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## **‘If “Princess Europa” returned to her namesake today’: Robert Graves and Europa<sup>1</sup>**

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As noted in the Call for Papers, the Fourteenth International Robert Graves Society Conference (Palma and Deyá, Mallorca, 10-14 July 2018) ‘will explore any aspect of Graves and Europe, from his own life and work in Mallorca, to the relevance of his writing for [the] European present and future’. For Robert Graves the commonly-accepted separation between history, ethnography, mythology, the plastic arts, literature, and even governance and economics, was arguably less meaningful than modern academe’s traditional division into disciplines would usually have it. In this paper I examine Graves’s published references to Europa in *The Greek Myths* and *The White Goddess* as possible sites of Gravesean insights into the geographical-historical Europe in which he spent most of his life. I will also touch on ‘Hymn to Europa’, c. 150 BCE, an epyllion composed in Greek by the Alexandrian poet Moschus,<sup>2</sup> with which Graves was surely familiar in the original Greek, and suggest that a Gravesean muse, such as the ‘woman of true royalty’ from his poem ‘The Secret Land’ is indeed a sister of Princess Europa:

I never dared question my love  
About the government of her queendom  
Or its geography.<sup>3</sup>

This paper concludes with a look at Graves’s poem, ‘General Bloodstock’s Lament for England.’ Whether or not his insights are of use to those struggling with the meaning and ramifications of the United Kingdom’s decision to secede from the European

Union – the Brexit – is beyond the scope of this paper, but I venture to hope that Graves’s discussions of the etymology and mythological sources of Europe / Europa will be of interest.

## The Word

As one for whom words and their power were of overriding importance, Robert Graves would probably have agreed that this examination of Europe / Europa should begin with the etymology of Europe, before moving on to a view of the word as the name of a mythological personage and then of a continent. The ancient Greek word *europa* contains the elements *eurus*, wide, or broad, and *ops*, eye, face, countenance. Thus, *europa* can mean ‘wide-gazing’ or ‘of broad aspect’. In the reconstructed proto-Indo-European language and religion, ‘broad’ is posited as an epithet for the Earth. As to ‘eyes’, Graves was of course familiar with such Homeric epithets as ‘grey-eyed Athena’ and ‘ox-eyed Hera’. The first recorded usage of *Europe* as a geographic term is found in the Homeric *Hymn to Delian Apollo*, in reference to the western shore of the Aegean Sea:

‘Here is the place I intend to erect a most beautiful temple  
now that will serve all men as an oracle; then they will  
always  
bring here, honoring me, their hecatombs full and effective –  
both those having abodes in the fertile Péloponnésos,  
and those dwelling in Europe and over the wave-washed  
islands –  
looking for oracles; then it will be infallible counsel.  
I will deliver to all of them here in my sumptuous temple’.  
So spoke Phoibos Apollo. (lines 287-94)<sup>4</sup>

As a name for a part of the known world, Europa was used in the sixth century BCE by the historians and geographers

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Anaximander and Hecataeus. Anaximander placed the boundary between Asia and Europe along the Phasis River (the Rioni River of Georgia, in the Caucasus Mountains), a convention followed by Herodotus in the fifth century BCE. Europe's eastern frontier was defined some two millennia ago by the geographer Strabo as the River Don.

Geographically, the British Isles, or as historian of Christianity Diarmaid MacCulloch terms them, 'the Atlantic Isles',<sup>5</sup> are part of the continent of Europe, although many anglophones use 'the Continent' as a way of conveniently differentiating between Britain and the rest of Europe. I have seen fit to raise this point because some of Graves's explanations for the name of the continent of Europe connect, not only to Greece and its myths, but to a broader geographical and mythological swathe, that is, to the Middle East and its myths, toponymy and history, and especially the history of migrations of tribes, peoples and ethnic groups. In this Graves was ahead of his time, as he was in so much else.

Moving from proto-Indo-European to Semitic languages, some etymologists have connected 'Europe' with a Semitic term for 'west,' that is, *erebu* in Akkadian (to set)<sup>6</sup> and the Phoenician *ereb*, meaning evening, or West. The latter were to become *erev* (evening) and *ma'arav* (West) in Hebrew, and in Arabic: Maghreb (West: and now a term for North Africa, which lies west of the Near East). Although most etymologists tend to reject the match between these Semitic languages and Europa's name, Graves would not necessarily have agreed with them.

In fact, as we find in *The White Goddess*, Graves sees Europe as, among other possibilities, the Full Moon, for which the Semitic languages, pointing in the direction of the West, or evening, are a source. Yet here, in a combination of etymology and mythology, Graves suggests that 'Europe is not only "she of the broad face," i.e. the Full Moon, but [...] she of the flourishing willows'. The willow, which thrives near sources of water, is sacred to the Moon-Goddess as the tree that loves water the most, and representative of dew (which appears at night), and moisture

generally.<sup>7</sup> In *The Greek Myths* Graves reports a version of the Europa narrative in which Zeus, having waded ashore in Crete in the form of a bull, becomes an eagle and attacks Europa in a willow-thicket beside a spring. Graves then parses the word *europa* not as *eur-ope* (wide eyes), but rather as *eu-rope* (good for willows), which may be said to mean ‘well-watered’.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Graves’s reference in *The White Goddess* to dew as a source of water which appears during the night (the hours ruled, as it were, by the moon) is of special interest to those familiar with Middle Eastern climates, where for the four or five months of the year in which there is very little rain, dew is seen as a divine blessing, an important source of water for the land (Graves, p. 173). The importance of dew as water for the irrigation of crops explains why, for example, prayers for dew are said at Passover, whose date corresponds to the end of the rainy season in Israel.

## The Story

Graves posits another meaning for the word ‘European’ in *The White Goddess*, i.e. ‘of Cretan extraction, based on a story in which Europa, daughter of Agenor, rides to Crete from Phoenicia on the back of a bull’ (pp. 272-273).

The story of Europa in written, literary form, based on earlier orally-transmitted myths, dates back as least as far as *c.* 150 BCE, to Moschus’ ‘Europa’. The following is a short outline of common versions of the tale, conflated from Graves and Moschus.

Europa was the daughter of Agenor, a son of Poseidon who settled in Canaan, and his spouse Telephassa. As Moschus would have it, on the morning when Zeus saw Europa and her companions dancing and bathing near the sea, Europa had been troubled by a dream in which two continents, each in the shape of a woman, tried to take possession of her: Asia, saying that she had given birth to the girl and another, who claimed that Zeus would give the girl to her.

Zeus fell in love with Europa and joined a herd of cattle disguised as a handsome snow-white bull. This herd was driven to the seashore at Tyre, in Phoenicia, where the girl and her friends were wont to walk. Struck by the animal's beauty, Europa began to play with him and even climbed on his shoulders. He suddenly swam away with her, eventually making landfall on Crete, where Europa became the mother of kings, bearing to Zeus Minos, Rhadamanthus and Sarpedon. The tale of Europa, in one or more of its permutations, is thus a story of migration from East to West, as are epics such as the Pentateuch and the Aeneid, to name but two.

### Queen Europa

Before focusing on Graves's 'The Secret Land', let us look at Moschus's epyllion. The following is Zeus's speech to Europa, spoken just prior to their landing on Crete and while he still bore the form of a horned bull:

Take courage, virgin! Nor the billow fear;  
 The seeming bull is Zeus; for I with ease  
 Can take at will whatever form I please;  
 My fond desire for thy sweet beauty gave  
 To me this shape – my footstep to the wave.  
 Dear Crete, that nursed me, now shall welcome thee;  
 In Crete Europa's nuptial rites shall be;  
 From our embrace illustrious sons shall spring,  
 And every one of them a sceptred king.<sup>9</sup>

This speech, made by a god and directed at a young woman, may be a justification on the part of Zeus for what would now be seen as an act of rape. In the above there is no doubt as to Europa's weakness, whether or not she finds Zeus attractive and accepts his forced attentions willingly: her compensation is that she is to be

the mother of kings.<sup>10</sup>

We shall now focus on Graves's 'The Secret Land'.

Every woman of true royalty owns  
A secret land more real to her  
Than this pale outer world:

At midnight when the house falls quiet  
She lays aside needle or book  
And visits it unseen.

Shutting her eyes, she improvises  
A five-barred gate among tall birches,  
Vaults over, takes possession.

Then runs, or flies, or mounts a horse  
(A horse will canter up to greet her)  
And travels where she will;

Can make grass grow, coax lilies up  
From bud to blossom as she watches,  
Lets fish eat from her palm;

Has founded villages, planted groves  
And hollowed valleys for brooks running  
Cool to a land-locked bay.

I never dared question my love  
About the government of her queendom  
Or its geography,

Nor followed her between those birches,  
Setting one leg astride the gate,  
Spying into the mist.

Yet she has pledged me, when I die,

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A lodge beneath her private palace  
In a level clearing of the wood  
Where gentians grow and gillyflowers  
And sometimes we may meet.<sup>11</sup>

‘The Secret Land’ makes a useful contrast to Moschus’s *Hymn to Europa*. Unlike Canaan, Phoenicia and Crete, which are well-known locations, the land over which Graves’s muse / queen rules is secret. There is, however, no doubt who holds power over this land which is more real than the ‘pale outer world’. Unlike Europa, the woman of ‘true royalty’ has at her disposal, as does Zeus, more than one means of transportation: she can run, fly (as can a god), or should she prefer to ride, she has the services of a horse: an animal presumably more suited to transporting a queen than a bull.

Moschus’s Europa is promised that she will become pregnant and be the mother of kings; but Graves’s queen will herself make trees, flowers and grass grow, will found villages, and even engineer the geography of her queendom in such a way as to create brooks and bays. Her control is complete, and as her servant, the poet would never dare to question her, neither as to ‘the government of her queendom | [N]or its geography’. The poet, unlike Zeus, does not make promises to his queen; at most he succeeds in extracting from her a promise that she will allow him, after his death, a lodge beneath her palace.

### **Epilogue: ‘England, my own generous mother’**

A discussion of Robert Graves and Europe would do well to include engagement with another poem of Graves’s, ‘General Bloodstock’s Lament for England’ beginning appropriately with the title. I hope to be allowed to assume that a possible source of the term ‘General Bloodstock’ is the *General Stud Book*, one of the first breed registries created (1791). Interested as he was in

myths of migration, whether of people or of animals, Graves may have known that all modern thoroughbred horses in England are said to be traced back to three stallions which were imported to England in the late seventeenth- early eighteenth century from the Middle East.

Graves precedes his poem with an epigraph from Robert Kirk's *The Secret Commonwealth*, set off in italics.<sup>12</sup>

### **General Bloodstock's Lament for England**

*This image (seemingly animated) walks with them in the fields in broad Day-light; and if they are employed in delving, harrowing, Seed-sowing or any other Occupation, they are at the same time mimicked by the ghostly Visitant. Men of the Second Sight . . . call this reflex-man a Co-walker, every way like the Man, as his Twin-brother and Companion, haunting as his shadow.*

Alas, England, my own generous mother,  
 One gift I have from you I hate,  
 The second sight: I see your weird co-walker,  
 Silver-zoned Albion, stepping in your track,  
 Mimicking your sad and doubtful gait,  
 Your clasped hands, your head-shakings, your bent back.

The white hem of a winding sheet  
 Draws slowly upward from her feet;  
 Soon it will mount knee-high, then to the thigh.  
 It crackles like the parchment of the treaties,  
 Bonds, contracts and conveyances,  
 With which, beggared and faint and like to die,  
 You signed away your island sovereignty  
 To rogues who learned their primer at your knees.<sup>13</sup>

Scholars have suggested fascinating approaches to this poem,

including the epigraph. Devindra Kohli, on the one hand, points out that: 'If the compulsive walk, then, can be seen as a reflection of the need for balance in opposing forces, integration with the self is suggested by Graves's use of the concept of the co-walker, the familiar ghost, or the lover's weird self', as depicted in the epigraph.<sup>14</sup> According to D. N. G. Carter, on the other hand:

A peculiar aspect of Graves's Englishness [is] its colonialism. For Graves's predicament as a twentieth-century poet is not dissimilar to the colonial's who will neither return to his country of origin nor become fully absorbed into his country of adoption. What sustains him is a myth, the myth of the frontiersman maintaining in isolation values long since betrayed at home.<sup>15</sup>

If I may be allowed to speculate, I am not sure that Graves would have seen himself as being 'sustained by the myth of the frontiersman'; and while he presumably would have agreed that the depiction of one 'who will neither return to his country of origin nor become fully absorbed into his country of adoption' applied to himself, he may not have seen this as a 'predicament,' a difficult or embarrassing situation. This poem does, however, express discomfort as to the situation of his country of origin: not because she is a colonial power abusing the peoples and cultures which she rules, but is, rather, a victim.

The epigraph of the poem, rare in Graves's oeuvre, points in the direction of mother England's gift to the poet: the 'second sight'. At first glance it is surprising that the poet would 'hate' what could be seen as an important aspect of the poetic gift. Yet on the basis of the epigraph, it may be that Graves does not hate the sight, but rather the sight of: 'the ghostly Visitant [. . .] your weird co-walker, | Silver-zoned Albion'. This figure, 'mimicking the queen as she delves, harrows, sows' (or, as does the woman of true royalty from 'The Secret Land', makes grass grow and coaxes lilies up from bud to blossom), haunts the queen she whose gait is

already sad and doubtful and whose back is bent.

In the body of the poem, England is envisioned as not only a ‘generous mother’, but as a victim of rape: her shroud is lifted to reveal what should be private. England is a queen, but one who was forced to sign away her ‘island sovereignty’. Who, however, are the ‘rogues who learned their primer at [her] knees’? Joseph Bailey has suggested that the ‘rogues’ may be Englishmen, possibly lawyers:

It certainly does seem that Graves could be referring to lawyers who draw up these documents and certainly could have ‘learned their primer at your knees’. Also of course [. . .] it could refer to the financiers and money-men who may have increasingly ‘beggared’ Britain through loans, which would have to be agreed by the same method of contracts, written treaties etc.<sup>16</sup>

We might, moreover, at least entertain the possibility that these rogues include Britain’s erstwhile North American colonies, where to this day schoolchildren are taught to appreciate the many gifts of the motherland to her New World colonies, and this despite her perceived lack of respect for the colonials and their leadership. But surely the treaties, bonds, contracts and conveyances which beggared England and brought her close to death include those imposed on the generous mother by her European neighbors. Thus, if Europa was raped by a god, while comforted with the thought of becoming the mother of kings, this poem may possibly suggest that while England may not be part of Europe, she may well be Europa.

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 NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Adam Kirsch, 'To Fight Against this Age: On Fascism and Human', *Review: Barnes and Noble.com* 7 February 2018. <<https://www.barnesandnoble.com/review/fight-age-fascism-humanism>> [accessed 7 May 2020]. 'Riemen personifies what he thinks of as the true, lost Europe in the figure of Europa, from Greek mythology. If "Princess Europa" returned to her namesake today, she would find that "from this Europe, the European spirit has gone."'"
- <sup>2</sup> An *epyllion* is generally defined as a comparatively short narrative poem written in dactylic hexameter. Although it may at times be a discrete tale embedded in a longer epic, its themes are not those primarily characteristic of the formal epic.
- <sup>3</sup> Robert Graves, *The Complete Poems in One Volume*, ed. by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000), pp. 504-05.
- <sup>4</sup> 'The Homeric Hymn to Apollo', trans. by Rodney Merrill in *A Californian Hymn to Homer*, ed. by Timothy Pepper. Hellenic Studies Series 41 (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2011). <<https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/6294.8-the-homeric-hymn-to-apollo-translated-by-rodney-merrill>> [accessed 29 Aug 2018]
- <sup>5</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Viking, 2009), p. 13.
- <sup>6</sup> The language of what is considered the first ancient Semitic-speaking empire of Mesopotamia, dating back to c. 2000 BCE.
- <sup>7</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), p. 173.
- <sup>8</sup> Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, combined edn (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 195, 196-97.
- <sup>9</sup> 'Moschus's Hymn to Europa,' trans. by M. J. Chapman, in *The Greek Pastoral Poets, Theocritus, Bion, and Moschus* (London: James Fraser, 1936) pp. 289-97 <[www.philaletheians.co.uk](http://www.philaletheians.co.uk)> [accessed 24 April 2020]
- <sup>10</sup> Both Hagar and Rebecca are promised by the Deity that they will be mothers of nations: Hagar when pregnant with Ishmael and Rebecca during her pregnancy with Esau and Jacob, (Genesis 21.18; Genesis 25.23).
- <sup>11</sup> *Complete Poems*, pp. 504-05.

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Kirk, *The Secret Commonwealth*, 1691 [first published 1815]: a treatise on fairy folklore of the Scottish Highlands, including witchcraft, ghosts, ‘second sight’. [Editor’s note: the sentence Graves ascribes to Kirk appears uncredited in the notes to Walter Scott’s *Legend of Montrose*, four years later.]

<sup>13</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 443.

<sup>14</sup> Devindra Kohli, ‘A Measure of Casualness: The Peripatetic in the Poetry of Robert Graves’, in *New Perspectives on Robert Graves*, ed. by Patrick J. Quinn (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1999), pp. 65-83, (p.76).

<sup>15</sup> D. N. G. Carter, *Robert Graves: The Lasting Poetic Achievement* (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 46-47.

<sup>16</sup> Thanks to Joseph Bailey for this valuable insight, first made during the conference and expanded in an email to the author 22 August 2018.