of reality into fiction—the disintegration of a family unit when "the other" is introduced.

In "The Sailor's Return," an English captain brings home to Fosse Priory an ex-princess of Dahomey. Among a great deal of contrast between English and African custom, food, culture, contrast of African good-heartedness with English prejudice, the inevitable happens: after many small tragedies, the English captain is beaten to death, the first-born son is sent back to Dahomey at the cost of the rest of the family's fortune, and the ex-princess becomes a washwoman for the rest of her unhappy life. At about the midpoint of the tale, when the second child dies, a fox is heard screaming outside.

Robert Graves' utopian fantasy *Watch the North Wind Rise*, (or *Seven Days in New Crete*, its British title) is another novel that on the surface, at least, seems to offer up great regard for the female, as embodied in "historical" goddess worship. But as in *The White Goddess*, in the final analysis the women and the goddess herself in *Watch the North Wind Rise* are shown completely cruel, murderous, and deceitful.

In what may be a minority opinion, Martin Seymour-Smith ranks *Seven Days in New Crete* as one of Graves' best novels, along with *Claudius*, *Wife to Mr. Milton*, *The Golden Fleece*, and *King Jesus*.

In a letter to the publisher, Creative Age, Graves refers to *The New Cretans* (the working title) as his "Utopia novel." Partly to settle a contract dispute, Creative Age published the novel as *Watch the North Wind Rise*, along with *Occupation: Writer*, in 1949. In 1950, Creative Age failed; and Farrar, Straus and Cudahy bought up the stock.

Graves wrote the novel in autumn of 1947 at a clinic in Barcelona where his son was treated for a severe leg injury. "Don't like it, really," Graves said of the book. "It smells too much of the Barcelona clinic where I wrote it."

Seymour-Smith says "Gravesian self-dissection was never done so openly or thoroughly, in prose, before or since...its importance as a key to Graves's personality cannot be overestimated." (He uses the "unions"—the shifting sexual liaisons—in *SDNC* as comparisons for his biography.) "In the revelation of his own intensely romantic and idealistic desire-nature, he manages to illuminate the nature of other people's, of his readers' sexual psychology" (301, 313, 418-423, 436, 441).

The plot of the novel is straightforward fantasy. Edward Venn-Thomas, a minor English poet, is evoked into the future by a group of new Cretan magicians (or rather, by

Sally, a witch.) In New Crete, witches act directly on behalf of the goddess. As with other novels of this sub-genre, such as Huxley's *Island* or even *Brave New World*, exposition provides much of the impetus for the novel. Graves' novel might well be considered, of course, as a thinly-fictive explanation of the theories of goddess-worship presented more overtly in *The White Goddess* the year before (1948). Long sections of *Watch the North Wind Rise* explain the social, sexual, and religious customs of New Crete where goddess-worship spontaneously arose in an "anthropological enclave" created by the Anthropological Council. After following mankind's increasing discontent with civilization through some seventy Utopias, the Council had concluded "we must retrace our steps or perish."

Eventually, these enclaves were finally consolidated on the island of Crete, where the natives had developed a pre-Christian European religion linked both to the cycle of agricultural festivals and "antique mysteries of their handicrafts...with the Mother-goddess Mari as the Queen of Heaven." Within 500 years, since The New Cretans repaired Plato's damage to Utopias by not only refusing to banish poets but also making poetic myth the legislation of their society, New Cretan colonies covered most of the habitable lands left in the world.

Venn-Thomas has been summoned because the New Cretan poets, he is told, want to ask him a few questions about the Late Christian Epoch, which has a melancholy fascination for them. (Much of the novel's humor centers on the New Cretan notions of poetic history and their notions of English). But soon he is embroiled in a jealous triangle with Sally, the witch who evoked him, and Sapphire, the young beauty with whom he spends his first night—and who adopts the guise of his wife Antonia in order to gain (among other things) Edward's confidence. In addition, this triangle is further complicated by the presence of Erica, a "wanton" with whom Venn-Thomas once had an affair in his youth, and who is wreaking havoc in the magicians' house by introducing contraband surreptitiously, by breaking village rules, and by inciting Edward to do the same unwittingly. Erica is dressed in a white coat, the name of which Edward cannot remember—until he meets the Goddess herself, face to face. Erica—actually the goddess in another form—wears a white walicot. (At the 1547 Aberdeen witch trials the queen of Elphame was said to arrive at witches' sabbaths riding a white hackney and dressed in a white walicot, a coat woven of wales, or stripes). After convincing him of her identity, the goddess tells Edward it was actually she who sent for him.

She apparently wants Edward to "shake up" New Crete. As he says, "though the bread's good and the butter's good, there doesn't seem to be any salt in either." New Crete is boring the goddess, too. The goddess gives Edward a pass to keep him out of trouble, a locket containing a crane's neck-feather; his powers—of intuition, of deduction and of

poetic creation—all begin to grow in strength after this meeting.

The novel is typical of Graves' fiction in basic ways. As George Stade, an early analyst of Graves' prose points out, these novels usually involve "a good-hearted but simple-minded hero...undone by an environment of treachery, ambition, intrigue, and lust, at the center of which is a woman driven by all these to an extreme degree...working against the modern psychology (as Graves understands it) are loving and detailed descriptions of past rites, feasts, occupations, military strategy, dress, housing, and games. While the characters are generally flat and conventional types...the physical settings are always full, rich, strange, at once unique and convincing in their historicity (34-35)."

Edward uses both his new powers and the locket quickly. He resolves a dispute between two villages, turning the two villages' rules neatly upside down. The plot thickens when FigBread, one of the recorders who serve the witches, is murdered by Sally, in order to provide a religious reason to "spread her cloak" for Edward (copulating on a recent grave sets its occupant's soul, in New Crete at least, to rest). Edward accosts the murderess and saves himself from her assault by using the locket, but he falls prey to her final stratagem, which is, once again, impersonating his wife that night in the magician's house. He sleeps long enough after this exhausting bout to allow Sally to send Sapphire off to the Royal Court at Dunrena, where she will ritually lose her identity as a magician and be reborn in the commons estate, with no memory of her previous life. Edward's presence is indeed shaking up New Crete.

As Edward rushes to save Sapphire, he is joined by Quant, new Crete's expert on language, who has also met the Goddess in person when she spoke to him about Edward's role, as a cause of rapid change, in the further evolution of New Crete. It seems that Edward has been evoked as a substitute for war. Quant explains the previous role of war in relieving discontent:

Your chief trouble in the Late Christian epoch is unlimited scientific war which nobody likes but everybody accepts as inevitable; that's a typical by-product of God-worship. In the archaic days, whenever tribal life grew too monotonous, the Goddess used, of course, to allow her peoples to go to war; but she kept it within decent bounds...your ancestors rebelled [and] invented a Father-God whose sole business was war.

Edward wonders aloud why an all-powerful Goddess would allow such foolishness. Quant again explains:

She not only submitted to it, she arranged it. You see, a few millennia of chaos can mean very little to an immortal, and she had two objects clearly in

mind. The first was that she loved man and didn't want him to feel fettered and repressed: she would emancipate him and allow him to fulfill his destiny (as she ironically expressed it) by letting him find out the absurdity of creating a supreme deity in his own phallic likeness. In the end, he would return voluntarily to her rule. Her second object was to demonstrate the existence in him of certain intellectual capacities hitherto unsuspected by woman: woman was taking her sexual superiority too much for granted and treating him as a plaything.

Now, Graves' aims in the novel, one may assume, are the same. Edward's transformation from a nicotine-craving schliemiel into a prophet and poet of the goddess certainly indicates that man has "intellectual capacities hitherto unsuspected." Sally's jealousy, her murderous duplicity, her smug acceptance of her superiority, all prove that New Crete women are taking their "sexual superiority too much for granted." And Quant makes a third point: is the immortal goddess very different from her human counterparts? She had appeared to Quant, while he was studying an ancient manuscript and she had written under Venn-Thomas' name, "Before the year is out, I will whistle up this seed of wing to blow the rotten boughs from my trees."

And the north wind she has "whistled up" is violent. Heretofore, in New Crete the witches had destroyed any evil, but as time passed, the notion of *good* was replaced with *normal*. The goddess sows a wind, to reap a whirlwind. Sally, Edward learns, is the goddess' instrument of evil.

Indeed, as the chaos in New Crete gathers momentum, Edward learns that just before Sapphire accepted the rite of rebirth into her new estate, she had ridden out to meet Sally and had killed her scheming rival, cold-bloodedly stabbing her in the neck—Sally was submissive because Sapphire had guessed Sally's secret, magical name: Cleopatra. And these are not the only ritualistic deaths. Edward attends a drama at the Royal Court, in which the annual cycle of marriage and death that rules the lives of the Queen's consort is presented. This drama, not surprisingly, is almost an outline of that grammar of all myths, *The White Goddess*. Only later does Edward learn that the *drama* was in fact a *ritual*. "The Wild Women are feasting on his [the old King's] flesh."

The Goddess's explanation, that it is expedient for a man to die for his people and that eating the corpse's flesh is a mark of reverence, does not dispel the violence of the ritual, for Edward or, probably, for the reader.

Many of Graves' readers and critics—led perhaps by William Empson—have been dismayed by the Goddess and her cruelty. It is clear, says Seymour-Smith, that Graves' early version of the Goddess "is almost exclusively based on



his personal experiences with and attitudes toward women. He tended to overemphasize the cruelty of the goddess at the expense of her gentleness (his worship, like all worship, has fairly obvious latent elements of fear and disgust)...(Seymour-Smith, 14-15)."

*Seven Days in New Crete*, of course, only adds to this literature of the Goddess's cruelty. Just as one Graves poem features a speaker offering to let the woman he loves flog his feet; as a character in the *Golden Fleece* causes the death by stoning of another character, and is nonetheless cited by Graves as an example of a gentle aspect of the Muse, this Goddess makes *Seven Days in New Crete* a very odd Utopia novel, indeed, one that begins by introducing the seed of its destruction and ends with the invoking of its destruction, both through the agency of the goddess whose worship created the Utopia!

Finally, Edward finds Sapphire, now renamed Stormbird; finally, too, he realizes that his attraction to her is based upon her resemblance to his wife, the young Antonia (a neat resolution, that). Using his new powers, he calls on the Goddess to return him to his own era, along with Stormbird (she will be his daughter). He makes one last speech to the New Cretans, as he conjures up the storm that flattens the court city:

The Goddess is utterly good; yet there are times when she wears her mask of evil...She summoned me from the past, a seed of trouble, to endow you with a harvest of trouble...the first fruits of her sowing are the disasters that have emptied the Magic House...You will be caught in that gust, you will gasp and sicken, and carry the infection to every town and village in this Kingdom...Blow, North wind, blow!

*Seven Days in New Crete* may show Graves working out his later, revised version of the Goddess in which, less overtly masochistic (Seymour-Smith's formulation) he posits

a more important Black Goddess, gentler and non-sexual, whose image lies beyond that of the White Goddess (15-16). Eventually, through one stratagem or another, Graves arrived at an ambivalent view of the Goddess. But even as he describes her in his late *Writers at Work* interview, most readers would still recognize her as a torturer of men's souls:

She gives happiness...hap: happening....Tranquility is of no poetic use...she may grow to be very intelligent, but emotionally she is arrested at the age of fourteen or fifteen...[long years of service to the Muse are rewarded] by becoming eventually attached to somebody who's not a murderess (51-52).

Graves' methods, especially as exemplified in *Seven Days in New Crete*, do not allow for a clear distinction between fiction and history—for temperamental as well as theoretical reasons, as Stade declared in 1967.

If, as Graves said in 1949, he earns his income "by writing history disguised as novels," he supplements that income by writing fiction disguised as history. And he writes both by the same method—"the analeptic method—the intuitive recovery of forgotten events by a deliberate suspension of time" (Stade, 36-37).

Graves himself said that "pure fiction is beyond my imaginative range." I take this method to mean that the writer, once saturated with details from historical reading and research, then selects appropriate details and structures and events in a process virtually subconscious or intuitive. It is very tempting then to read the resulting structure as a metaphor of that mind. Remember that for Robert Graves, the unembroidered truth was simply not believable enough for fiction.

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