

Robert Graves and the Scholars

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Robert Graves has won wide distinction as a poet and as a novelist. He also produced two studies of mythology, *The White Goddess* and *The Greek Myths*, which appear, indeed purport, to be works of monumental scholarship. These two studies may be able to claim a wider readership than all his other literary works, yet Robert Graves and classical scholarship have about as much affinity as oil and water. When I told a German friend that I was to talk of Graves and classical scholarship at an academic conference on Graves, he laughed and said: ‘Oh, is Robert Graves *salonfähig* now?’ Is Graves presentable in learned societies? Let Graves himself answer the question: ‘Scholars blush and turn their heads away when my ideas are mooted.’¹

Many classicists may have a copy of *The Greek Myths* on their bookshelves, but its author’s name rarely appears on the programmes of learned conferences. A search of the classical journals would disclose few references to the poet who claimed to have penetrated to the very heart of ancient Greek mythology. Most such articles are reviews of his books, and they all advise us that Graves, though perhaps a genius, is a very eccentric genius indeed.²

The eminent mythologist, Joseph Fontenrose, used to warn the students in his large undergraduate courses on mythology at Berkeley against taking Graves as an authority. Woe to the student who forgot the warning and borrowed a piece of Gravesian misinterpretation for his or her term paper.

The divide between Graves and the scholars is not due solely to the natural antipathy of scholars towards a goat let loose in the sheepfold. The authorities on whom Graves depended in *The Greek Myths* are themselves dated. Who reads Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, or Jane Harrison’s *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*? The theories of the Cambridge school of

anthropologists and of the nineteenth century scholars of religion and myth have all been problematised. Most problematic of all is what Graves called ‘the central secret’ of the Neolithic religion in the Mediterranean, which Graves claims to have stumbled on, that, as Graves writes, ‘the concept of fatherhood had not been introduced into religious thought’; hence there were no gods, but only ‘The Great Goddess [. . .] regarded as immortal, changeless, and omnipotent’.³

It is hardly true to say that Graves ‘stumbled’ on this secret since his thesis of the family as the first paradigm for religious consciousness, with power invested in the hearth and the Mother, could be taken almost verbatim from Jacob Bachofen’s *Mutterrecht*, published in 1861. But ‘stumbling’ is perhaps justified in the sense that Graves came upon this hypothesis in the course of a truly labyrinthine personal search for the occult meaning of certain Celtic stories, rituals, and poems. That objection aside, the thorn here is that the theory of the one universal Goddess by its very nature defies validation since it purports to represent a stage of consciousness prior to the appearance of written texts. Once written texts appear, so Graves argues, the Neolithic Goddess religion had already been seriously corrupted by the northern invaders bringing their patriarchal forms. Without texts, how can we say how this ancient Mother Goddess was regarded?

Graves writes that his conclusions should have been ‘a subject for wide and deep research by university teams of specialists’.⁴ If this challenge has gone unmet, we should not be surprised. Scholars have their own agendas. Even though scholarship has moved farther in his direction that even Graves himself might have suspected, the standoff between Graves and classical scholars remains much as it was when Graves first published *The White Goddess*. Let Fontenrose serve again to illustrate why scholars and Graves have difficulty finding common ground. When Fontenrose tells the story of the serpent Python, slain by Apollo when he established his cult at Delphi, he states in a single sentence that Python had guarded the oracular shrine that had

belonged to Ge (or Gaia, the Earth). It is a piece of information, no more, though in the course of his *Python* he will argue that it is a major variant of the Combat Myth, which is for Fontenrose one of the most ubiquitous and fundamental myths of the struggle between order and chaos in ancient Near Eastern mythology. For Graves, however, Apollo's slaughter of the serpent that guarded Earth's shrine at Delphi is prime evidence for what he calls the war of 'the busy, rational cult of the Solar God Apollo' against the Moon-goddess.⁵ He links Apollo's victory over Python with the Apollo cult's rejection of 'the Orphic tree-alphabet in favour of the commercial Phoenician alphabet', with the capture of numerous shrines sacred to the Goddess, and with violent suppression of the Goddess religion, so that, in his words, 'the great raging Ninefold Mountain-mother of Parnassus was at last converted into a choir, or ballet, or troupe of nine tame little Nymphs, "the Muses", with Apollo as their art-director and manager'.⁶

Even scholars prepared to go half-way or more with Graves will balk at the theory of an original Orphic alphabet, and hesitate at the hypothesis that the nine Muses of classical Greek poetry were once a single orgiastic Mountain-mother.

Since *The Greek Myths* is so widely used as a reference tool, it may be of some value to study Graves's *modus operandi* in that work, using for our paradigm the Aphrodite unit (§18), which he entitles 'Aphrodite's Nature and Deeds'. In this work Graves subdivides each unit on a mythological character into three sections. In the first section, which I shall call the 'Narrative', Graves recounts the major stories told of that mythological figure by the ancient poets and writers. In the second section, which I shall call the 'Bibliography', Graves lists the ancient sources for the stories told in the Narrative. In the third section, which I shall call the 'Commentary', Graves offers his own interpretation, viewing the myth through the filter of his Goddess theory. The Narrative, therefore, purports simply to retell the ancient stories of that figure, whereas the Commentary allows Graves to offer his own narrative. Each section has its own strengths and weaknesses.

The Narrative section of his Aphrodite unit is the work of a good storyteller: forceful, lively, spare, yet full of detail. It has *brio*, as we would expect from Graves the novelist and poet. The problem, however, is that the narrative is too perfect. Aphrodite's story, as Graves tells it, is absolutely seamless. Many stories from various regions and periods are woven into a single tapestry. The back cover of the 1992 Penguin edition claims that Graves 'used a novelist's skill to weave a crisp coherent narrative of each myth', echoing Graves's own words, when he defines his method as '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'.⁷ This kind of compilation is certainly useful, as much for classical scholars as for the general reader, but it gives little sense of the bewildering variants and the complexity of the Aphrodite myth in antiquity.

An even more serious problem in the Aphrodite unit, however, is that the Narrative renders Aphrodite into a character in a French bedroom farce. Graves need not look far, to be sure, for this comic Aphrodite. His first story in the Aphrodite Narrative is taken from the song sung by Demodokos in Homer's *Odyssey*, which tells of Aphrodite caught in adultery with her lover Ares by her ugly but clever husband Hephaestus, who weaves a net to snare the illicit lovers. Everything in the *Odyssey* tale accentuates Aphrodite's shame and humiliation. The male gods stand around the lovers' bed to joke at the spectacle of the lovely Aphrodite caught and exposed to public disgrace by her cuckolded husband, and it is an opportunity for some lewd male jokes. The goddesses feel the mortification so keenly that they hide themselves away.

Graves devotes the largest part of his Aphrodite Narrative to this story of Aphrodite's sexual promiscuity and subsequent humiliation, and exploits the story's comic and satirical possibilities. This satire, to call it by its proper name, occupies one third of Graves's whole Aphrodite Narrative. The other stories that follow are told in more summary form, with noticeably less attention to story-telling effects. Demodokos' Aphrodite publicly

humiliated for her lust is the keystone for his whole Aphrodite unit. Aphrodite, as Graves portrays her in this section, is certainly not a deity deserving a moment's worship from any serious person.

This is not, of course, Graves's Aphrodite. For Graves, Aphrodite is one persona of the Great Goddess herself, who is anything but a figure of fun. But here is how, in the opening sentence of the Narrative, Graves introduces the Aphrodite of the ancient classical poets to the modern reader: 'Aphrodite could seldom be persuaded to lend the other goddesses her magic girdle which made everyone fall in love with its wearer; for she was jealous of her position'.⁸ This assertion is, in fact, quite untrue. In the one instance in ancient literature when Aphrodite was asked for her magic girdle, she granted the request graciously and without hesitation. The episode occurs in Homer's *Iliad*, when Hera requests the loan of Aphrodite's girdle so that she can seduce Zeus into sexual intercourse on Mt Ida, and thus distract his attention from the war on the Trojan plain below.⁹

To accomplish her seduction, Hera first anoints and dresses herself, then repairs to Aphrodite to borrow her girdle, inventing a facile pretext that she is on her way to reconcile their primordial ancestors, Okeanos and Tethys. Here is how Aphrodite responds to Hera's request, as told in the eloquent and archaic translation of the *Iliad* by Lang, Leaf, and Meyers: 'Then laughter-loving Aphrodite answered her again: "It may not be, nor seemly were it to deny that thou askest, for thou sleepest in the arms of Zeus, the chief of gods."' ¹⁰

Aphrodite then unfastens her girdle, 'wherein are all her enchantments', and lays the garment in her arch-enemy's hands with this gracious response: 'Lo now, take this girdle and lay it up in thy bosom, this fair-wrought girdle, wherein all things are fashioned; methinks thou wilt not return with that unaccomplished, which in thy heart thou desirest.'¹¹

We could hardly find a better intimation in classical literature of Aphrodite's true archaic character as the great Nature goddess. This is the goddess the Roman poet Lucretius was to celebrate

with magnificent eloquence centuries later as Venus, mother of Aeneas, whom he invokes to bless his great epic poem, *De Rerum Natura*. But this Aphrodite is not to be seen in Graves's Narrative, which emphasises instead her all too human jealousy and vanity. Here is how Graves concludes his Narrative of 'Aphrodite's Nature and Deeds': 'The Fates assigned to Aphrodite one divine task only, namely to make love; but one day, Athene catching her surreptitiously at work on a loom, complained that her own prerogatives had been infringed and threatened to abandon them altogether. Aphrodite apologized profusely, and has never done a hand's turn of work since.'¹²

So the ancient goddess is framed in Graves's narrative: a beautiful and promiscuous woman, publicly humiliated at the beginning of the story for her sexual transgression, and a lazy tart at the end. In between these two versions of Aphrodite we glimpse, in the other stories Graves tells of her, as in the Venus and Adonis story, a different Aphrodite, but she is almost completely occluded behind the more superficial portrait of Aphrodite that is the centrepiece of the Narrative.

The second section of the Aphrodite unit, the Bibliography, is an impressive roster of ancient sources. Cited here are the most famous poets and writers, and mythographers from the later Greco-Roman world, together with commentaries and ancient scholiasts to various literary works. These bibliographical references present the same problem: they create an illusion of a seamless facade, giving, as in the Narrative, a false sense of coherence. The ancient testimonies span centuries, even millennia, from the Homeric poems of the eighth century BC, to scholarly commentaries of the late pagan period of Greco-Roman culture. How is an amateur to evaluate one source against another? How determine the relative merit of a scholiast's note to a passage in an ancient literary work? Anyone who publishes a handbook on ancient myth must forego a certain degree of complexity, given the vastness of such a project, but Graves would have done his readers a better service had he hinted in the Narrative and Bibliography of his mythological units at the complexity of the

problem of establishing the canonical version(s) of any myth. To smooth away all irregularities, to paper over every crack and fissure, is something akin to the modern-day reconstructions of ancient temples using but a few scattered columns and other architectural fragments.

The third section of Graves's Aphrodite unit, the Commentary, is the most compelling. Here Graves casts aside his scholarly apparatus and the hallowed classical authorities and we are given a goddess not to be found in the ancient texts at all, but one reconstructed from possible inferences, affinities, and leaps of the imagination. This goddess is the construct of modern anthropology and comparative religion, an idol, we might say, drawn from the pages of James Frazer, Max Muller, Jacob Bachofen, Jane Harrison, with a certain bravura synthesis by Graves himself. But this section is virtually *terra incognita* to most classicists. Classicists will read the Narrative to refresh their memory on certain myths, and they will be grateful for the sources listed in the Bibliography. But they part company with Graves when he seems to have jettisoned the canonical methods of historical research and interprets the myths according to his own intuition or, in the case of Aphrodite, in accordance with the theory of his White Goddess.

Here is how, in the Commentary, Graves introduces 'his' Aphrodite: 'The later Hellenes belittled the Great Goddess of the Mediterranean who had long been supreme at Corinth, Sparta, Thespieae, and Athens, by placing her under male tutelage and regarding her solemn sex orgies as adulterous indiscretions. The net in which Homer represents Aphrodite as caught by Hephaestus was, originally, her own as Goddess of the Sea [. . .] and her priestess seems to have worn it during the spring carnival; the priestess of the Norse Goddess Holle, or Gode, did the same on May-Eve.'¹³

The disjunct between the Aphrodite of the Narrative and the Aphrodite of the Commentary is remarkable – the one a caricature, said to be the construct of the ancient poets; the other, the great Mediterranean sea-goddess, as reconstructed by Graves

with the aid of comparative literature and religion. Adultery in the Narrative becomes ritualised promiscuity in the Commentary, with promiscuity now given a positive value, as the orgiastic dance in celebration of the mysterious self-generative powers of Nature. When we reach the Commentary, we come to see that the disjunct between the two Aphrodites was deliberately crafted for its shock value. In the Narrative Graves concentrates on those stories or features of the Aphrodite myth that will paint her in the most superficial colours. He will not here ‘dwell on her graciousness’, to borrow a phrase from Graves himself, because he needs the silly woman of the Narrative in order to deconstruct her and reconstruct for us the true Aphrodite. He needs the contrast to be extreme to document his thesis that true myth had been corrupted by the masters of the written text, those offspring of the patriarchal invaders who had overthrown the White Goddess.

Following Graves, as he reconstructs the true Aphrodite myth, we are informed that she is not only the sea-goddess but ‘the nymph goddess of midsummer’. In this form she mates with Anchises, the father of the Trojan hero Aeneas. She is now a savage queen who kills the sacred king ‘as a queen bee destroys the drone, by tearing out his sexual organs’. For this Aphrodite we are supplied with no testimony from the ancient sources, because none are to be found. Continuing further, we now find Aphrodite assimilated to Cybele, ‘the Phrygian Aphrodite of Mt Ida as a queen bee’, whose rites include the ecstatic self-castration of her priests in memory of her lover Attis.¹⁴

Now we are told that Anchises was a sacred king killed by a thunderbolt. This is no ordinary thunderbolt; it is, in Graves’s words, ‘a ritual thunderbolt’, since in Graves’s understanding of myth, all myth is the expression of a religious ritual. Anchises, the sacred king, is thus ritually killed after ‘consorting with the Death-in-Life Goddess’. Now Graves asks us to extend our imagination in a wide reach to include figures that are no part of the Greek pantheon – Isis, Osiris, the Phoenician Tammuz. Then we are led even farther afield, beyond anthromorphic equivalences, to scan

the whole world of nature. Before Graves has concluded his version of Aphrodite, in the Commentary, we have learned the significance in the Neolithic Goddess religion of the pear-tree, the bee, the mountain, the boar, the Palladium, the net, the goat, the serpent, the lion. We are told of the Goddess's sacred year divided in three parts, and are treated to a discourse on bearded goddesses and 'womanish gods like Dionysus' as hybrid forms emerging in the transitional period when the Goddess religion fell captive to the patriarchal religion of the invading Hellenes.

Others have noted Graves's dual nature. In one persona he is the epitome of the Apollo-ruled man of reason, his mind packed with detail, always sorting, theorising to the top of his bent. This Apollo-persona is dogmatic, even pugilistic, driven by a moral imperative to maintain Apollonian standards of excellence in a world too easily prone to sentimentality and other forms of weakness.¹⁵ His other persona despises the Apollo-persona. This second persona, his alter ego so to speak (a term Graves himself would sternly repudiate), still speaks with the authority of the Apollo-persona, but in a new key. Now the pugilistic male has submitted of his own strong, free will, though not without complaint, to the awesome demands of the Goddess. We think of his Orpheus crying: *'I am oppressed, I am oppressed, I am oppressed'*.

Oppressed, yet submitting, this Graves becomes the poet. And 'poet' is a term strictly defined in his personal *Gradus ad Parnassum*: he is the male who has submitted to 'the wild Mountain-mother of Parnassus,' a Goddess indifferent, indeed antagonistic to, rationalism, as uncouth and licentious as Apollo is moderate and sober.

This persona Randall Jarrell called Graves's Anima (much to Graves's disgust) – the projection of his unconscious and feminine self, whose moral imperative was not to uphold the laws of the Apollonian patriarchy but to record the true, original, poetic experience, which is to be found only by direct participation in the ecstatic dances of the great Mountain-mother.¹⁶

I would suggest that Graves expresses in his Aphrodite unit not

two but three personas. As his Goddess is tri-form, so is her most devoted modern male priest. He is boy, man, and sage. Put another way, he is the youthful satirist, the adult scholar, and, after his conversion, the mature poet. In the Narrative, where he gives us the Aphrodite of the patriarchy, Graves is the well-polished son of the British Empire, well educated in the Classics, schooled in the forms of classical rhetoric and argument. He knows how to research his sources, how to organise a mass of material, how to separate the incidental from the essential.

The Narrative bears the imprint of Graves's English schoolmasters on every page. Yet in this magisterial voice we detect another voice, the voice of a young ventriloquist, the cynical British schoolboy.¹⁷

This is the clever schoolroom satirist, doodling caricatures in his copy book while the school master orates on the glory that was Greece, etc. This bright, rebellious lad finds Virgil a sanctimonious bore, and not even Homer can escape his scorn.¹⁸

This is a boy who was force-fed the Classics by pedantic schoolmasters from an early age, and in rebellion he found his himself a satirist.¹⁹

This satirist, who finds comedy and satire abounding throughout Homer's *Iliad*, has produced his own satire in his Aphrodite portrait. The goddess of the Narrative is a cardboard figure stripped of her divinity and utterly belittled, the construct, we are led to believe, of those corrupted ancient poets and writers, who had forgotten their calling as Muse-poets, those whom Oxford calls 'The Greats', the poets read with solemn reverence in the English classroom. Graves uses the gravitas of his English schoolmasters to ridicule the very texts that receive their deepest genuflections.

In *The Greek Myths* Graves gives us his definition of myth, separating it first from what it is not: it is not allegory, not aetiological explanation, not satire, not fable, romance, propaganda, anecdote, melodrama, saga or fiction. 'Yet genuine mythic elements', he continues, 'can be found embedded in the least promising stories.' How curious, then, when Graves us the

‘classical’ Aphrodite, as he claims it was transmitted by the ancient poets, he leaves out those genuine mythic elements, giving us not a myth (by his definition), but merely an entertaining story. We cannot help sensing, as we read the Aphrodite Narrative, that Graves himself, a member after all of the very patriarchy that he despises, takes his own personal pleasure in the tale he has spun of a frivolous classical deity. He has entertained himself.

In the second section of his Aphrodite unit, the Bibliography, Graves speaks, if we may say so, in his Master’s voice. Nothing is so solid as a textbook for establishing a man’s authority, and the authority here is that of the scholar. Whatever handbook Graves may have relied on, Graves presents his bibliographies in such a way as to have us believe that he has like Theseus followed Ariadne’s thread through every turn in the labyrinth of Greek mythology. This is the apparatus of the University man. Does a reader question Graves on a point of detail? Has such a reader read, for example, the scholiasts on Homer’s *Iliad*, or the late mythographer Nonnus, as Graves seems to have done? Valuable as the Bibliography is for its wealth of reference, it also has a rhetorical function, to serve as a fortress from which Graves can wage his battle of the books with any who dare to question his premises.²⁰

In the third section, the Commentary, Graves speaks with yet another voice. The material is strangely different from the material presented in the Narrative and referenced in the Bibliography; the sources here are different too. Here, where Graves reclaims the archaic myth from its contaminators, and reinstates the true myth, Graves still speaks with the authority and certitude of the Master, but the authority springs from a different source. Born and bred in a male-dominated society where gender roles were strictly differentiated, where women, as in the ideal portrait praised by Pericles in his Funeral Oration, were to be seen little and heard less, educated in the English public school where the female presence was entirely excluded, except for the cameo appearances of the housekeeper and perhaps the Master’s wife, Graves one day walked out of the cloister and discovered the Feminine.²¹

The shock of this encounter with the hitherto ignored, despised, or hated Feminine led Graves in due time to write *The White Goddess*, and *The Greek Myths* are the continuing account of his conversion. In the Narrative Graves gives us, as it were, the public school version of Aphrodite, a silly goddess, to be treated with levity or contempt. Indeed, the *Odyssey*'s story of Aphrodite caught in adultery Graves would almost certainly have read in the schoolroom, and we can surmise that English schoolmasters, listening to their boys parse Homer's syntax and scan his hexameters, would not have enlightened them as to the true nature of this goddess whom Homer treated with patriarchal scorn. The Commentary, on the other hand, issues from the man who has had his conversion on the Damascus Road, the blinding vision in this case being the vision of the One True Goddess. The voice in the Commentary is still dogmatic (St Paul did not abandon dogmatism after his Damascus Road experience). It is the voice of the male, but now merged with the authority of the poet's Anima, which borrows his magnificently trained magisterial male persona to promulgate in our time the mysteries of the Goddess, once revered throughout Europe and the Mediterranean, but for millennia excluded from consciousness. This is the voice of the sage, opinionated certainly, yet motivated by a greater vision of a spiritual truth that had been suppressed in Graves himself and in his male-dominated, male-dominating culture.²²

In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates gives us the interesting story of the Palinode, a poem written by the seventh century lyric poet Stesichorus. Stesichorus, so the story goes, once wrote a Helen poem, which Helen herself (in her deified persona, since the historical Helen had been dead many centuries) read as a vicious slander. She took offence at the insult and blinded the poet. Stesichorus, coming to his senses, rewrote his Helen poem. He wrote the so-called 'Palinode', literally, a recantation. In this revised Helen story, Stesichorus asserted that Helen had never been to Troy at all but that an *eidolon* (an image) had been given to Paris when he was visiting Sparta. Paris, all unsuspecting that he had been bedded with a mere replica of Helen, sailed to Troy,

and the Greeks and Trojans fought at Troy for ten years not for a woman but for her phantom. Helen, it seems, was satisfied with this recantation, and Stesichorus's eyesight was restored.

The polarity in Graves's treatment of Aphrodite mirrors in a remarkable way the conversion that Socrates attributes to Stesichorus in his treatment of the Helen myth. Stesichorus in his first Helen poem, we may infer, had portrayed Helen as poets had inherited the tradition from Homer, Helen the dangerous wanton, a beautiful curse like Hesiod's Pandora. But then, blinded, but being *mousikos*, as Socrates calls him, i.e. being a poet gifted by the Muses – a Muse-poet Graves would call him – Stesichorus saw his error and repudiated the whole epic tradition, thus exonerating Helen and, it seems, re-instating her as the goddess who was worshipped as a goddess through the whole historical period.

Graves treats Aphrodite in the same way. First he gives us the Aphrodite of the poetic tradition, the patriarchal Aphrodite, deliberately excluding anything that might her seem at all worthy of respect. But being, like Stesichorus, *mousikos*, a true Muse-poet, he was vouchsafed a vision of the true Goddess, and this Goddess he now celebrates and venerates in the Commentary as the Goddess of all Nature. If the Aphrodite in the Narrative is the patriarchy's 'blasphemy', to use the word Socrates had used of Stesichorus's first Helen poem, the Commentary is Graves's personal Palinode to the Great Goddess, to redress the wrong done her in the Narrative.

Sir James Frazer, though one of the greatest students of ancient religion in our time, was not himself a religious man. His *Golden Bough* was the work of an agnostic investigating the forms and rituals of ancient religion as manifestations of primitive superstition. Yet a profound effect of *The Golden Bough* is the aura of the numinous that haunts his description of objects and persons, rituals and customs. Graves, coming to ancient religion via such scholars as Frazer, Bachofen and Harrison, and through his own highly tuned intuition, discovered the numinous for himself, not only as magic associated with ancient religion, but as a still-living presence in his own life. Once he had experienced the

numinous, Graves knew his mission. It was to record and re-create the numinous in his poetry as fully and vividly as his poetic powers would allow. His project became to re-invest myths that had been de-sacralised with the presence of the sacred. Penetrating through the outer layers of the 'story', Graves strives to return us to 'myth', to restore what Martin Buber calls the I-Thou relations with the world. If some call this presence God, Graves preferred to name it the White Goddess.²³

The White Goddess, however eccentric, is of historical interest for our own time, as a milestone in the evolution of the modern Goddess movement. In the *Times Literary Supplement*, the anthropologist T. M. Luhrman reviews *The Triumph of the Moon*, Ronald Hutton's study of the history of modern British witchcraft.²⁴ Luhrmann gives his review the witty title 'Hello Corn Dolly'. Hutton's achievement, he writes, is to demonstrate that the practice of witchcraft in present-day Britain is 'not a weird social accident but [. . .] the embodiment of a mainstream centuries-long emotional impulse at the heart of British culture: a romantic rejection of modernity that finds wisdom and beauty in the rural life'. This impulse springs from a rejection of two aspects of modernity. First, science and technology have eroded, when they have not absolutely eradicated, our I-Thou relations with the world, leaving us feeling as if we are but mechanical robots in an atomised and mechanical universe.²⁵

If we yearn to heal this ruptured relationship the form available to us is the patriarchal version, with God as our Heavenly Father. But this is yet another way to talk of our alienation, since our earthly home is under the rulership of the Devil himself. These two aspects of modern culture, fused into a single image, Graves calls the Apollo cult. Whether we consider our culture from the perspective of art, religion, or science, every document has been inscribed with what Jacques Lacan calls *le nom du père*, 'the name of the father'.

The Goddess theory that has been evolving for the last century and longer, even in the most sophisticated European thought, is propelled by the desire to reject the de-sacralised, de-personalised,

over-masculinised world-view to which the Apollo cult has brought us. Adherents of the Goddess theory seek wisdom and beauty in Nature, as Luhrmann notes; even more important, however, they seek the personal, transformative encounter with the real dynamic presence of Nature, whether it be mild or savage.²⁶

Since Nature has been reduced to a system of mechanics in the course of our scientific revolution, its vital spirit all but outlawed 'in the name of the father', many thoughtful people who yearn for a living encounter with Nature are compelled to find it 'in the name of the mother'.

Luhrmann goes on to say that 'around 1800, a sacred earth mother emerges in Romantic literature, as the embodiment of nature and the moon. By the end of the nineteenth century, the 'corn goddess' was established in British anthropology, Classics, and prehistory as the dominant religion in all early societies, with much folklore in modern society understood as its misinterpreted remnant.'²⁷

Given that Graves's White Goddess, however personal the vision from which she emerges, is but another modern instance of this Goddess archetype of the Romantic poets, an archetype already well established in academic and literary circles before Graves, it may be of some value to trace the connection between Graves's Goddess and the Romantics' archetype by a brief analysis of certain key documents in the history of the modern Goddess movement.

We can begin with the Faust legend, first told in the mid-sixteenth century in Germany. This is some distance from the Romantic poets, to be sure, yet the role that Helen plays in the story is one of our earliest signs of the Goddess religion striving to re-emerge from its long exile. Helen, the absolutely forbidden icon at the heart of the Faustian quest, is the first glimpse of the archetype that was to flower into *La Belle Dame sans Merci* in the poetry of the Romantics in the ensuing centuries. Helen is the single most romantic image of the Feminine in all Western thought, whether pagan or Christian. In the medieval Christian

world Helen was even more romanticised than in the pagan past, a pagan icon declared not only immoral but illicit, prohibited 'in the name of the father'. In the original German Faust-book, Mephistopheles conjures up the shade of Helen for Dr Faustus and Faustus and Helen even marry, though it is an ersatz marriage, being the work of the Devil, and Helen eventually vanishes, and Faustus is left to face his eternal exclusion from the face of God for having, above all other crimes, dared to unite himself to the most false, most illicit form of the banished Feminine.

In Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, composed at the end of the sixteenth century, Helen is given a larger and, we might say, a more romantic role. Faustus first conjures up the shade of Helen in response to the pleas of certain scholars who, once vouchsafed this vision of absolute beauty, depart in monkish ecstasy. Shortly thereafter, Faustus demands that Mephistopheles produce Helen for him, to be his paramour. He wants not the mere image that dumbfounded the other scholars but Helen in her true and essential Being. Seeing Faustus on the point of repentance, Mephistopheles, to seal his doom, acquiesces and sends up Helen from the dead for Faustus to embrace and kiss. With that kiss, Faustus surrenders up his eternal soul but in that brief moment the prize seems worth the penalty, even when the penalty is to be banished from the presence of God forever. In that kiss Dr Faustus believes that he has found a new kind of immortality through Helen, just as Menelaus was made immortal by his marriage to Helen in Homer's ancient tale.

Ellis-Fermor has written of Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* that 'the central idea of the play is an idea of loss'.²⁸ She goes on to say that 'Marlowe does not tell us precisely what this is, for the plain reason that he did not know. The catastrophe is too recent [. . .]. But the passionate agony of the play is an agony of loss and it finds fitting expression in the medieval idea of a lost soul.'²⁹ If we may continue this scholar's line of thought, we might add that if the play circulates around the idea of a lost soul, it is also a play of a man struggling against all the strictures of his society to regain the image of the lost Goddess. This quest is tragic, since for Faust,

a Christian scholar, Helen represents the absolute taboo. Like Graves, Marlowe grew up in a society so exclusively male that the opposite sex, as Graves writes in his autobiography, was ‘despised and hated, treated as something obscene’.³⁰ The exclusion of the female was perhaps even more marked in Marlowe’s world than in the Georgian society in which Graves grew up. When the German Faust-book was being written, woman in their thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, were being tortured, drowned, and burned alive, ‘in the name of the father’, for being witches; that is, human incarnations of the dread and prohibited Goddess.

Today we can see the nature of Marlowe’s problem more clearly than he could. In *Dr Faustus* he found the perfect story, in which a scholar (like himself) condemned his own soul to eternal hell for daring to search out and make manifest the illicit Goddess. Through the figure of *Dr Faustus* yearning for the forbidden Helen, Marlowe represents his own struggle to burst through the taboos of his own culture, which made consorting with the Goddess the unforgivable sin. The excluded Feminine was, of course, as seductive as it was deadly. The world in Marlowe’s *Dr Faustus* is a Manichean battlefield. The enemy is Woman, and her name is Helen. *Dr Faustus*’s self-immolation on the altar of the false goddess Helen is the tragedy of a poet so alienated from his Muse that death or, if we prefer, suicide, was the only available form of redemption.

In 1832 Goethe’s *Faust Part Two* was published posthumously, Goethe having finished it the previous year. We are at this point well past Elizabethan consciousness and into the Romantic sensibility. The contrast between Marlowe’s Helen and the Helen of Goethe’s *Faust Part Two* marks the great divide between the medieval period and the modern with respect to the excluded Feminine. In Marlowe *Faust* must be eternally damned for the stolen kiss, but in Goethe’s *Faust*, the poet – for now the protagonist, as in all Romantic poetry, is the poet himself – in discovering Helen rediscovers himself

In Goethe’s poem, when *Faust* demands that *Mephistopheles* conjure up Helen from the dead, *Mephistopheles* informs him that

this action is far more hazardous than ordinary necromancy. In fact, Mephistopheles explains, Faust must perform this necromancy himself. To accomplish his desire Faust must penetrate to the realm of the Mothers. Mephistopheles, urbane though he is, is embarrassed, so he confesses, to be talking of such mysterious entities. In time, he defines this realm as the place of absolute emptiness, pathless, never seen by human eyes. It is the pure void, where Being first swirls into form. Reaching this realm is a task almost beyond human capacity, but Mephistopheles gives Faust a golden key that will open the forbidden desolate territory to him.

Why Mephisto's embarrassment as naming the Mothers? And why are mothers so proscribed that they have come to signify the absolute void? Goethe's Mephistopheles is more sophisticated than Marlowe's. He is no longer Devil but daemon, not Faust's enemy but, in fact, his therapist, whose work is to forward Faust's consciousness. In Goethe's revision of the Faust legend, Faust must reach the same point of self-annihilation that is Faust's fate in Marlowe's play, but in the Romantic revision of the medieval tale, Faust succeeds in his mission: he finds Helen and brings her back from the dead. This is the successful version of the Orpheus story; here the poet (i.e. Faust) is not destructive to himself or his beloved in his descent to the underworld, as Orpheus was; instead, his journey is regenerative.

Goethe's *Faust Part Two* is much more lucidly the journey of the human mind into its own consciousness; its objective is more obviously therapeutic, to heal the rupture in human consciousness between the licit and the illicit.

If Mephistopheles is embarrassed even to mention the Mothers, this is Goethe's recognition that even for Goethe the Goddess was still so taboo that she could scarcely be named, and then only in an ironic manner, and so stripped of her powers that she must stand as the signifier, in theology and philosophy, of absolute Non-Being. In Goethe the Faustian quest to recover the exiled Feminine, though understood as a terrifying psychological experience, is no cause for damnation. Far from being annihilated

by the vengeful father God for trespassing into forbidden territory, Goethe's Faust finds his redemption in Helen. Her function in Goethe's telling is to assist the poet in reintegrating the Anima back into his consciousness.

One generation after Goethe's *Faust*, Jacob Bachofen's *Mutterrecht*, which put forward the hypothesis that matriarchy was the basis of early religions, marked the entrance of the Goddess theory into the Academy. Another generation, and Classics-trained anthropologists like Frazer and Jane Harrison, and in time psychologists like Erich Neumann, while not always espousing the Goddess theory in its most extreme form, were working the same soil. Deeply impressed by Frazer's emphasis on the myth of the Great Goddess and her repeatedly-sacrificed sacred consort, and by Harrison's analysis of the evolution of goddesses in ancient religion, in 1948 Graves joined the club when he published *The White Goddess*, assisting in his own way to escort the Goddess back in triumph from her long exile.³¹

Since Graves was not a scholar but a poet, and an idiosyncratic poet at that, its thesis was easily dismissed as poetic flamboyance. But just as he was publishing his bold polemic, 'three giants of British archaeology' as Luhrmann calls them – Gordon Childe, O. G. S. Crawford, and Glyn Daniel – 'asserted that New Stone Age cultures across Europe and the Near East venerated a single female deity'.³² If this was not yet a mainstream theory, it had at least become a theory to be taken seriously, now presented by most reputable scholars in the Academy. Then, another generation on, in 1974, Marija Gimbutas published her study of Neolithic religion, *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe*, in which she argues, with a wealth of archaeological data, for the Goddess theory first promulgated by Bachofen a century earlier.³³

When Graves published *The White Goddess*, his hypothesis of the one Goddess was still a minority view. Even though the corn goddess, as Luhrmann notes, was acceptable in certain academic circles, Graves's peculiar arguments seemed to be an example of scholarship either trampled underfoot or run amok. Now, half a century later, the case is very different. Graves himself would be

astonished to discover how deeply the Goddess theory has infiltrated into the Academy. The Goddess, when she is not actually worshipped, is a topic of intense and serious investigation in most departments of Classics across the country, and in many courses in archaeology, history, religion, anthropology. Graves was a prophet before his time. Like the Old Testament prophets of Jehovah, Graves may be too loose at times with the thunderbolt, Jehovah's pre-eminent weapon of persuasion. But like Jeremiah of old, Graves spoke with the urgency borne of the conviction that his mission was to speak for the long-forsaken God. In this case, the Goddess.

While others were propounding the theory of an original Goddess in a more academic fashion, Graves distinguished himself from such theorists by the very force of his personal conviction. Convictions so intense have a two-fold effect: they either sweep all opposition off the field, including fellow travellers; or they incorporate the most disparate pieces of data into their argument. Globalism on this scale wins either way.

To return to our question: Is Robert Graves now *salonfähig*? No, not entirely, but his hypothesis is no longer outright heresy. A great number of specialists, in fact, in many different disciplines, are at work at the agenda that Graves claimed that he had bequeathed to them, though many of them may have read neither Graves the poet nor Graves the mythologist. Scholarship is moving at its own speed, in its own way, with its own methods, in the direction Graves had pointed to in 1948.

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NOTES

¹ Robert Graves, 'The White Goddess', *On Poetry: Collected Talks and Essays* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955), p. 230. Hereafter referred to as *Essays*.

² See Jay Macpherson's review, 'The Greek Myths', *Phoenix*, 12 (1958), 15–25, for one of the most penetrating critiques of Graves's method and ideological slant in his treatment of myth. Macpherson calls *The Greek Myths*, 'in spite of the tremendous suggestiveness of many things in it a crank book'. George Steiner, 'The Genius of Robert Graves', *Kenyon Review*, 22 (1960), 354, writes that most of Graves's academic opponents 'see in Graves a dangerous amateur, possibly even a charlatan, who imposes upon reality a world of private fantasies'.

³ Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 1962), p. 13. Hereafter referred to as *TGM*. For his 'stumbling' on the secret, see Graves, *Essays*, p. 230.

⁴ Graves, *Essays*, p. 231.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Graves, *TGM*, p. 22.

⁸ Graves, *TGM*, p. 67.

⁹ Homer, *Iliad*, 14. 197–223.

¹⁰ Homer, *Iliad*, trans. by Lang, Leaf, and Meyers, rev. edn (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 279–80.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Graves, *TGM*, pp. 70–71.

¹³ Graves, *TGM*, p. 71.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Randall Jarrell, 'Graves and the White Goddess: Part II', *Yale Review* (1956), 467–79, gives us an incisive analysis of the duality in Graves's psychology. The Apollonian persona he calls 'Graves or the Father of the Regiment [. . .] anti-sentimental to the point of insolence'. Robert H. Canary, *Robert Graves* (Boston: Twayne, 1980), p. 94, writes that the Goddess myth provides 'for the Graves who was his father's son [. . .] a series of opportunities for his puzzle-working intellect. For the Graves who was his mother's son, it provides that the intellect shall ultimately be placed in the service of the female Muse.'

¹⁶ Jarrell, 'Graves and the White Goddess', 474–77. See Graves, *Essays*, pp. 235–47, for his quite violent repudiation of Jarrell's psychoanalytic interpretation of Graves's vision of the Goddess. But cf. also Graves, *TWG*, p. 502: 'No poet can hope to understand the nature of poetry unless he has had a vision of the Naked King crucified to the lopped oak, and watched the dancers, red-eyed from the acrid smoke of the

sacrificial fires, stamping out the measure of the dance, their bodies bent uncouthly forward, with a monotonous chant of “Kill! Kill! Kill!” and “Blood! Blood! Blood!”

¹⁷ Cf. Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1930), pp. 13–14: ‘The most useful and at the same time the most dangerous gift that I owe to my father’s side of the family [. . .] is that I am always able, when it is a question of dealing with officials or getting privileges from public institutions which grudge them, to masquerade as a gentleman.’ Note also p. 25, where he remembers his youthful self at a preparatory school: ‘Here I began playing games seriously, was quarrelsome, boastful, and talkative, won prizes, and collected things.’

¹⁸ Graves, *The Anger of Achilles: Homer’s Iliad* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), p. 13, writes: ‘The *Iliad*, and its companion piece, the *Odyssey*, deserve to be rescued from the classroom curse which has lain heavily on them throughout the past twenty-six centuries, and become entertainment once more.’ In Homer he finds a fellow satirist (p. 16): ‘[...] these iron-age princes – descendants of the Dorian invaders who drove his own ancestors overseas – whom Homer satirized in Mycenaean disguise as Agamemnon, Nestor, Achilles, Odysseus. The Homeridae, being sacrosanct servants of Apollo, could risk satire, so long as they remained serene and unsmiling throughout their performances, pointed no finger, cocked no eye, tipped no wink.’ And further, pp. 20–21: ‘When I “did” Book 23 [of the *Iliad*] at my public school, the ancient classroom curse forbade me to catch any of the concealed comedy in the account of Patroclus’ funeral games, which distinguishes them from Anchises’ tedious funeral games in Virgil’s *Aeneid*.’ Keith M. Aldrich, ‘Graves vs. Homer,’ *Prairie Schooner*, 34 (1960), 394–96, writes of Graves’s *Iliad* that it is an ‘outrageous sortie into the field of translation’, and a ‘gross misinterpretation of the *Iliad*’.

¹⁹ Philip Burton, ‘The Values of a Classical Education: Satirical Elements in Robert Graves’ Claudius Novels’, *Review of English Studies*, 46 (1995), 192–218, writes that Graves was strongly influenced by Samuel Butler and his satirical attacks on the Classics. He notes, p. 196, that Graves’s *Iliad* shows the persistence of Butler’s influence: ‘the thesis on the character of the *Iliad* advanced in the Introduction is a radical re-evaluation on a scale worthy of his mentor’.

²⁰ See Macpherson, ‘The Greek Myths’, 15, on the limitations of Graves’s bibliographies.

²¹ Here is how Graves describes sex in the public school context (*Goodbye to All That*, pp. 26–27): ‘In English preparatory and public schools romance is necessarily homo-sexual. The opposite sex is despised and hated, treated as something obscene. Many boys never recover from this perversion.’

²² See Graves, *Essays*, p. 235, for a good example of Graves’s use of the magisterial persona when he attacks Jarrell for claiming that Graves’s Goddess is but the projection of his own Anima.

²³ It is instructive to compare Fontenrose and Graves again in this respect. Fontenrose’s *Python* is a colossal compendium of the Near Eastern and Greek variations on the great Combat Myth between the forces of order and chaos. It includes the most astounding, even bizarre, stories of monsters, and monstrous actions, the stuff of dream, fantasy, and nightmare. But never in the course of Fontenrose’s exposition does he allow the least shiver of the numinous to ruffle the text.

²⁴ T. M. Luhmann, ‘Hello Corn Dolly’, *Times Literary Supplement* (19 May 2000), 36.

²⁵ Macpherson, ‘The Greek Myths’, 24, on the Goddess in modern poets: ‘[I]n her origination and continuing appeal she is a product of a genuinely religious attitude, and represents an attempt in mythical terms to account for sophisticated man’s alienation from the life of nature’.

M. C. Kirkham, ‘Incertitude and the White Goddess’, *Essays in Criticism*, 16 (1966), pp. 57–72, calls the White Goddess poems ‘religious poetry’, and writes (p. 71): ‘Graves’ romanticism feeds on and therefore cultivates the intense and the extraordinary in experience.’

²⁶ On this presence in Graves’s poetry, see Robert Davis, ‘The Pastoral Vision of Robert Graves’, *New Perspectives on Robert Graves* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1999), p. 218: The ur-myth of the pastoral ‘suggests, ultimately, that the primary task of the pastoral imagination may be defined as a remembering of, and return to, the mother. [. . .] The goal of this immense feat of pastoral reconciliation is to place the experience of sympathy, connectedness, destiny, shared love, and suffering at the center of human subjectivity.’ Note also Robert Creeley, ‘Her Service is Perfect Freedom’, *Poetry*, 93 (1959), 396: ‘The Goddess [in Graves], whether characterized as the ultimately personal, or impersonal, wife, mother, queen, or simply the generically “unknown,” is the most persistent other of our existence, eschewing male order, allowing us to live at last. The obedience of a poet’s

gratitude for this is the authority which you hear in his poems, and it is obedience to a presence which is, if you will, that which is not understood, ever; but which he characterizes as all that can happen in living; and seeks to form an emblem for, in words.’

²⁷ Luhrmann, ‘Hello Corn Dolly’, 36.

²⁸ Una M. Ellis-Fermor, *Christopher Marlowe* (London: Methuen, 1927), p. 61. This essay is reprinted as ‘Faustus’ in *Christopher Marlowe’s Dr Faustus*, ed. by Irving Ribner (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1966), pp. 63–86.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, p 27.

³¹ Graves’s interpretation of the Judgment of Paris as an iconic representation of the tri-form Goddess choosing her beloved is based directly on a vase painting discussed in Jane Harrison’s *Prolegomena* (pp. 292–99). At numerous points Graves has taken over Harrison’s hypothesis of the indigenous myths taken and revised by the conquerors. His discussion of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, Aegisthus and Orestes, in *The Greek Myths*, and his argument that the Orestes story shows the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy, are directly dependent on Harrison’s that Clytemnestra once was a ruler in her own right, but the story was revised when the conquerors brought Agamemnon and his family into the drama. For the influence of Frazer on Graves, see John B. Vickery, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), p. 1: Graves ‘may be viewed as the living writer most deeply affected not only by *The Golden Bough* but by the whole corpus of Frazer’s writings’.

³² Luhrmann, ‘Hello Corn Dolly’, 36.

³³ Gimbutas revised this book and republished it in 1981, with the title changed to *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1981). Her original study was published in 1974.