Obscene or Sentimental? Graves and the Muses of the 1960s

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Abstract: A two-part consideration of Robert Graves's generalizations about women published during the 1960s. The first part looks at comments published in *The Ladies Home Journal,* in conversation with Feminist and other contemporary generalizations; the second part looks at poems published in *Man Does, Woman Is.*

Keywords: Second Wave Feminism, Laura (Riding) Jackson, Greek mythology, Ruth Fainlight, *Man Does, Woman Is*

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As a newcomer, and perhaps interloper, to both the MLA and the Robert Graves Society, I should begin by explaining briefly how I got here: I am a Classicist and my interest in Classical Reception has focused on women's writing of the 20th century – this brought me to Laura Riding's *Trojan Ending* and thence to Graves and his take on classical myth, literature and history. I have been looking into his highly idiosyncratic interpretations of classical myth and literature, and into his interest in ancient matriarchies, and I am interested in how this intersects with Laura Riding's thinking about women and myth.

When I saw the call for papers on the 1960s it occurred to me that it would be useful to take a closer look at the ways in which Graves makes use of classical myth in his love poems, and into how the love poetry intersects with the Muse mythology developed in *The White Goddess*.

The period I am looking at today is from around 1960 to 1965, which includes Graves's lectures as Professor of Poetry at Oxford and a focus on love poetry often connected in the biographies to his relationship with Margot Callas, referred to as his 'Muse' of the time. This is also the time during which the publication of Betty

Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 caused considerable waves and ensured that ideas about gender as a social construct, which were introduced in *The Second Sex*, became widely debated in the anglophone world. In this context, Robert Graves's apparent championing of the power of women makes an intriguing addition to the mix….

In 1964 the *Ladies Home Journal* published an essay by Robert Graves in its January issue on the topic of the 'real woman'[1]– and six months later in June a special issue focused on 'Woman: The fourth dimension', including a follow-up essay by Betty Friedan to the best-selling *Feminine Mystique*. What was a girl to think? Friedan was telling women that it was indeed possible to 'break out' and away from the three dimensions of wife/mother/homemaker and to have a fulfilled life. Graves was telling readers of the *Ladies Home Journal* that 'A man's biological function is to do, woman's is to be'. And the elaboration of what this 'being' involved sounds like a worrying mixture of the bohemian and bourgeois. For instance, 'A real woman's main concern is her beauty, which she cultivates for her own pleasure – not to ensnare men'.

> A real woman is content to dress with a difference, to make her home unmistakably her own, to illuminate any company she enters, to cook by instinct, not by the cookery book. This is her evidence of being, the proof of which lies in her sense of certitude. She is no feminist.[2]

There is more – and I am not citing all this to be unkind, but simply to give a sense of the time. What disturbs a twenty-first century reader, however, is how the essay ends by evoking Jennifer Dawson's 1961 novel *The Ha-Ha*, about a young woman's mental breakdown. Graves says that 'mental institutions on both sides of the Atlantic house hundreds of young, beautiful, silently brooding girls, victims of the sex war – defeated before they could come to terms with life'.[3] I find it hard not to think of Sylvia Plath in this context – presumably she was not, in Graves's view 'a real woman'. As he says: 'A real woman somehow avoids suicide. or

virtual suicide, or the mental institution […] '"This is not worthy of me", she will remind herself ten times a day, "but to preserve my inner self I must once more act an alien part."'[4] I have to wonder whether he was aware that the part of 'Muse' was itself such an alien part.

To return to the subject of Graves's love poetry, it is perhaps a bit mischievous of me, but I hope forgivable, if I set the scene a little with the poem 'Old Man in Love' by the poet Ruth Fainlight, a friend of Robert and Beryl Graves.

Old Man in Love

The good accrete as he gets older:
Land, children, fame,
He's weighted by a lengthening list
Of things that name him,
Tethered firm to age and death.

The work left to complete
Like secret money he can draw on
Might help escape, but surer still
He hopes, is anguish, severance.
He seeks destruction in the gaze of love.[5]

The poem seems to me a clear-sighted assessment of Graves's insistence on seeking to suffer in love into old age. In an interview published in *Gravesiana* in 2017, Fainlight, apparently refusing to be drawn on what the interviewer, Charles Mundye, refers to as Graves's 'quite […] complex set of […] prejudices, thoughts, intellectual positions around gender', simply observes, about *Man Does, Woman Is*: 'I found that really infuriating'.[6] I expect that she was not alone in not being entirely convinced by the Gravesian muse worship – and she cannot have been the only woman poet to be unpersuaded by the desirability of Musedom as he described it. Both Fainlight and her friend Sylvia Plath were apparently drawn to *The White Goddess*, and it appears that both may have seen the

partnership between Graves and Riding as a 'model' for their own marriages with important writers.[7]

But how could they have reconciled themselves to the pronouncement that 'Woman is not a poet: she is either a Muse or she is nothing'? Of course, in a sense Plath did not and by 1964 when *Man Does, Woman Is* was published, she was dead.

My paper today is an attempt to understand how *Man Does, Woman Is*, and more generally Graves's 'dramatizing of the vicissitudes of love' sit within the context of a world, in the early to mid 60s, in which women poets were trying to work out how to be women *and* poets. Laura Riding had renounced poetry herself by this time – but her poems were read on the BBC's third programme in 1962 (when Plath heard them), and a new edition of selected poems was published in 1970 by Faber.

I have, a little provocatively, given a tile which alludes to what Laura Riding says in one of the essays in *Epilogue* about the ways in which men think about women. I did this because I think her perspective on the 'man-woman relationship' is significant despite the fact that she no longer featured in Graves's daily life in the 1960s. Riding had written a lot about women, and about the way men and women relate to each other, and she was, like Graves, interested in the idea of an ancient and perhaps also a future supremacy of women.

On *The White Goddess* her antipathy is well known, and she claimed in the foreword to *The Word Woman* (published posthumously in 1993) that everything produced by Graves 'in this guise of male pioneer in new thinking on Woman and Women is derived appropriatively from my thinking as he had direct personal contact with it',[8] and that 'the literary production in which RG exploited my thought and writing on the subject of women most massively and concentratedly is *The White Goddess'* (Ibid). These claims are contested by some, and it is not my objective here to defend or prove them.[9] I do want to draw attention to her claims in order to suggest that Laura Riding's work on women has some bearing on the period of the 1960s in which the currency of *The White Goddess* was riding high, and the role of the incarnated Muse

was taken on by a series of women, who were often seen to be following in the footsteps of Laura Riding herself.

It is worth noting that Riding had expressed her views on the abstract idea of the muse, quite separately from Graves's personal muse mythology and its adherence to her own person, for instance in the preface to her *Collected Poems* of 1938, where it is clear that she considers the muse an invention – a myth – and thus inimical to the aim of truth in poetry:

> When one feels compelled to do something because one wants very much to do it from one's point of view, then it is dishonest to put the onus of compulsion on some outside force
> Poets have attributed the compulsion of poetry to forces outside themselves – to divinities, muses, and, finally even to such humanistic muses as Politics.[10]

For the second part of this short paper, and against the background and context I have outlined, I want to take a look at just a pair of poems in *Man Does, Woman Is*, in which the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is used in a particularly intriguing manner. If I had more time, I would want to talk more about how the idea of 'Woman Is' is developed in the collection and how it is connected with the turning of women into myth, for instance in poems such as: 'At best, poets' where the equation between woman and nature is effortless in the first line: "Woman with her forests, moons, flowers, waters'; or the 'heart-line | Identical with its head-line' evoking the instinct-driven, irrationality of the woman in the titular poem. But let us turn to Eurydice:

> Food of the Dead
>
> Blush as you stroke the curves – chin, lips and brow –
> Of your scarred face, Prince Orpheus, for she called it
> Beautiful, nor would she stoop to flattery.
> Yet you are patient still, when again she has eaten
> Food of the dead, seven red pomegranate seeds,
> And once more warmed the serpent at her thighs

For a new progress through new wards of hell?[11]

The thing that strikes me the most here, is the conflation of Persephone with Eurydice. The latter's presence is implied by the naming of Orpheus of course, but Eurydice has nothing to do with pomegranate seeds in Greek or Roman myth. The seeds are offered by Hades to Persephone and the choice the girl makes to eat them means that she must commit to becoming the queen of the Underworld. The eating of the seeds is often interpreted by modern readers as a form of assertion of agency, or sexual agency, by which the kidnapped girl Persephone establishes herself as independent from her distraught mother, Demeter (this is the case for instance in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, but less emphatically so in Ovid's version).

In *Greek Myths*, Graves calls the seeds 'the food of the dead' and expands on a theory that there was a 'primitive taboo' on red-coloured food, which could only be offered to the dead. In *The White Goddess*, Orpheus is not mentioned in connection with Eurydice (and the latter is not mentioned at all), but he is mentioned as a 'victim' of the White Goddess.

In 'Food of the Dead' the woman or goddess is in something of a habit of associating with the dead – she has 'again' eaten the seeds, and then she 'once more' warms the serpent at her thighs, for a 'new' descent into hell. So it appears that in Graves's version of the myth, the Eurydice figure behaves a little like Persephone in descending and re-ascending to and from the underworld. The serpent she warms at her thighs, recalls the serpent that killed Eurydice – but it also evokes Eve's serpent, and suggests an image of sexual infidelity.

But Graves's poem appears to me to be more about Orpheus himself. Each of the two sentences that make up the poem begins with an address to himself (Blush as you stroke […] Yet you are patient still). As he contemplates his own face it is her gaze he evokes though: '*she* [italics mine] has called it beautiful'. And so the suffering (the scarred face, the patience) are in effect what he desires and yearns for. It is not too much of a reach I think, to look

back at Fainlight's 'Old Man in Love' here who 'seeks destruction in the gaze of love'.

The most complete version of the Orpheus and Eurydice story in antiquity comes from Virgil's *Georgics,* and most scholars agree that its key moment, the second loss of Eurydice when Orpheus looks back to ensure she is still following him, is likely to be Virgil's invention. In the *Georgics* the lovers are parted when Orpheus, seized by a lover's mad desire, and heedless of Proserpina's rule, turns around to look at Eurydice. Orpheus's failure is especially tragic in the *Georgics* since it is juxtaposed with the success of Aristaeus in rehabilitating himself.

Now, Graves always professed his dislike of Virgil, the 'anti-poet', of course. And so it is perhaps unsurprising that in his remaking of the Orpheus and Eurydice story he appears deaf to a moment when Virgil is, actually, a 'true' poet. The Orpheus episode in the fourth *Georgic* is probably Virgil's greatest achievement as a poet. Here he shows his understanding of the power of love as a kind of madness – Eurydice says to Orpheus that it is his *furor* that is sending her back to the world of the dead. And Virgil reworks this moment in the second book of the *Aeneid*, when Aeneas neglects to check his wife is following behind him, and loses Creusa, whose name in the earlier epic cycle was Eurydice! The loss of Creusa takes place in a burning Troy near the end of *Aeneid* 2 that closely resembles the underworld of the *Georgics* and of *Aeneid* 6. Orpheus's failure is truly tragic, especially as it is juxtaposed with the success of Aristaeus in rehabilitating himself. George Steiner, who was otherwise impressed, if not awed, by Graves, put it well when he criticised the Gravesian re-interpretations of the ancient world as 'curiously unpoetic':

> As long as men weigh love against death and know the tragedy of near-success, Orpheus's attempt to lead Eurydice back to the light will strike its rich echoes. When Graves assures us that it was actually Eurydice who destroyed men in some ancient serpent-rite, our sense of the poetic mutinies even before our reason.[12]

Let us look at 'Eurydice' then:

> *I am oppressed, I am oppressed, I am oppressed*,' –
> Once I utter the curse, how can she rest:
> No longer able, weeping, to placate me
> With renewed auguries of celestial beauty?
>
> Speak, fly in her amber ring; speak, horse of gold!
> What gift did I ever grudge her, or help withhold?
> In a mirror I watch blood trickling down the wall –
> Is it mine? Yet still I stand here, proud and tall.
>
> Look where she shines, with a borrowed blaze of light
> Among the cowardly, faceless, lost, unright,
> Clasping a naked imp to either breast –
> Am I not oppressed, oppressed, three times oppressed?
>
> She has gnawn at corpse-flesh till her breath stank,
> Paired with a jackal, grown distraught and lank,
> Crept home, accepted solace, but then again
> Flown off to chain truth back with an iron chain.
>
> My own dear heart, dare you so war on me
> As to strangle love in a mad perversity?
> Is ours a fate can ever be forsworn
> Though my lopped head sing to the yet unborn?

I don't think 'Eurydice' is a very good poem (I don't like the rhyming of 'stank' and 'lank' and the repetition of 'chain' looks careless perhaps; the naked imps are just too graphic) – though I am happy to be persuaded otherwise. The necrophiliac monster who shines here in borrowed light is quite simply, too much. And I am reminded of the dig Carol Ann Duffy's Eurydice aims at this kind of thing, a useful corrective perhaps:

> rest assured that I'd rather speak for myself
> than be Dearest, Beloved, Dark Lady, White Goddess,

etc. etc.
In fact, girls, I'd rather be dead.

In Virgil, this is one of the very few episodes of genuine love poetry, I think. It is love, as a form of madness, that compels Orpheus to look back before they have reached the light – it is desire that causes him to disregard the rules, and his severed head keeps on crying out Eurydice's name. This is a triumph for the elegiac. What so-called 'pessimist' readers of Virgil are able to see is that Virgil returns to the darkness and to the tragic failure of the Orpheus episode at all those moments in the *Aeneid* when he lets the other, or oppressed, voices speak: In the Nisus and Euryalus episode for instance, where an underworldly labyrinth brings destruction to the young lovers, sacrificed for the cause of empire, or with the loss of Creusa in the hell of burning Troy at the end of *Aeneid* 2. Virgil also takes us back to the shadows of that world at the end of the *Aeneid* when he acknowledges the failure of epic. So here, I believe that Graves misreads Virgil, very likely because he cannot see past his fixation with the monstrous female. Fainlight's 'Old Man in Love' is placed next to a poem titled 'The Black Goddess'. Although I am not sure I understand it entirely, I do think that this poem too offers some criticism of the mood of *Man Does, Woman Is,* not least in the line, 'And ancient vanity deceives you both.'

A weak conclusion, I am aware – but please accept this as a first approach to a complex subject matter.

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NOTES

[1] Robert Graves, ‘Real Women’, Ladies *Home Journal* 81 (1964), 151–55. Rpt. Robert Graves, ‘Real Women’ *Mammon and the Black Goddess* (London: Cassell, 1965), pp. 101–113.
[2] pp. 111–12.
[3] Ibid, p. 112.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ruth Fainlight, *New and Collected Poems* (Newcastle, England: Bloodaxe, 2010) p. 94. Kindle ebook.
[6] Charles Mundye, ‘Interview with Ruth Fainlight’, *Gravesiana* 4.2 (2017) <https://robertgravesreview.org/essay.php?essay=369&tab=6> [accessed 6 May 2024]
[7] For Plath, see Judith Kroll, *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), and Deryn Rees-Jones, *Consorting with Angels: Essays on Modern Women Poets* (Tarset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2005).
[8] Laura (Riding) Jackson, *The World Woman and Other Related Writings* (New York: Persea, 1993), p. 10.
[9] Mark Jacobs, ‘Contemporary Misogyny: Laura Riding, William Empson and the Critics’, *English: Journal of the English Association* 64.246 (2015), 222–40.
[10] Qtd in *The Poems of Laura Riding,* a newly rev. edn. of the 1938/1980 collection (New York: Persea Books, 2001), p. 486.
[11] Robert Graves, *Man Does, Woman Is* (London: Cassell, 1964), p. 23.
[12] George Steiner, ‘The Genius of Robert Graves’, *The Kenyon Review* 22.3 (1960), 340–64.