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Homer's Daughter: *Graves's Vera Historia*

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Abstract

Within Robert Graves's enormous output, the novel *Homer's Daughter* is easy to miss. Written mostly in hopes of achieving large popular sales and inspired by another book that few people take seriously, Samuel Butler's *The Authoress of the Odyssey*, *Homer's Daughter* has never commanded the same respect as Graves's better-known historical fiction, especially the *Claudius* novels. This is in part because *Homer's Daughter* does not concern what are generally considered real historical events, although, as I hope to show, that difference has positive as well as negative consequences: it allows Graves to raise some of the same questions about writing history that he does in the *Claudius* novels, but with even more freedom. With its light tone and romantic plot, *Homer's Daughter* may seem especially deserving of the label 'potboiler' that Graves applied to all of his prose works. Yet, like the work of Lucian to which my title alludes, it is a playful but challenging exploration of the interplay between history and fiction. The jokey, satirical character of *Homer's Daughter* is less a sign of inconsequence than a reflection of how difficult the main elements of its story-romantic awakening and poetic inspiration-were for Graves, and the book stands as an overlooked illustration of the serious uses of wit.

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Homer's Daughter

Graves's Vera Historia

Sheila Murnaghan

Within Robert Graves's enormous output, the novel *Homer's Daughter* is easy to miss. Written mostly in hopes of achieving large popular sales and inspired by another book that few people take seriously, Samuel Butler's *The Authoress of the Odyssey*, *Homer's Daughter* has never commanded the same respect as Graves's better-known historical fiction, especially the *Claudius* novels. This is in part because *Homer's Daughter* does not concern what are generally considered real historical events, although, as I hope to show, that difference has positive as well as negative consequences: it allows Graves to raise some of the same questions about writing history that he does in the *Claudius* novels, but with even more freedom. With its light tone and romantic plot, *Homer's Daughter* may seem especially deserving of the label 'potboiler' that Graves applied to all of his prose works. Yet, like the work of Lucian to which my title alludes, it is a playful but challenging exploration of the interplay between history and fiction. The jokey, satirical character of *Homer's Daughter* is less a sign of inconsequence than a reflection of how difficult the main elements of its story—romantic awakening and poetic inspiration—were for Graves, and the book stands as an overlooked illustration of the serious uses of wit.

Homer's Daughter was written in the winter of 1953–4 and published in 1955. Graves hoped to repeat with it the financial success he had achieved with the *Claudius* novels and to make even more money from a film version. This was to star Ingrid Bergman, providing her

too with a needed career boost in the aftermath of her scandalous affair with Roberto Rossellini. Plans for the film proceeded on and off until Bergman dropped the idea, offering the excuse that she was getting too long in the tooth to play the heroine Nausicaa. 'The only thing is I'll be a pretty *old* daughter . . .'¹

According to Graves, the book practically wrote itself. In a letter to Selwyn Jepson, a detective-story writer who was acting as his agent and who became the dedicatee of the book, he reported that: 'Homer's Daughter . . . causes me no trouble. I shall have finished the first draft in about a fortnight and can then concentrate on embellishments. Never have I found a book so easy to write, and the suspense is kept up, and there is a strong love-interest and lots of murders.'² Despite these exciting features, the book never achieved the wide sales that Graves was hoping for, and it is not hard to see why. The plot is lively and the central character is engaging, but the real pleasures of the novel are quite esoteric, brought about through reading it in tandem with the *Odyssey* and savouring Graves's complex intertextual moves. *Homer's Daughter* is, in effect, a modern revision of the *Odyssey*, a secondary work derived from the *Odyssey*, but it presents itself as prior to the *Odyssey*: it claims to be the true story of which the *Odyssey* is a revision, and an account of the *Odyssey's* origins.

Homer's Daughter opens with an account of its own origins, in a 'Historical Note' in Graves's own voice:

Samuel Butler, the author of *Erewhon*, . . . suggested that the poem, as we now have it, was composed at Drepanum, the modern Trapani, in Western Sicily and that the authoress was the girl self-portrayed as Nausicaa. None of his classical contemporaries, for whom Homer was necessarily both blind and bearded, deigned to pay Butler's theory the least attention . . . Nevertheless, while working on an explanatory dictionary of Greek myths, I found Butler's arguments for a Western Sicilian setting and for female authorship irrefutable. I could not rest until I had written this novel. It recreates, from internal and external evidence, the circumstances which induced Nausicaa to write the *Odyssey*, and suggests how, as an honorary Daughter of Homer, she managed to get it included in the official canon. Here is the story of a high-spirited

¹ Seymour-Smith (1982), 471–8; R. P. Graves (1995), 246–58. Another proposed adaptation that went nowhere was the composer Peggy Glanville-Hicks's idea of using the book as the basis of an opera libretto. See the Gibson essay (Chapter 14) for the context of the film version.

² O'Prey (1984), 120.

and religious-minded Sicilian girl who saves her father's throne from usurpation, herself from a distasteful marriage, and her two younger brothers from butchery by boldly making things happen, instead of sitting still and hoping for the best.³

This passage displays many of Graves's signature characteristics, including, especially in the magnificent last sentence, his crisp, energetic prose style. The story of the book's origin is typical of his self-presentation as an author. He often portrayed inspiration for one book seizing him while he was working on another. For example, the idea for *The White Goddess* supposedly gripped him while he was writing another of his more obscure classical novels, *The Golden Fleece*, based on the Argonaut legend.⁴ The sentence about not being able to rest until he had written this book suggests his characteristic manic productivity and may, as well, be a form of magical thinking, given his aspirations for the book and his earlier claim, in an essay entitled 'PS to *Good-bye to All That*', that 'For a book to be popular . . . it should be written in a state of suppressed excitement and preferably against time and with a shortage of money'. In a further comment that bears strikingly on *Homer's Daughter*, he also adds that 'the most painful chapters have to be the jokiest'.⁵

While this introductory note may give the impression that *Homer's Daughter* was the immediate and spontaneous consequence of discovering Butler's theory, Butler had actually been an important figure for Graves from very early on, first encountered during his time at Charterhouse.⁶ *The Way of All Flesh* was a formative influence, which opened up the possibility of exposing the traditional Victorian family as oppressive and hypocritical. The second volume of Siegfried Sassoon's thinly fictionalized autobiography, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, published in 1930, includes a portrait of Graves, under the name of David Cromlech, as unpopular with the other men for his opinionated ranting. He quotes one of those men to the effect that: 'The blighter's never satisfied unless he's turning something upside down. I actually heard him say that that Homer was a woman. Can

³ Graves (1955b), 8-9. Oddly, this introductory note is omitted from the recent Carcanet edition (2001) edited by Neil Powell, from which subsequent quotations from *Homer's Daughter* are taken.

⁴ Seymour (1995), 308-9.

⁵ Graves (1930), 21.

⁶ Seymour (1995), 30-8.

you beat that?'⁷ So Graves had already been championing Butler's theory for many decades before he decided to write *Homer's Daughter*. It makes sense that he would have been immediately attracted to the iconoclastic possibilities of claiming that Homer was a woman, though he also developed further views about women and poetry in the intervening years that would have made Butler's ideas even more congenial.

In *The Authoress of the Odyssey*, which appeared in 1897, Butler argued, as Graves indicates, that the *Odyssey* was written by a Sicilian girl, 'young, headstrong and unmarried' (p. 142), who represented herself in the text as Nausicaa and represented her Sicilian surroundings as the various settings of the *Odyssey's* events. His argument was based on the poem's domestic focus and close attention to the trappings and rituals of peacetime society, which seemed to Butler evidence of a female sensibility. It was also bolstered by on-the-ground investigations of Sicilian geographical features, which were matched to the settings of the poem in the manner of late nineteenth-century archaeology. Butler's thesis was not taken seriously by the scholarly community of his day, or of subsequent times, and there is even some question whether it was taken seriously by Butler himself; some argue that the book was intended as a parody of scholarship rather than a serious contribution.⁸ And yet Butler's hypothesis is one of those theories that gets at something important and serves as a catalyst for the ideas of others, even if it is impossible to credit in the terms in which it is stated. Among students of the *Odyssey* there has been a renewal of attention to Butler in recent decades, although not an embrace of his actual views, as feminist critics have tried to account for the poem's remarkably pronounced and sympathetic attention to women.⁹

At the same time, no current Homeric scholar could accept Butler's thesis at face value, because we now approach Homer through an entirely different model of authorship. Butler treated the *Odyssey* as if it were a modern novel, not unlike *The Way of All Flesh*, in which the individual author's own experience is recast in fictional form;

⁷ Sassoon (1937), 357. Cf. Sassoon's comment that 'At that period, Samuel Butler was the source of much of David's ingenuity at knocking highly-respected names and notions off their perches' (p. 384).

⁸ On the reception of Butler's theory in his lifetime, see Whitmarsh (2002); Beard (2007).

⁹ See Winkler (1990) and, for a survey of other examples, Beard (2007), 331-2.

the Homeric epics are now understood as reworkings of long-standing traditional material transmitted by bards speaking for and to a community. It is therefore not surprising that Butler's impact has been strongest on two twentieth-century novelists who found inspiration for new works of fiction in his vision of the *Odyssey* as itself a kind of novel. One is James Joyce, who, like Graves, was deeply influenced by *The Way of All Flesh* as well as by *The Authoress of the Odyssey*. Butler's conception of the *Odyssey* is fundamental to Joyce's *Ulysses*, a work of covert autobiography in which all of the events of the *Odyssey* have been transposed to a single, circumscribed location corresponding to the author's own home. More particularly, Butler's authoress lies behind Joyce's Nausicaa figure, Gertie McDowell, who constructs an account of her own life along lines inspired by women's novels, and is also behind Joyce's decision to make the final voice in his novel that of a woman, Molly Bloom.¹⁰ The other novelist, of course, is Graves.

Graves's relationship to Butler's theory is much more straightforward and literal than Joyce's; like Butler, he keeps the text of the *Odyssey* itself closely in view. Butler's reconstruction of the *Odyssey's* genesis follows a scenario that Graves found endlessly attractive and stimulating: the revelation that a valued cultural document, most often a text, is in fact a falsification, or cover-up, that does not disclose but rather obscures the truth that lies behind it. It becomes the role of the scholar or the critic or, in an interesting twist, the novelist to expose this fact and to reveal the authentic truth that has been so long overlooked. This was a role that Graves claimed for himself over and over again, and that he welcomed in his admired model Butler, whose exposure of the hidden truth of the *Odyssey's* authorship paralleled his exposure of the hidden truths of Victorian family life, truths obscured in that case not by misattribution of authorship but by a set of manners and conventions.

This occult cast of mind shows up throughout Graves's work.¹¹ In the realm of religion, Graves exposes the works of Paul and others as misrepresentations of the true thought of Jesus; *The Greek Myths* treats all of our myriad sources for Greek mythology as belated distortions, designed to misrepresent an earlier myth of matriarchal

¹⁰ For Butler's influence on *Ulysses*, see Kenner (1956); Müller (2009).

¹¹ On Graves's relationship to occult religious traditions, see Psilopoulos (1999).

power and male sacrifice.¹² (This approach complicates Graves's obsessive citing of sources, as in his defences of the *Claudius* novels, since it gives him licence to treat those sources as purposely false.) In the realm of literary criticism, Graves's and Laura Riding's influential reading of Shakespeare's Sonnet 129 in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* argues that the sonnet as generally read is distorted by later editorial interventions that occlude Shakespeare's intentions: 'By apostrophes and accents and changes of spelling the rhythm and consistency in spelling of the original is sacrificed; and without making it an easier poem, only a less accurate one.'¹³

Such thinking also underlies *I, Claudius*, where it applies to a set of texts that no longer exist, the historical works that the real Claudius is known to have written. *I, Claudius* opens with Claudius explaining that his official autobiography, now in the City archives, is 'a dull book', partly ghost-written by the freedman Polybius, in which 'I told no lies, but neither did I tell the truth in the sense I mean to tell it here' (p. 10).¹⁴ The current book, which tells a more urgent and authentic story, is labelled a 'confidential history' (p. 11) and intended for remote posterity. Like Graves, Claudius is not only the author of the truest histories but also the exposé of false ones and a connoisseur of hidden truths. At the end of chapter 9 we learn that he has identified some supposed correspondence of Cicero as a forgery by Clodius Pulcher. At the very end of the novel he confesses that one of the best things about being emperor will be access to secret archives in which he can find out 'just what happened on this occasion or on that' (p. 396).

Nausicaa, as rescued by Butler from her own self-concealment, provides Graves with another, and a very different, protagonist and narrator who, like Claudius, is also the author of an officially recognized and widely credited work that is actually less true than Graves's novel. By adopting her as his heroine, Graves gains a number of significant advantages, to be explored in the rest of this essay, among them yet another opportunity to exploit the pressure that historical fiction places on the boundary between its two components, history and fiction. In this case, however, the supposed author's official work, the *Odyssey*, is not lost, as the historical works of

¹² Murnaghan (2009).

¹⁴ Graves (2006b).

¹³ Graves and Riding (1927).

Claudius are, but known to us; as a result, it can play a constituent role in the novel's construction.

In the introductory note quoted above, Graves identifies *Homer's Daughter* both as fiction and as non-fiction: he labels it a novel ('I wrote this novel') but also characterizes it as a work of historical reconstruction ('it recreates from internal and external evidence the circumstances . . .'). This doubleness extends to the novel's relationship to the *Odyssey*, than which it is at once more factual, in the sense that it lacks fantasy and corresponds in certain ways to what Graves really believed about Greek history, and more fictional, in that it is clearly a novel of a sort that could never have been written in antiquity. For one thing, *Homer's Daughter* does not, like *I, Claudius*, pretend to be an autobiography, or a story told under particular circumstances, or any other kind of text that would have been produced in antiquity, but simply records the narrator's inner thoughts in the manner of modern fiction. The project of writing a historical novel about a figure who is attested only in a mythological narrative, and one whom nobody but Graves himself and Samuel Butler view as historical, leaves Graves much freer to acknowledge the literariness of his work, and to play with its dual claims as fiction and history—unencumbered by the inhibitions that Andrew Bennett, in his essay in this volume, sees as weighing down the *Claudius* novels and limiting their interest as objects of critical discussion.

The plot of *Homer's Daughter* represents a geographically restricted, down-to-earth version of the *Odyssey*, with many of the events of the Ithacan narrative transposed to Phaeacia, and with Nausicaa in a central rather than a peripheral role. Nausicaa is, as she introduces herself, 'a princess of the Elymans, a mixed race living on and about Eryx, the great bee-haunted mountain', who pride themselves on being 'the remotest nation of the civilized world' (p. 4). She lives with her mother and father and three of her four brothers. The plot gets under way when one of her brothers, Laodamas, disappears after having been nagged by his difficult, superficial wife Ctimene, who wants him to get her an amber necklace. It is widely assumed that Laodamas has gone off on a Rhodian merchant ship, although Nausicaa and her mother both figure out that he has actually been murdered by local rivals. In a nice inversion of the *Odyssey's* Telemachus plot, Nausicaa's father goes off on a journey in search of his lost son, leaving his kingdom in charge of his brother-in-law Mentor.

In the king's absence the local youths become rebellious. They show disrespect towards Mentor and towards Nausicaa's younger brother Clytoneus, who tries to address the problem in an assembly, and they start regularly feasting in the royal palace on the pretext of being Nausicaa's suitors. Seeking an excuse to meet her loyal friend Procne, Nausicaa goes to the shore to do the laundry, where a Cretan stranger Aethon washes ashore. She grants him her protection on condition of obedience, and lodges him with the swineherd Eumaeus. After the suitors kill Mentor, Nausicaa, Aethon, and Clytoneus work together to defeat them through a plot involving an archery contest, ostensibly for Nausicaa's hand. Nausicaa and Aethon, who turns out to be a long-lost relative of her mother, kidnapped as a baby by pirates, marry for strategic reasons as part of the plot, but also fall in love. Nausicaa's father returns when it is all over to regain his throne and approve his daughter's choice of husband.

In addition to the generally Homeric trajectory of the plot, there are many satisfying reworkings of Odyssean details and motifs. Aethon's name derives from the pseudonym adopted by Homer's Odysseus in one of his false tales; the bitchy Ctimene is named for Odysseus's sister, who is mentioned once in the *Odyssey*. There is a scene of foot-washing involving Euryclea, but she washes the feet of the suitor Eurymachus, and what is revealed as a result is that Eurymachus is wearing one of Laodamas' undershirts—and thus that Laodomas was murdered and Eurymachus was involved. Graves takes the opportunity to correct some of what might be considered the *Odyssey's* flaws. For example, Nausicaa and her allies make the distinctions among her more and less culpable suitors that Odysseus refuses to make among Penelope's; once the two ringleaders have been killed they offer to let the rest survive if they will only leave the house, a deal that the suitors stupidly reject.

The tone of the narrative is light, high-spirited, and satirical. For example, when Aethon addresses Nausicaa with the same comparison to a palm tree with which Homer's Odysseus ingratiates himself to Homer's Nausicaa, she gives a sceptical reply:

'You have visited Delos then?' I asked, much amused, 'Or is this a second-hand compliment borrowed from one of the Sons of Homer? No one ever compared me to a young palm tree; probably because I am neither tall nor slim, and my hair, though long, is by no means my best feature'. (p. 56)

Portraying Nausicaa as practical, unsentimental, and sharp-tongued, Graves makes her an excellent medium for the broader rhetorical project of cutting the *Odyssey* down to size. He makes extensive use of the common satiric procedure of juxtaposing the classically elevated with the grubby details of real life. In Graves's version, Nausicaa's laundry really is dirty; she tells her Uncle Mentor, 'You have gone around in the same tunic this last month—I recognize the wine stain on the hem' (p. 47). And getting it clean really is hard work: 'I was soon jumping on the sheets in the trough, or banging at them with a cudgel' (p. 51).

The deflating jokiness of Graves's approach does not prevent him from raising a basic issue about historical fiction that also pertains to all historical writing and historical inquiry. In this respect, the *Vera Historia* of the second-century AD Greek satirist Lucian provides a useful parallel. The *Vera Historia* or *True History* is also a high-spirited, satirical work cast in the form of a fictional autobiography, and it is also notably dependent on the *Odyssey*. The narrator relays an elaborate and fantastic tale of adventure, including one of the earliest voyages to the moon, that on his own cheerful admission is entirely fabricated. Yet Lucian repeatedly brandishes the same truth-claims that straightforward historians do, making use of such authenticating gestures as the provision of exact numbers of troops or the reporting of first-hand eyewitness information.¹⁵ Lucian's aggressive use of these stylistic features raises questions about what a historian's credibility for his audience is actually based on.

If Lucian's text raises questions about how writers construct a plausible account of the real, Graves's text, in a similarly satiric vein, raises questions about how writers construct a plausible account of the past. When characters in historical fiction speak in ways that seem idiomatic to modern readers and dwell on the mundane details of life as modern readers recognize them, are they being more or less authentic? Is a Nausicaa who speaks in the accents of a twentieth-century girl rather than Homeric hexameters anachronistic or timelessly human? This is an issue that haunts all historical writing, and especially historical fiction, in which invention and historical reconstruction are supposed to converge, as Graves claims in his prefatory note that they do in *Homer's Daughter*.

¹⁵ Greenwood (2006), 109–29.

Graves acknowledges the perennial nature of this issue in *I, Claudius* by retrojecting it into an ancient Roman setting. In the much-discussed ninth chapter of the novel, Claudius is sitting in a library quietly reading Asinius Pollio's *History of the Civil Wars* when in come Livy and Pollio himself, who draw him into a debate about how to write history that, as Duncan Kennedy and Ellen O'Gorman show in their essay for this volume, is also a proleptic debate about how to write historical fiction. Pollio asks Claudius to affirm that Livy's work is trashier than his:

I smiled. 'Well, at least it is easier to read.'

'Easier, eh? How's that?'

'He makes the people of Ancient Rome behave and talk as if they were alive now.'

Pollio was delighted. 'He has you there, Livy, on your weakest spot. You credit the Romans of seven centuries ago with impossibly modern motives and habits and speeches. Yes, it is readable, all right, but it is not history.' (p. 103)

Here a strong distinction is made between real history and what Livy writes, which is readable, accessible, anachronistic, and, as a subsequent discussion of the Lars Porsena episode reveals, fictional. Livy's works would then seem to represent a version of historical fiction not very different from Graves's own.

But the picture becomes more complicated, as Pollio goes on to charge Livy with drawing too much on the non-historical genres of poetry and oratory. Livy asks if Pollio means that he should not write history with an epic theme because that is the prerogative of poetry, and he should not 'put worthy eve-of-battle speeches' in the mouths of his generals because that is the prerogative of oratory. Pollio replies that 'an epic theme' distorts history, which is 'the true record of what people did, how they lived and died, what they did and said', and that Livy's generals' speeches are 'admirable as oratory' but not based on any evidence and also 'inappropriate':

'I have heard more eve-of-battle speeches than most men and though the generals that made them, Caesar and Antony especially, were remarkably fine platform orators, they were all too good soldiers to try any platform business on the troops. They *spoke* to them in a conversational way, they did not orate.' (p. 104)

There then follows a description of Caesar's speech before the Battle of Pharsalus, which involved chomping on a piece of bread and waving around a radish, while making earthy jokes about how

much chaster Pompey was than himself and telling off-colour anecdotes, illustrated with help of the radish:

'Not a word about the coming battles except at the close: "Poor old Pompey! Up against Julius Caesar and his men! What a chance he has!"'

'You didn't put any of this in your history,' said Livy.

'Not in the public editions,' said Pollio, 'I'm not a fool. Still, if you like to borrow the private *Supplement* which I have just finished writing, you'll find it there.' (p. 105)

If history like Pollio's, characterized by Claudius as pedantic and unadorned, is truer than Livy's, both Livy's rhetorically elaborated work and Pollio's unadorned work are less true than yet another kind of account, which reproduces the idiom of actual conversation, as observed through first-hand experiences much like the ones that Graves himself had in the trenches of the First World War. It turns out there is a more authentic *Supplement* that stands to Pollio's—now lost—official *History of the Civil Wars* in the same relation that *I, Claudius* does to Claudius's—now lost—official *Autobiography* and in the same relation that *Homer's Daughter* does to the—now still extant—*Odyssey*. All of these Graves-generated fictions are truer than their historically documented substitutes because they capture the 'conversational' tone of real speech, which can only be done by making the people portrayed 'behave and talk as if they were alive now' (p. 103). But one of them, Pollio's *Supplement*, is presented as a lost ancient text rather than a modern novel; in this way Graves slyly raises the question of whether a modern novel might not be more authentic than our surviving ancient sources.

With his tendency to mythic thinking and his scepticism towards almost any document, Graves clearly inclines to the view that a modern reconstruction really could represent past experience better than an ancient source. At the same time, by exploiting the incongruity between ancient original and modern retelling for comic effect, he also acknowledges implicitly the gap between ancient and modern experience. When Claudius praises Livy for making people 'behave and talk as if they were alive now', the episode is provocative in part because the ways that people behave and talk in first-century Rome and twentieth-century England or America are so different. It remains open to question whether, as Pollio suggests with his evocation of real soldiers' talk, that difference is simply a matter of rhetoric, and whether the fact that something rings true to a contemporary

reader is really proof of authenticity. In these novels, Graves addresses casually and humorously issues about the claims of historical fiction and the relationship of the epic and the novel that have been taken up much more earnestly and directly by literary theorists, including such twentieth-century heavyweights as Lukács and Bakhtin.

In his comments about *Homer's Daughter* at the time it was being written, Graves stresses the contemporary character of his story and goes out of his way to portray its most modern-seeming elements as the most authentic. In his correspondence with Selwyn Jepson, Graves gives several markedly modern analogues for his emancipated heroine Nausicaa:

But Nausicaa was a tight little body. She would have made a very good shore-officer in the WRNS.¹⁶

I imagine Professor Tush of Columbia and Professor Bush of Harvard are bellyaching about Homeric scholarship. But I have taken expert advice and there is nothing in the world *against* my reconstruction; and every nice Vassar girl will feel flattered that she could have written the *Odyssey* herself.¹⁷

In one such passage, Graves not only identifies Nausicaa with Eve Gill, the girl detective in Jepson's own novels, but also identifies those features in the *Odyssey* that resemble a modern novel as the most essential:

The *Odyssey* originally consisted of a straightforward early Homeric saga about the return of Odysseus from Troy, only to find that his wife has been unfaithful—to which (after the first eighty lines) has been added a fairy-tale, unconnected with it, about a hero called Ulysses who escaped various kinds of ritual death. But when these two separate elements have been removed, there remains, as Samuel Butler first pointed out, a substantial mass of realistic modern novel-writing which reflects a domestic and political crisis in a Sicilian court about the year 730 BC. I have worked this background story out and it makes a very exciting drama full of suspense: centered around the Princess Nausicaa (a sort of Ionian Eve Gill) of whom such a charming portrait is given in Book VI of the *Odyssey*.¹⁸

Graves here makes it explicit that for him, as for Butler, there is no difference between the *Odyssey* properly understood and a modern novel. In *Homer's Daughter*, as he puts the novelistic 'background

¹⁶ O'Prey (1984), 125.

¹⁷ O'Prey (1984), 127.

¹⁸ O'Prey (1984), 119.

story' into the foreground, he neatly distinguishes and incorporates the 'separate elements' in other genres that have been grafted onto that story to form the *Odyssey*, turning them into discrete embedded narratives, known to Nausicaa but not her actual experiences. As Nausicaa walks through the countryside to Eumaeus's hut with her Uncle Mentor, she gets him to tell her the fairy-tale of Ulysses once again. The 'Return of Odysseus' is sung to the suitors by the bard Phemius; in that saga, Penelope is indeed unfaithful, a consequence of the fact that it is Aphrodite, not Poseidon, who figures as Odysseus's divine opponent.

Graves's willingness to take Butler's thesis seriously gives him an opportunity denied to other historical novelists of antiquity; he can tell the story of a significant historical figure who is also a girl. It is not easy to write a novel about an ancient girl that can claim historical accuracy in which the heroine does anything of public importance. In her reflections on the composition of *Memoirs of Hadrian*, Marguerite Yourcenar comments that she could not have chosen a female subject for that book. 'Another thing virtually impossible, to take a feminine character as a central figure, to make Plotina, for example, rather than Hadrian, the axis of my narrative. Women's lives are much too limited, or else too secret.'¹⁹ During the time that Graves was writing, authors of historical fiction for girl audiences had to perform a balancing act in order to produce narratives set in antiquity that feature both a historically accurate setting and an active, appealing girl protagonist. The strategies they devised include the use of settings on the margins of the classical world, where strict patriarchal practices can be envisioned as somewhat relaxed; the construction of plots in which girls are required to act because of the failures of their brothers; the self-consciously anachronistic introduction of romantic love leading to marriage; and scenes of recognition by the protagonist's father, in which he acknowledges the necessity and value of her unusually enterprising actions.²⁰

In *Homer's Daughter* Graves adopts all of these strategies, in effect confirming the constraints that limit writers in any genre who wish to locate active, self-determining girls within the classical world. At the same time, fortified by his belief in the historicity of Nausicaa and by

¹⁹ Yourcenar (1990), 327.

²⁰ These are studied in relation to the works of an American novelist of the 1920s and 1930s, Caroline Dale Snedeker, in Murnaghan and Roberts (unpublished paper).

his view of patriarchal society as secondary and impermanent, he gives these strategies much less weight. Nausicaa's Sicilian home is far from the power-centres of the Greek world and the Elymans pride themselves on their remoteness, and this allows for a freer vision of female agency than would a setting like Mycenae or Sparta. In the end, however, by inserting her own poem about her experiences into the Homeric canon, Nausicaa places herself at the very centre of Greek culture. Like other historical novelists, Graves tells the story of a girl who takes over the action in part because of the absence or dereliction of her brothers, of which she has three, and he does invent a violent plot twist to remove one of those brothers, along with Nausicaa's father, from the scene. But Nausicaa's other two brothers do not require such drastic banishment. One is simply too young to be involved, and the other, Clytoneus, is Nausicaa's active, if clearly subordinate, collaborator throughout as she defeats the rebels who are pretending to be her suitors.

In his treatment of Nausicaa's other collaborator, Aethon, Graves allows the romantic plot that is notably curtailed in the *Odyssey* to develop: Aethon and Nausicaa fall in love and marry. But he also mutes this plot-line, playing down the idea that his heroine is motivated by love. The marriage originates as a stratagem for keeping her supposed suitors at bay, and Nausicaa is at pains to conceal her feelings for Aethon, even though he confesses to love at first sight, and even on their wedding night: '... never had I realized how overpoweringly fierce is the Goddess Aphrodite... I must not let Aethon know that I loved him more than the whole world, more than myself, more than anything in existence but the Goddess Athene, whom I invoked silently for strength' (p. 136).

Finally, the novel does include Nausicaa's recognition and acceptance by her father, who returns after his kingdom has been saved to find that his previously reluctant daughter has acquired a husband. 'My father's greeting to me was brief and generous: "Daughter, you did well to delay your choice, having found a husband so acceptable to me"' (p. 154). But this paternal blessing is relatively insignificant and even somewhat absurd, given her father's absence from all the crucial action. A far more important achievement is Nausicaa's self-creation as 'Homer's daughter', author of a poem that enters the Homeric canon and is sung throughout the Greek world.

Nausicaa's gender and her exceptional level of initiative and scope for action set her apart from many of Graves's other depictions both

of historical agents and of poets, figures whom he typically portrays as struggling with inhibition, abjection, and compulsion. The off-hand, jokey tone of the novel should not obscure the way in which it addresses by inversion some of Graves's most persistent and fraught concerns. Here it is well to recall Graves's injunction, quoted above, that in a popular work the most painful chapters have to be the jokiest. The energetic heroine who makes things happen instead of sitting still and hoping for the best, and who effortlessly acquires protective colouring through her gender, is an antitype of the passive and genuinely handicapped Claudius. As the author of one of the greatest and most foundational works in the poetic tradition, Nausicaa is also an antitype of the tortured male poet as represented by Graves himself and as described by him in a number of works, notably *The White Goddess*. She experiences her poetic vocation as an untaxing, pragmatic, and down-to-earth matter, very different from the male poet's compulsive servitude to an imperious Muse.

Nausicaa becomes a poet through a calculation. Finding herself preoccupied with death as a moody teenager, she figures out that only poetry is really immortal and takes the decision 'of securing for myself a posthumous life under the mantle of Homer' (p. 4). The moment when she is first visited by the Muses, which she labels 'an important crisis in my life, perhaps the most important' (p. 42), is easy and straightforward. Visiting the family linen factory, she finds the women who work there being told a story, the story of the Cyclops, by an old woman Gorgo. The manageress of the factory, Eurymedusa, laments that 'Homer has no daughters as well as sons', and Nausicaa prays to the Muses: 'enter into the heart of your servant Nausicaa, and teach her to compose skillful hexameter verses!' And then:

Believe it, or believe it not, my unusual prayer was at once answered! For I heard myself saying:

*'Eurymedusa, the day must dawn when the songs of a woman,
Sound to the well-strung lyre, and are praised by the Delian judges.'* (p. 42)

The one other episode in which Nausicaa is visited by the Muse occurs when she is staying in Eumaeus' hut, where she suffers from the presence of fleas:

I could not sleep a wink but sat on a stool by the fire, scratching and picking the black torments off my white body. Strangely enough, my head was flooded with beautiful, smooth-flowing hexameter verses . . .

'To be a poet is easy,' I thought, 'I could compose a whole fytte in a single night, I believe.' However, I stopped after sixty lines, and memorized them; had I attempted more, I should probably have forgotten all . . . Eumaeus, when I told him later about my experience, gave the credit to the goddess Cerdo, who inspires poetry and oracular utterances, as well as protecting swineherds; but I had the fleas to thank for keeping me awake. (p. 104)

In these passages Graves represents effortless poetic composition by making something look easy that is actually very hard: the production of graceful, unforced English hexameters. Not only does this occur in the lines of poetry that Nausicaa quotes, but as she recalls her experience of spontaneous composition her words fall naturally into hexameters: 'I could |not sleep a |wink but |sat on a |stool by the |fire.'²¹ This cheerful inspiration by flea-bite is a far cry from the male poet's subjection to the Muse of *The White Goddess*, which calls forth very different insect imagery, 'the Mother of all living, the ancient power of fright and lust—the female spider or queen-bee whose embrace is death', and leads to the formation of true poetry 'in the poet's mind, during a trance-like state of suspension of his normal habits of thought by the supra-logical reconciliation of conflicting emotional ideas'.

Nausicaa's ready production of sixty finished verses is markedly different from Graves's own mode of composing poetry, which involved extensive revisions through multiple drafts, linked in *Good-bye to All That* to his headmaster's parting advice: 'remember that your best friend is the waste-paper basket.'²² In fact, Nausicaa's poetry-making sounds a lot more like Graves's experience writing *Homer's Daughter*. Both Nausicaa's poetry, which is simultaneously spontaneous and matter-of-fact, and Graves's novel, which is a spontaneously composed prose text based on that poetry, blur the distinctions between prose and poetry that Graves set out in his *On English Poetry*, discussed in this volume by Andrew Bennett.

As a poet, Nausicaa escapes the demands that Graves's Muse imposes on her male worshippers. As a strong female figure, she herself displays very little of the White Goddess' lustfulness or sexual power, although there is perhaps a hint of that allure in the phrase—which has the ring of an authorial intrusion—'white body' in her

²¹ My thanks to James Ker for pointing this out to me.

²² Graves (1957a), 58.

report of herself 'picking the black torments off my white body'. Nausicaa is generally resistant to Eros. Her equally unsentimental mother warns her that a woman is better off if she is not passionately attached to her husband, because she is then able to manage him better. When Nausicaa does fall in love she calmly recognizes the fact through careful reasoning: 'Cautiously examining myself, I decided that I must have well and truly fallen in love, else why should I place such confidence in Aethon's strength and courage?' (p. 89). As noted already, on her wedding night she conceals the depth of her feeling from Aethon, a sign of her self-control as well as a hint of the White Goddess' cruel withholding.

There is one moment in *Homer's Daughter* when Nausicaa becomes a goddess to Aethon, but that is not an occasion of wilful imperiousness, but rather one on which she displays nobler female virtues of good sense, justice, and respect for religion. During the final battle she intervenes to prevent the slaughter of Phemius, which would be unmerited and would bring a curse on the family.

Picking myself up, I sprang in front of Phemius, and spread my arms wide. Aethon came bounding towards us, drunk with blood lust. 'Aethon, beware!' This time my scream dispelled his trance. He flung away sword and shield, fell at my feet, and worshipped me as though I was a goddess; while the other three methodically continued their horrid task of hunting down fugitives and cutting the throats of the wounded. (p. 148)

Despite its billing as a love story, *Homer's Daughter* purges the *Odyssey* of its erotic character. Graves writes out of the poem not only the seductive goddesses Calypso and Circe, but the central characters, Odysseus and Penelope, whose stories are motivated by their sexual love for one another. He places at the centre of his version a figure who in Homer's narrative pointedly avoids or escapes sexual experience. Homer situates Nausicaa in a scenario that could be expected to lead to seduction or rape, a meeting with a stranger at the wild seashore, but does not allow it to develop in that direction, and he portrays Nausicca as carefully vigilant of her reputation.

Graves thematizes Nausicaa's Homeric function of deflecting sexual content when he portrays Nausicaa herself as cleaning up the *Odyssey*. Nausicaa's *Odyssey*, which we know as Homer's, is supposedly a revision of that version sung by Phemius in which Penelope has sex with all the suitors and Odysseus' main antagonist is not Poseidon but Aphrodite:

While altering the saga of *Odysseus' Return* to make my Elyman suitors serve as Penelope's lovers, I had to protect myself against scandal. What if someone recognized the story and supposed that I, Nausicaa the irreproachable, had played the promiscuous harlot in my father's absence? So, according to my poem, Penelope must have remained faithful to Odysseus throughout those twenty years. And because this change meant that Aphrodite had failed to take her traditional revenge, I must make Poseidon, not her, the enemy who delayed him on his homeward voyage after the Fall of Troy. (p. 157)

In other words, Graves invents two new versions of the *Odyssey*, one ('the saga of *Odysseus' Return*') that is darker and has more sex in it than the canonical one, and one (*Homer's Daughter* itself) that is sunnier and has less sex. Both are presented as prior to, and thus more authentic than, the *Odyssey* that we actually have, but in *Homer's Daughter* the chaster alternative occupies the foreground, while the more erotic version is cast into shadow.

By contrast, an eroticized version of the *Odyssey* is powerfully foregrounded in another work of Graves's, significantly a poem rather than a work of prose, 'Ulysses', written in 1933:

To the much-tossed Ulysses, never done
 With woman whether gowned as wife or whore,
 Penelope and Circe seemed as one:
 She like a whore made his lewd fancies run,
 And wifely she a hero to him bore.
 Their counter-changings terrified his way:
 They were the clashing rocks, Symplegades,
 Scylla and Charybdis too were they;
 Now angry storms frosting the sea with spray
 And now the lotus island's drunken ease.
 They multiplied into the Sirens' throng,
 Forewarned by fear of whom he stood bound fast
 Hand and foot helpless to the vessel's mast,
 Yet would not stop his ears: daring their song
 He groaned and sweated till that shore was past.
 One, two and many: flesh had made him blind,
 Flesh had one pleasure only in the act,
 Flesh set one purpose only in the mind—
 Triumph of flesh and afterwards to find
 Still those same terrors wherewith flesh was racked.

His wiles were witty and his fame far known,
 Every king's daughter sought him for her own,
 Yet he was nothing to be won or lost.
 All lands to him were Ithaca: love-tossed
 He loathed the fraud, yet would not bed alone.²³

In 'Ulysses', Odysseus, evoked as the 'much-tossed Ulysses', is at the centre of an entirely sexualized version of the *Odyssey*. Every adventure becomes the conquest of a woman. Odysseus' famous mind and will are bent only on the satisfaction of lust, which is portrayed as demeaning and unfulfilling. Unlike Homer's *Odyssey*, which involves the hero's progress from purely physical relations with Circe and Calypso to the deeper pleasures of married love with Penelope, Graves's 'Ulysses' presents Odysseus' erotic encounters as repetitive and indistinguishable ('Penelope and Circe seemed as one'), compulsive re-enactments of a single mythic moment. As a high-spirited, cheerful, and expansive prose narrative, *Homer's Daughter*, with its forward-moving plot and its fresh, active, self-possessed heroine, is the inverse—and the antidote—to the earlier poem, in which the beleaguered hero appears as the passive victim of multiple powerful women, trapped in the endless sexual pursuit that they inspire.

In a passage from *Good-bye to All That* Graves locates the dichotomy, which is also a symbiosis, between the mythic and the satiric at the very beginning of his career as a poet. Writing about Wales, a place that he and his siblings embraced as their own without studying its history, he relates that 'we came to know Wales . . . as a place with a history too old for local legends; while walking there we made up our own . . . above Harlech I found a personal peace independent of history or geography. The first poem I wrote as myself concerned those hills. (The first poem I wrote as a Graves was a neat translation of one of Catullus' satires).'²⁴ Note here Graves's nice use of punctuation, as he consigns his official satiric paragon to parentheses.

But as many of Graves's poems and other works, such as *The White Goddess*, testify, his personal relationship to myth, as he came to know it as instantiated by the goddess, was not peaceful. The parenthetical alternative is not so easily bracketed or disowned, for it points ahead to the kind of corrective to, and relief from, that stormier realm that he was moved, even compelled, to construct with

²³ Graves (1975), 56.

²⁴ Graves (1957a), 34.

Homer's Daughter. The 'neat' translation suggests the future author-ess as a 'tight little body' whose WRNS uniform covers but does not entirely efface the underlying 'white body' of the goddess. Some of Catullus's poems certainly qualify as satires, but satire is not the genre that he is usually associated with, being more readily thought of as a love poet giving voice to the male lover's subjection to a maddening, capricious woman and the torment of mingled love and hate. Graves's 'neat translation' of Catullus seems to carry with it with a distinctive generic choice, a choice like that which underlies *Homer's Daughter*, the neat satire into which Graves translated Homer's *Odyssey*.

Robert Graves and the Classical Tradition

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