Poetic Mythography: The Genesis, Rationale and Reception of The Greek Myths

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There are many facets to the work of Robert Graves: he was a love poet, critic, and essayist; an autobiographer of the Great War in *Goodbye to All That* (1929); a re-interpreter of Roman history in *I, Claudius* (1934); and a mystagogue of ancient lore in *The White Goddess* (1948). Of his many audiences, however, one of the largest – perhaps even one of the youngest – comprises readers who may know Graves only as a mythographer. For the last five decades, anyone wishing to learn the origins of the legends of ancient Greece, to discover their significance and symbolism, has been just as likely to consult *The Greek Myths* (1955) as a translation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, or of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

That Graves believed he was breaking new ground is clear from a passage in his Introduction to *The Greek Myths* (omitted from the revised version of 1958), where he lamented that 'the standard work in English, Smith's *Dictionary of Classical Mythology and Biography*, first published in 1844, has not been brought up to date since archaeology and anthropology were both in their cradles' ('Introduction' [Braziller] 22). Graves refers to the work of William Smith, whose massive tomes remain on the study shelves at Canelluñ, Graves's home in Deyá, Mallorca: the three-volume *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography* (1844, 1846, 1849), the two-volume *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Geography* (1856, 1857), and the *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities* (1869). In fact, Graves could have gone back further than 1844, to the elaborate classifications of John Lemprière's popular *Classical Dictionary* (1788).

In any event, it was time for a more scientific 'standard work in English', and the two Penguin paperbacks of *The Greek Myths* appeared when relatively few guides to classical mythology were available to non-specialists. Granted, Sir James Frazer's twelve-volume *The Golden Bough* (1890–1915) had been abridged to one hefty volume in 1922, but its discussions of the anthropological context for ancient beliefs and rituals ranged far beyond classical myths. Even H.J. Rose's influential *Handbook of Greek Mythology* (1928), in its fifth edition by the time Graves was researching *The Greek Myths*, had drawbacks, as we shall see. In effect, few since Lemprière and Smith had attempted the encyclopedic task of cataloguing, recounting, and explaining the vast corpus of Greek mythology.

Despite the book's ongoing popularity, however, some classicists and scholars of comparative religion dismissed *The Greek Myths* as a compendium of misinterpretations. In 1962, Michael Grant singled out Graves as one of those poets who 'have often brilliantly re-fashioned Greek myths after their own images' (279). In 1970, G.S. Kirk was critical of 'the erratic Harrison, the factual Rose, the Jungian Kerényi, the repetitive Eliade, [and] even the brilliant but in this field totally misguided Robert Graves' (Myth 5).[1] Four years later, Kirk

summed up *The Greek Myths* as 'extensive paraphrases adorned by interpretations of unusual idiosyncrasy' (*Nature 15*). In his 1973 comparative study of reference works in classical mythology, John Peradotto was amused by Graves's comments on ambrosia and Maenads in the Foreword to the 1960 edition of *The Greek Myths*: 'grist for those parts of the collegiate mill driven by interest in drugs and women's liberation'. On the other hand, he detected behind H.J. Rose's 'cautious and tentative' approach 'a refusal to confront the darker, irrational strata of Greek thought' – which cannot be said about Graves – citing Rose's 'by now notorious' assertion that the Greeks were 'high-spirited, clear-headed, beauty-loving optimists, and not in the least other-worldly' (10–11). In 1985, a survey in the *Yale Review* of works useful to classicists advised readers to avoid Thomas Bulfinch [*The Age of Fable* 1855], Edith Hamilton [*Mythology* 1942], and the 'more pernicious' *Greek Myths*, with its 'ludicrous etymologies and general unreliability' (Bers 373). We shall see that earlier reviewers of *The Greek Myths* were no kinder. One should note in passing that those who preferred Rose's *Handbook* did so probably because, as Patrick Grant puts it, Rose's 'careful weighing of evidence and tentative conclusions [...] are a model of positivist restraint and critical discrimination' (144). Yet, as Herbert Weisinger observed, 'even Rose falls into the error of multiple quotation from a variety of unequal sources' (149), a recurring criticism of *The Greek Myths*.

The fact remains that some specialists resisted Graves's interpretations, whose rationale he outlined quite lucidly in his Introduction to the *Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology* (1959): 'One constant rule of mythology is that whatever happens among the gods above reflects events on earth,' one function of myth being 'to justify an existing social system and account for traditional rites and customs.' Hence all mythology is 'a dramatic shorthand record of such matters as invasions, migrations, dynastic changes, admission of foreign cults, and social reforms' (vii, viii, v). In his Introduction to *The Greek Myths*, he had written similarly about 'true myth' being 'the reduction to narrative shorthand of ritual mime [...] recorded pictorially on temple walls, vases, seals, bowls, mirrors, chests, shields, tapestries, and the like' (Introduction [Braziller] 12).

Many readers thought these views wide of the mark. Those expecting accuracy or consistency were frustrated by Graves's eclectic, imaginative approach. Katherine Snipes found a problem in the way Graves combined or juxtaposed 'issues classifiable as ritualistic, semantic, iconotropic, anthropological, euhemerist. The purist steeped in a particular methodology cannot abide such miscellaneous possibilities' (104). Yet if 'purists' were unhappy with his unorthodoxy, Graves blamed academic elitism: in *The Listener* (23 September 1948), in a rebuttal to a review of *The White Goddess*, he pointed out that 'the liaison between [...] mythology, archaeology and theology, is so weak that many of the conclusions separately reached are logically irreconcilable' (quoted in Lindop 487). Seven years later, however, scholars in those disciplines were writing in a similar vein about the conclusions of *The Greek Myths*.

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To understand the controversy generated by *The Greek Myths*, one must examine the book's inception. In 1946, under the general editorship of E.V. Rieu, Allen Lane established the Penguin Classics series, with Rieu's translation of *The Odyssey* as the inaugural volume. Rieu, described as possessing 'an openness of imagination and a romantic willingness to try hunches' (McLeish 17), approached Graves in 1951 with a request for a reference companion to his series. Graves began working on the project in September that year, assisted by Janet de Glanville – fiancée to his eventual biographer Martin Seymour-Smith – who had read classics and philosophy at Oxford. In light of the enormous scope of *The Greek Myths*, her contributions as researcher and translator were far more significant than have been heretofore acknowledged.

Graves's letters to his friends chart his progress on the book and express his concerns about its reception. 'It will run to 80,000 words and there will be a companion volume on the heroic tales, of about the same length,' he wrote to Selwyn Jepson on 29 October 1951. On 21 January 1952, he informed Derek Savage: 'The important thing is to separate myth from allegory, fable, decorated history, streetcorner anecdote and novelette: the whole corpus of myth is in a dreadful mess.' He explained that it was easy to see the Arachne myth as 'a simple moral fable', when it was in fact 'a story of Athenian trade rivalry with Miletus, the biggest textile exporters of the day whose trade mark, inherited with Cretan Miletus, the parent city, was a spider' (O'Prey 102, 104). This was the kind of idiosyncratic interpretation that made scholars and classicists bristle.

Graves also explained to mycologist Gordon Wasson on 15 April that he was 'anxious to rescue myth from the ignorant Jungian psychologists' (O'Prey 109). He did so that spring in a thirteen-page essay entitled 'Jungian Mythology' in *The Hudson Review*, where he decried Carl Jung's 'humourless and watertight psychological system'. According to Graves, Jung regarded myth 'as a delightful timeless world-soup, thickened with innumerable titbits, all alike reduced to a single fundamental, Germanic taste: sample one, sample the lot'. Graves was adamant that 'a science of myth should begin with a study of archaeology, history and comparative religion, not in the psychotherapist's consulting room' (246, 255, 251). He repeated this idea almost verbatim in his Introduction to *The Greek Myths*, where he emphasized that to consider Chimaera, Sphinx, Gorgon, Centaurs, and Satyrs mere 'blind uprushes of the Jungian collective unconscious [...] is demonstrably unsound' (Introduction [Penguin] 21, 20). Unfortunately, many found Graves's own approach to the science of myth – one that eschewed psychology and embraced ritual – just as demonstrably unsound.

At the end of May 1953, Graves sent Penguin the completed typescript. His labour of over two years was over, but he now encountered resistance from American publishers. Under the aegis of critic Malcolm Cowley, an adviser to

the Viking Press, Graves had been given an advance of $2,000. However, on 19 March 1954, he received a letter from B. W. Huebsch, Viking's managing director, announcing that a final publication decision would be withheld until figures for the first year were available from Penguin, and until the book had been, as he phrased it, 'examined by scholars' (quoted in Seymour-Smith 460). Unfortunately, Cowley was absent at this time and unaware of Huebsch's reservations. On 23 March, Graves wrote to Selwyn Jepson that Viking 'got scared' because *The Greek Myths* 'is in advance of University fashion in the USA (i.e. it treats myths anthropologically and archaeologically, and not as uprushes from so-called Jungian unconscious) and turned it down' (O'Prey 127). Graves now offered the book to Doubleday, who were already committed to *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* (published four months later), *Homer's Daughter* (1955) and *Collected Poems* 1955. He told Jepson that *The Greek Myths* was 'the only one now available in which one can turn up any mythological reference that crops up in poetry and psychology and get its case history'. Five days later he wrote to Jepson again, emphasizing that 'there *are* no other books on the subject', and that his was 'a *popular* book, and its documentation is elaborate and magnificent and the argument is much too exciting for the Academics' (O'Prey 127–29, Graves's emphases). In the end, Doubleday too declined the book, reluctant perhaps to repeat the critical and financial failure of *The Nazarene Gospel Restored*.

Graves did manage to secure American paperback rights thanks to Jepson, who told Allen Lane that he needed a set of the book's proofs to try to secure an American publisher. Jepson wrote to Graves on 27 March that Lane's reaction 'was an immediate desire to buy the rights himself, to penguinise it also over there [America]' (quoted in R.P. Graves 235): *The Greek Myths* was published by Penguin (London) on 24 February 1955 and by Penguin (Baltimore) on 17 June. In 1957, a second American edition (reprinting that of 1955) was published by George Braziller (New York), which soon sold out its 5,000 copies; the book was not reprinted. A second English edition was published by Cassell in one volume on 6 March 1958 in 3,000 copies, with a second impression on 15 November 1958 and a third in November 1962. It was for this edition that Graves revised his Introduction and made numerous changes to the text. The two-volume Pelican impression of 1960 is identical to the revised 1958 Cassell edition, with the addition of a Foreword. The 1992 one-volume Penguin 'Combined Edition' was based on the amended 1958 edition revised in 1960 and is the basis for the 2001 Carcanet edition.[2] Graves also produced two abridged versions for young adults: *Greek Gods and Heroes* (Doubleday 1960; as *Myths of Ancient Greece*, Cassell 1961) and *The Siege and Fall of Troy* (Cassell 1962, Doubleday 1963), which were combined into one volume as *Greek Myths and Legends* (1967). According to Graves's bibliographers, *The Greek Myths* has been translated into Dutch, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Polish, and Serbo-Croatian (Higginson 118).

Evidence of Graves's research on *The Greek Myths* will be found in a few lengthy essays: 'Pharaoh's Chariot Wheels: A Study in Iconotropy' (1949), 'The Language of Myth: Addenda to *The White Goddess*' (1951), 'Jungian Mythology' (1952), 'What Happened to Atlantis' (1953), and 'Discoveries in Greek Mythology' (1954). Among other topics, these articles discuss the mythical recurrence of the Triple Goddess and the shift from matriarchal to patriarchal sovereignty. They also provide background sources, etymological theories, and variant versions for some myths. Much of what Graves wrote in these articles is found in *The Greek Myths*, sometimes almost verbatim. The book appeared in February, and that summer Graves published another long article, 'Greek Myths and Pseudo Myths', discussing some of the stories attached to the history of the Trojan War, Hesiod's account of Pandora ('an anti-feminist fable'), and other myths referring to the yearly sacrifice of the sacred king. These essays and other writings by Graves relevant to mythology are listed in full in the Appendix.

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While accompanying Graves on his daily stride down to the sea near Canelluñ one day, sculptor James Metcalf – who provided the woodcuts for *Adam's Rib* (1955) – explained to Graves how he had been taught to control the symmetry of a work in hammered metal 'by guiding the hammer blows with concentric circles inscribed with a compass from a point in the centre of the piece of metal'. Graves, as if uncovering some hidden truth, replied: 'why, certainly the word Cyclops means "ring-eyed" ' (quoted in Seymour 334). Two years later, Metcalf discovered he had been the unwitting source for one of Graves's colourful etymologies: he read in *The Greek Myths* that the Cyclopes were early bronze-smiths inspired by concentric circles, and that 'the smith would guide himself with such circles, described by compass around the centre of the flat disk on which he was working'. Moreover, Graves continued, the Cyclopes 'are likely to have been tattooed with concentric rings on the forehead, in honour of the sun, the source of their furnace fires', and were one-eyed 'in the sense that smiths often shade one eye with a patch against flying sparks' (3.2).[3] That 'Cyclops' means not 'ring-eyed' but 'round eye' or 'round face' is another matter. This particular 'interpretation of unusual idiosyncrasy' illustrates how Graves could be seduced by a symbol or image into embracing an etymology that often generated fanciful conclusions. Mythographer Alexander Eliot wrote for many when he referred to Graves in 1993 as 'a shameless euhemerist' (152).

If Graves's interpretations have disconcerted some critics, others have explained *The Greek Myths* as the product of a personality wherein, as Seymour-Smith puts it, 'we encounter the two sides of Graves, the empirical and the romantic-magical, working side by side' (461). Graves is therefore, as Snipes calls him, 'a strange combination of stubborn commonsense and poetic,

romantic intuition' (37). Weisinger goes so far as to claim that 'Graves' attitude toward myth [is] essentially romantic' (155). Specialists were bound to find this frustrating. However, Graves was not writing for scholars, or so he emphasized in his Introduction to the first edition of *The Greek Myths* by calling his book 'large enough in its scope for all normal requirements of the student and general reader' (Introduction [Braziller] 22). Yet Graves also wished his findings to be taken seriously: 'My approach has been historical and anthropological', he wrote to Raphael Patai, his collaborator on *The Hebrew Myths* (1964), on 28 October 1953, shortly after completing *The Greek Myths*. 'I find anthropologists my favourite class of scientists: it is in fact the basic science' (quoted in Patai 99). Graves even became a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute in 1954 (Smeds 84). Still, Graves the polymath knew his limitations. While indexing the book that June, he wrote candidly to his friend, actress Ava Gardner: 'I am not a Greek scholar or an archaeologist or an anthropologist or a comparative mythologist; but I have a good nose and sense of touch, and I think I have connected a lot of mythical patterns which were not connected before. Classical faculties will hate me, and I will get a lot of sniffy reviews' (quoted in R.P. Graves 235–36).

Graves knew that an encyclopedic work written by a self-confessed amateur would provoke controversy among experts. Over a decade before *The Greek Myths*, he had made a disclaimer for his retelling of the Argonaut legend in his novel *The Golden Fleece* (1944) by means of an epigraph from Diodorus Siculus that he quoted in his Introduction: 'But as a rule the ancient myths are not found to yield a simple and consistent story, so that nobody need wonder if details of my recension cannot be reconciled with those given by every poet and historian' (5). That epigraph should serve as a cautionary note to all of Graves's myth-related writings, a body of work that includes *The Greek Myths, The White Goddess, The Golden Fleece*, and *Homer's Daughter*; a translation of *The Iliad* entitled *The Anger of Achilles* (1959); numerous articles, essays, reviews, lectures; and dozens of poems featuring Pygmalion and Galatea, Theseus and Ariadne, Dionysus and Semele, Aphrodite, Pandora, Artemis, Leda, Pasiphaë, Apollo, Prometheus, Dionysus, Teiresias, Ulysses, Hercules, and others.[4]

Graves made a more forceful disclaimer in his Introduction to *The Greek Myths*: 'My method has been to assemble in harmonious narrative all the scattered elements of each myth, supported by little-known variants which may help to determine the meaning, and to answer all questions that arise, as best I can, in anthropological or historical terms. This is, I am well aware, much too ambitious a task for any single mythologist to undertake, however long or hard he works.' The next part – omitted from the revised edition – was a broadside aimed squarely at reviewers: 'Not for the first time, I will find the scholarly specialists combining to criticize me on points of detail which they have made their own, though not combining to suggest an alternative general hypothesis,

and each disclaiming acquaintance with the other's small department of knowledge, even where it is necessary for a better understanding of his own. What seems to be lacking today is centripetal, rather than centrifugal, scholarship.' In the revised edition, these two sentences were replaced with a terse assertion – 'Errors must creep in' – perhaps because the lacunae in the first edition had been pointed out to him. He also removed from the revised version the important statement that he regarded his 'intuition as by no means infallible; and that if anyone can make a guess that rings truer than mine I shall be the first to applaud it' (Introduction [Braziller] 22–23). Perhaps Graves felt that critics had made too many accurate guesses following the first edition to reiterate his offer.

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One essential aspect of *The Greek Myths* is the opportunity it allowed Graves (to the delight of his detractors) to expand on his favourite theme: the presence of the goddess in ancient matriarchies, a theme already dealt with in *The White Goddess*. Its appearance here is hardly surprising: Graves revised *The White Goddess* in 1952 while writing *The Greek Myths*, and by the time he had revised the latter for the 1958 edition, he had delivered his important lecture, 'The White Goddess', in New York on 9 February 1957. One might say that *The White Goddess*, subtitled 'a historical grammar of poetic myth', is the dictionary's companion volume: both are compendia of wide-ranging stories interpreted by a mind alert for connections. In 1958, poet Jay Macpherson even referred to *The White Goddess* as the 'progenitor' of *The Greek Myths* (18).

Indeed, the goddess leitmotif dominates *The Greek Myths*. A selection of Moon-goddesses include Alcyone (45.3); Demeter (58.2); Pentheus's mother Agave (27.9); Helius's mother Euryphaessa (42.1); 'orgiastic' Aphrodite (43.1); Alope, Moon-goddess as vixen (49.2); Stheneboea, Moon-goddess as cow (72.4); Pasiphaë (88.7); Ariadne (98.5); Artemis and Athene (74.3); and Hypsipyle (106.2). The Triple-goddess, or Triple Moon-goddess, is incarnated as Ino (70.4); Artemis (22.1); Themis (95.c); Hippodameia (110.3); the three daughters of Catreus (93.2) and of Pandareus (108.9); Leos's daughters Theope, Praxithea, and Eubule (97.2); Hera, Pasiphaë, and Ino (51.5); Core, Persephone, and Hecate (24.1); Thetis, Amphitrite, and Nereis (16.1); the Gorgons Stheino, Euryale, and Medusa (33.3); the Graeae Enyo, Pemphredo, and Deino (33.5); the Furies or Erinnyes Tisiphone, Alecto, and Megaera (6.3); the Harpies (33.5); the Danaë Cameira, Ialysa, and Linda (42.4), also known as Cameirus, Ialysus and Lindus (146.4) and identified with Halia, Leucothea, and Electryo, and with the Fates or Moerae Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos (4.1, 60.2); Erechtheus's daughters Otiona (Athene), Protogonia (Eurynome), and Pandora (Rhea) (47.2); and the Akan goddess Ngame (p. 22). Even the Muses (originally a triad) are the Triple-goddess in her orgiastic aspect (13.4), according to Graves.

This bounty of goddesses is easily explained if one remembers the central premise of *The White Goddess*: that in the second millennium, ancient Moon-Goddess-worshipping matriarchies began to be subordinated by a patriarchy that placed male divinities in positions of supremacy. As Graves put it in his 'White Goddess' lecture, 'The most important single fact in the early history of Western religion and sociology was undoubtedly the gradual suppression of the Lunar Mother-goddess's inspiratory cult, and its supersession [...] by the busy, rational cult of the Solar God Apollo'. Thus were powerful women such as Hera, Artemis, and Hestia deposed by Zeus, Apollo, and Dionysus, an upheaval that also 'recorded a steady deterioration in the general position of women – they were pushed out of trade, industry, justice, and local government' (492, 498). In mythical terms, for example, 'Orestes's absolution records the final triumph of patriarchy' (114.4).

The White Goddess premise is also found in the Introduction to *The Greek Myths*: 'A study of Greek mythology, as Bachofen and Briffault insisted long ago, should begin with an understanding of the matriarchal and totemistic system which obtained in Europe before the arrival of patriarchal invaders from the east and north. One can follow its gradual supersession first by a matrilineal and then by a patrilineal sacred monarchy, at last by a fully patriarchal system' (Introduction [Braziller] 11).[5] Graves reiterated this idea in a 1961 lecture entitled 'Hebrew and European Myth Contrasted': 'The gradual reduction of women from sacred beings to chattles [*sic*], provides a main theme of Greek myth' (quoted in Patai 233). This theory was given widespread credence in 1964 by Joseph Campbell in the third of the four volumes of his series *The Masks of God*: 'the old cosmology and mythologies of the goddess mother were radically transformed, reinterpreted, and in large measure even suppressed, by those suddenly intrusive patriarchal warrior tribesmen' (7). With Johann Jakob Bachofen's *Das Mutterrecht* (*Mother Right*, 1861) and Robert Stephen Briffault's *The Mothers* (1927) as precedents, *The Greek Myths* could also attempt to reinstate the great goddesses to their erstwhile dominant positions in Greek mythology.

Graves's Introduction goes on to discuss the moon's three phases (recalling the matriarch's phases of maiden, nymph, and crone) and the Queen's choice of an annual lover for mid-winter sacrifice: as fertility symbol and Queen's consort, he survived, while his twin or 'tanist' was sacrificed in his place, thus originating sacred kingship.[6] Eventually, animals were substituted and the king refused death, but the throne remained matrilineal until Achaean invasions weakened it; with the arrival of the Dorians near the end of the second millennium, 'patriarchal royalty became the rule' (Introduction [Penguin] 16–19). The ubiquitous White Goddess, whose avatars pervade Greek mythology, was later absorbed into Graves's views on Muse-worship and the role of the incarnated goddess for the Muse-poet, who must also 'die' for her, metaphorically speaking.[7]

Graves had explained his mythographical method two years prior to *The White Goddess* in the 'Historical Commentary' to his novel *King Jesus* (1946). Here he introduced his 'analeptic method', which he described as 'the intuitive recovery of forgotten events by a deliberate suspension of time', for which 'one must train oneself to think wholly in contemporary terms'. Graves also defined the important term 'iconotropy' as the 'deliberate misinterpretation' of ritual icons 'adopted in ancient Greece as a means of confirming the Olympian [patriarchal] religious myths at the expense of the Minoan ones which they superseded' (353, 355). In his Introduction to *The Greek Myths*, Graves defined the term again as the accidental or deliberate misinterpretation of 'a sacred picture or dramatic rite', giving as examples Hephaestus's three-legged tables (actually sun-disks) and the 'Judgement of Paris' episode, whose three goddesses are in fact one in triad: maiden, nymph, crone (Introduction [Penguin] 21). Graves approaches a number of myths from an iconotropic perspective (see 29.1, 81.5, 145.3). For instance, 'The story of Laius, Iocaste, and Oedipus has been deduced from a set of sacred icons by a deliberate perversion of their meaning' (105.1).

Frequent references to *The White Goddess* in *The Greek Myths* – 9.5, 23.2, 52.7, 73.9, 92.11, 108.8, 112.1, 113.7, 145.3, 160.5, 170.9 – indicate that it was the basis for many of Graves's interpretations. Some myths seem tailor-made to fit the White Goddess thesis, especially since Graves believed that 'a large part of Greek myth is politico-religious history'. Zeus swallowing Metis, for example, symbolizes for Graves the Achaeans suppressing her cult and arrogating all wisdom to Zeus as their patriarchal god; Perseus's beheading Medusa records 'the usurpation by Hellenic invaders of the Moon-goddess's powers'; and Heracles's servitude to Omphale refers 'to an early stage in the development of the sacred kingship from matriarchy to patriarchy'.

Shamelessly euhemeristic as these readings might be, for Graves they gave plausible form and meaning to what he had called the 'dreadful mess' of the corpus of Greek myths. As a backdrop for one of his most deep-seated beliefs, they also gave form and meaning to his own life: 'in my view', he told a Boston audience in a 1963 lecture entitled 'Nine Hundred Iron Chariots', 'the political and social confusion of these last 3,000 years has been entirely due to man's revolt against woman as a priestess of natural magic, and his defeat of her wisdom by the use of the intellect' (47). The hyperbole was perhaps intended to shock his audience of scientists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, but the idea was central to Graves's mythography.

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Kenneth McLeish, editor of the 1996 Folio Society edition of *The Greek Myths*, considers Graves the first person to attempt to treat these myths 'with narrative cohesion, psychological verisimilitude and philosophical density'. He also be-

lieves that their retelling has restored their 'proper numinosity and resonance' (17, 19). Graves phrased his contribution more modestly, as we have seen, in saying he had 'connected a lot of mythical patterns which were not connected before', many of them originating in his fascination with the goddess archetype and her mythical incarnations. Some readers, however, were not impressed with those connections.

No stranger to adverse criticism – *The White Goddess* had received mixed reviews and some comments on *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* were hostile – Graves knew what lay ahead: when Penguin issued *The Greek Myths* on 24 February 1955, some reviews, as he had predicted, were sniffy. Graves was faulted for using too many late commentators (whose work he assumed to be less corrupted) while omitting earlier sources. Some went so far as to list the authors and texts they believed Graves had misinterpreted or neglected. What baffled them above all was the prominence given the White Goddess. The consensus was that the myths were well told, often eloquently and poetically, but that the book was not scientific enough to be taken seriously, nor scholarly enough to be practical. Rex Warner praised the book, but reservedly: 'though on every page one may find something to question, the fact still remains that the general hypothesis is useful and convincing, and that the explanations of the myths, conjectural as they must be, have been carried out with great brilliance, with great learning and with rare intuition' (330). Anthony West was less circumspect: 'Modern scholars squalidly devoted to specialization avert their eyes when Mr. Graves makes his Hussar rides through their neatly tended pastures on the winged horse of his intuitions' (233–34).

An anonymous reviewer in *The Times Literary Supplement* (4 March) rebuked Graves for making it appear 'that all his conjectures are facts', claiming that there was 'no evidence that group marriage ever obtained anywhere'. Graves replied sarcastically in the 25 March issue that this disposed of James Frazer's 'five massive volumes on the subject'. E.R. Leach, of the Faculty of Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge, wrote in the 29 April issue that although Frazer's *Totemism and Exogamy* (1910) accepted the idea of group marriage, 'the whole notion was finally and completely demolished' by Malinowski in 1913, leaving Briffault's *The Mothers* as a rare exception.[8] In the August issue of *The Hudson Review*, G.E. Dimock, Jr., observed that Penguin 'had hired a cabinet-maker to do their plumbing' and produced a work 'of uncertain usefulness'. The usual suspects were the White Goddess and the Sacred King, and the result was 'a monument of pseudo-scholarship' (450, 454).

H.J. Rose's comments in *The Classical Review* (1955) were equally sharp. Dubious sources woven into 'tangled narratives, difficult and tedious to read' suffered from Graves's 'defective scholarship' and 'romantic interpolations and sentimentalities' (208). Poet and translator Dudley Fitts was delighted that Graves had retold the myths 'with the force of the highest art' and made his material 'a kind of poetry in itself', yet he predicted that experts would regard

Graves as merely 'a prickly eccentric with an axe to grind' (16). Kevin Herbert, in *The Classical Journal* (1956), while pointing out that the 'standard short work in English' was the fifth revised edition (1953) of Rose's *Handbook*, noted Graves's goddess 'metamyth' (playfully dubbed the 'leukotheistic' theory), his iconotropy, his use of 'obscure and late sources while ignoring writers of the classical period', and his 'strange etymologies' and 'stranger interpretations' as detrimental to the book (191–92).[9]

But there were exceptions to these dissenting voices, such as C.M. Bowra's ten-page essay in *The Sewanee Review* (Summer 1956), which praised Graves wholeheartedly. Yet the piece is less a critique of *The Greek Myths* than a philosophical digression about how 'myths bring the unknown into relation with the known', how the Greeks conveyed history and ritual through symbol and myth, and how their stories (derived from religion) were necessary 'in a world which still needed them to grasp its mysteries'. Bowra thought Graves 'an inspired choice' to convey all this, not only because of his 'sharp intelligence' and his 'poet's understanding of what myths mean for thought and imagination', but also due to his 'long and devoted study of comparative religion'. Graves's comments on the myths were described as 'illuminating and ingenious' (501, 507, 499, 500). An even longer essay, Anthony West's 'The Greek Myth' [*sic*], was mostly an eloquent account of the fortunes of mythographers through the ages. He concluded that Graves combined 'realism and lucidity' with 'authority, wit, and insight' in 'untangling garbled tribal histories told in a forgotten symbolic language' (243).

Nonetheless, some were astonishingly meticulous in correcting Graves's explanations, among them M.J.C. Hodgart and S.J. Papastavrou, whose essay, 'Mythology for the Masses', in *20th Century* (May 1955), took issue with what they termed Graves's 'curious use of his originals'. They concluded that Harrison's *Prolegomena* (1903) was 'surely' his only source for his notes on Zagreus; that virtually all of the icons 'which everyone has so wantonly misinterpreted, are extravagant creations of his fancy'; that his etymologies were 'equally fanciful'; that his text was riddled with factual errors; and that his astronomical theory was 'pure nonsense' (see 454–61). All this was not lost on Graves: close examination of his emendations to the 1958 edition (listed in the Endnotes to the Carcanet edition) reveals that some of these suggestions were the basis for certain new etymologies and corrections of fact.

Interestingly enough, thus far only one full-length work explores the relationship between Graves's writings on myth and his fiction and poetry: *Statement and Story: Robert Graves's Myth-making* (1997) by Finnish scholar John Smeds. This book engages with both Graves's models (Frazer) and detractors (Rose), while seeking to elucidate the complex 'relationship between Graves's mythographical writings and his literary production'. Given the fuzzy distinction between Graves's 'creative' and 'euhemerist' uses of myth – the crux of most of the criticisms outlined above – it is little wonder that Smeds finds 'a

strong element of the devil's story-teller in [Graves's] very use of euhemerist rationalism as a hermeneutic framework' (2, 269).

Many of Graves's critics noted the 'scientific' shortcomings of *The Greek Myths*, and Patrick Grant has observed that Graves – contrary to his stated intentions – did not aim to reproduce the results of 'the modern skills and sciences', and that 'to criticize him for not doing so is to fall into a trap'. Instead, Grant believes that one should take into account the book's 'coalescence of imagination and history' (146, 153). Grevel Lindop's perceptive comments on *The White Goddess*, in his Introduction to the Carcanet edition, are also relevant here: 'Where the scientist must choose the most economical interpretation, Graves chooses the interpretation richest in meaning: if poetic intuition is in good working order, historical evidence to confirm the reading will turn up later' (xiv). Although this approach produced an unconventional work that received a controversial reception, Graves's imaginative retellings of the Greek myths resonate as powerfully today as they did in 1955. Judging from the book's perennial appeal, Graves's intended audience – 'the student and general reader' – decided long ago to accept his 'interpretations of unusual idiosyncrasy'.

* * *

Graves was a notoriously meticulous writer – perhaps more so in preparing *The Greek Myths* than elsewhere[10] – and a word must be said here about the changes he made for the second edition, in which he corrected lacunae pointed out by reviewers and included whatever pertinent information had come his way since the first edition. In the first edition, Graves had drawn parallels between Greek myths and the story of Marduk (ten references indexed) and the tales in *The Mabinogion* (none indexed).[11] Here he added new analogues from Indian myth (the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*) and five new references to the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, two of them (38.3, 163.2) not indexed. In 1960, Graves added an entire Foreword that summarized his 'second thoughts' on Dionysus, the Centaurs, and ambrosia, which stemmed from his experiences that year with the hallucinogenic mushroom *psilocybe*.

By far the longest addition is a 700-word passage, at the end of his Introduction, on the 'cult-types' of the Akan. Graves had become fascinated by Ngame, the Akan moon-goddess he believed was 'clearly identical with the Libyan Neith, the Carthaginian Tanit, the Canaanite Anatha, and the early Greek Athene'. Acknowledging his debt to 'E. Meyrowitz's [*sic*] *Akan Cosmological Drama*', he was pleased with 'the close analogues' offered by the book 'to the religious and social changes here presumed'. In 'Pandora's Box and Eve's Apple' (1956), Graves mentioned 'the leading authority' on the Akan by her full name, Eva Meyerowitz.[12] According to Seymour, Graves repaid Meyerowitz for her help 'by working over one of her typescripts in detail' (417). This is most likely *The*

Early History of the Akan States of Ghana (London: Red Candle Press, 1974), whose dedication reads, 'To Robert Graves in friendship'. Graves was delighted to have found in West African belief a deity whose attributes were shared by his White Goddess, and he continued to discuss Ngame often in his writings.[13]

Other changes to *The Greek Myths* are smaller but equally significant, such as those attenuating Graves's controversial thesis. In the Introduction, 'matriarchal and totemistic' is replaced by 'political and religious', and 'patriarchal' by 'Aryan'; in the text proper, 'The relevance of this mythical struggle to the historical capture of Troy seems to be that the Hellenes introduced patriarchal institutions into what had hitherto been a matriarchal city' is transformed into 'Hesione's ransom of Podarces may represent the Queen-mother of Seha's (Scamander?) intervention with the Hittite King Mursilis on behalf of her scapegrace son Manapadattas'. There are some indications that Graves was also trying to be less dogmatic in the second edition, replacing 'began as' with 'began, probably, as', 'concerns' with 'seems to concern', 'will have been' with 'may have been', and so on. Perhaps to placate the critics, he even erased all traces of lunar qualities from the etymologies of over a dozen names in the index – Alxion the 'war-like moon man' became a 'war-like native'; Endymion the 'seduced moon-man' is a 'seduced native'; and Arion the 'moon-creature on high horse' is now a mere 'lofty native' – while retaining the lunar aspects within the text itself.

A more puzzling excision was made near the end of the Introduction, where Graves had acknowledged the work of 'such indefatigable and humane scholars as Sir James Frazer, A.B. Cook, F.M. Cornford, Jane Harrison, E.R. Dodds, and others'. The Introduction mentions Harrison's *Prolegomena*, but one wonders at the disappearance of the other 'scholars', some of them cited in the text of *The Greek Myths*. For instance, although Frazer is gently chided (80.5 and 147.1), *The Golden Bough* is invoked in reference to fern-seed (51.2), mistletoe (50.2 and 101.1), a Balkan ritual (108.3), flax-harvest rituals (147.4), and concubines (171.4).[14] Harrison is quoted approvingly on Athene's birth – 'a desperate theological expedient to rid her of her matriarchal conditions' (9.1) – and on the word 'tragedy' being derived not from *tragos* ('goat') as Virgil suggests, but from *tragos* ('spelt'), a grain used in Athens for beer-brewing (27.3). Her *Themis* is also mentioned in a discussion of the Zagreus myth (30.2). Sir Arthur Evans may be 'misleading' in implying that the ruler of Crete was called Minos in the early third millennium BC (88.1), and inaccurate in believing that Minos's palace was a labyrinth (88.8), but he is cited in support of Cretan copper ingots being stamped with a bull's head or a recumbent calf (99.2). Finally, Samuel Butler's *The Authoress of the Odyssey* (1897) is discussed briefly, Graves concurring (not surprisingly) that 'the light, humorous, naïve, spirited touch of the *Odyssey* is almost certainly a woman's' (170.1).

For the most part, however, Graves's excisions are outnumbered by emendations that correct or refine his facts. Many are subtle: the 'box' into which

Prometheus had shut Hope became a 'jar'; 'a priestess in a prophetic trance' was turned into 'a prophetess in a trance'. Others provide a stronger sexual dimension: 'group marriage' became 'erotic orgies', 'totemistic group-marriage' is now 'pre-Hellenic sexual orgies' (although 'lecherous' was diluted to 'amorous'). In other cases, Graves has rectified errors: 'the Battle of Kadesh (1286 BC)' is now 'the Battle of Piari (1229 BC)', 'Heracles' is now 'Zeus', 'Anchises' is 'Teiresias', 'Armenian' is 'Sumerian'. Sometimes he has included new data, asserting boldly (and without citing a source) that 'Homer has drawn on the Babylonian *Gilgamesh* epic for the Achilles story; with Achilles as Gilgamesh, Thetis as Ninsun, Patroclus as Enkidu'. Idiosyncratic in writing *The Greek Myths*, Graves was conscientious in revising it. Although he could not take into account every suggestion that followed the book's initial publication, his extensive revisions demonstrate a genuine concern for clarity and accuracy.

* * *

Since Graves considered himself a poet above all else, readers might be advised to approach *The Greek Myths* as a work of the poetic imagination, one that was bound to infuriate what he called 'the scholarly specialists'. It was inevitable that the iconotropy behind many of his interpretations – especially those surrounding the moon goddess metamyth – would not sit well with classicists and scientists. Ironically, Graves always insisted that *The Greek Myths* did in fact 'treat myths anthropologically and archaeologically'. In keeping with this paradox, the 'mythical patterns' Graves uncovered might best be approached as poetic mythography, to coin a phrase, rather than as the work of a 'shameless euhemerist'. Entering into the spirit of his idiosyncratic and challenging interpretations of ancient myth may perhaps help us to better appreciate, understand, and enjoy them.

Michel Pharand *edited* The Greek Myths *for Carcanet's Robert Graves Programme.*

NOTES

1. See Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903) and *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (1912); H.J. Rose, *A Handbook of Greek Mythology* (1928); Carl Kerényi, *The Gods of The Greeks* (1951); Mircea Eliade, *Le Mythe de l'Éternel Retour* (1949).
2. For the 2001 Carcanet edition, close comparison of the 1955 and 1958 editions was made using Graves's own copy of the 1955 Penguin edition, which I examined at Canelluñ. In addition to his hand-written emendations for the revised edition, Graves's copy contains some changes that did not appear in the 1958 edition. The

Carcanet edition includes all of Graves's additions, excisions, and corrections; all emendations made or intended by Graves for his second edition are found in the Endnotes.

3. References to the text of *The Greek Myths* follow Graves's notation: '3.2' refers to section 3 ('The Olympian Creation Myth'), explanatory paragraph 2.
4. For Graves's use of Greek myth in *Homer's Daughter* and *Hercules, My Shipmate* (1945) – the American edition of *The Golden Fleece* – see Snipes 55–68.
5. On this topic, see Robert Fraser's insightful essay.
6. Myths enacting the conflict between the sacred king and his tanist include the stories of Cronus (7.1), Orion (41.1), Scylla (91.1), Laius (105.2), Tantalus (108.3), Atreus (111.3), Agamemnon (112.1), and Achilles (164.3 and 5).
7. On this topic, see 'The White Goddess', *The White Goddess*, ed. Lindop, 501–02.
8. Anonymous, 'Myth and Interpretation', unsigned review of *The Greek Myths, Times Literary Supplement* (4 March 1955), 137; Graves, 'The Greek Myths', *TLS* (24 March 1955), 181; E. R. Leach, 'The Greek Myths', *TLS* (29 April 1955), 209.
9. Graves's most-cited sources include Aeschylus, Apollodorus, Apollonius Rhodius, Aristophanes, Callimachus, Cicero, Diodorus Siculus, Euripides, Herodotus, Hesiod, Homer, Hyginus, Lucian, Lucretius, Nonnus, Ovid, Pausanias, Pindar, Plato, Pliny, Plutarch, Servius, Scholiast, Sophocles, Strabo, Theocritus, Johannes Tzetzes, and Virgil. There are also numerous parenthetical references to the Bible.
10. In the Southern Illinois University Special Collections at Carbondale, there are early manuscript drafts of *The Greek Myths* amounting to 154 pages, including versions of the Introduction. See items 558 to 566 in Presley.
11. This collection of medieval Welsh tales on Celtic folk themes is mentioned at 28.1, 29.2, 73.2, 112.1, 146.2, 148.4, and 160.5. See also Index under *Llew Llaw*.
12. Graves, Introduction (Penguin) 22. See 'Pandora's Box and Eve's Apple' 160. Graves refers to Eva L.R. Meyerowitz's *The Akan of Ghana* (1958) in 'Goddesses and Obosoms' 65. Meyerowitz also wrote *Akan Traditions of Origin* (1952).
13. See Graves's Introduction, *Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, vi; 'Goddesses and Obosoms' 65–66; and 'The White Goddess' (493–94) and 'Postscript 1960' (479–80), both in *The White Goddess*, ed. Lindop.
14. For the influence of *The Golden Bough* on Graves, see Vickery 1–25.

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APPENDIX

Works by Robert Graves on Mythology and Related Topics

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