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## Myths of the Greeks: The Origins of Mythology in the Works of Edith Hamilton and Robert Graves

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## Myths of the Greeks: The Origins of Mythology in the Works of Edith Hamilton and Robert Graves

### Abstract

This paper concerns two popular myth collections that date from the mid-twentieth century: Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, first published in 1940, and Robert Graves' *The Greek Myths*, first published in 1955. The dates of these collections mean that they are close enough to us that they are still considered current: both are still widely read, and are both still in print, in an interesting variety of editions. But they are also far enough away from us that we can identify with some precision the ways in which they are shaped by the preoccupations of their period. In particular, both now reveal themselves as over-reactions, although in opposite directions, to the early twentieth century rediscovery of classical culture, especially Greek culture, as primitive, as comparable to the traditional cultures studied by anthropologists.

### Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Classics

MYTHS OF THE GREEKS: THE ORIGINS OF MYTHOLOGY  
IN THE WORKS OF EDITH HAMILTON AND ROBERT GRAVES

This paper concerns two popular myth collections that date from the mid-twentieth century: Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, first published in 1940, and Robert Graves' *The Greek Myths*, first published in 1955. The dates of these collections mean that they are close enough to us that they are still considered current: both are still widely read, and are both are still in print, in an interesting variety of editions. But they are also far enough away from us that we can identify with some precision the ways in which they are shaped by the preoccupations of their period. In particular, both now reveal themselves as over-reactions, although in opposite directions, to the early twentieth century rediscovery of classical culture, especially Greek culture, as primitive, as comparable to the traditional cultures studied by anthropologists.

Neither of these collections has been taken seriously by professional classicists. The prevailing attitudes within the profession are briskly represented in a 1985 article in the *Yale Review* by Victor Bers, designed to inform non-specialists about resources for studying antiquity. Bers lumps Hamilton and Graves together with Bulfinch as "three books, all available second hand, but in perfect condition on account of never having been opened after presentation as gifts, [that] deserve a brief *dis*recommendation." Hamilton, along with Bullfinch, is dis-recommended for her omission of "the naughty bits of mythology that are the gist of modern scholarship," Graves for a misleading appearance of scholarship that masks his mad obsession with the "Great White Goddess." "Luckily," Bers adds, "this book is very difficult to use as a reference (the index is execrable), and this limits the potential damage of Graves' ludicrous etymologies and general unreliability."<sup>98</sup>

Bers' assumption that no one actually reads these books, unless they are duped into thinking that Graves' collection is really scholarly, is contradicted by the fact that both are still being regularly bought first hand, in quantities that suggest that their purchasers are not just aunts and uncles who have run out of better gift ideas. Both have been continuously in print in a variety of editions. Hamilton is still widely read in schools and some colleges as a basic introduction to classical mythology. One sign of this is the availability of a volume of "Spark Notes" on *Mythology*, somewhat surprising given the already straightforward and user-friendly character of Hamilton's text. In addition to the original two-volume Penguin edition, Graves' text has appeared in a number of other versions. While the format of the original cannot be called user-friendly, the contents have been repackaged in more accessible forms. There is a 1981 condensed version, wholly narrative in form, without Graves' elaborate footnotes and commentary, but accompanied by many photographic illustrations. There is an audio tape of Volume I, which actually

<sup>98</sup> Bers 1987:373. On reviews of *The Greek Myths*, see Graves 2001:viii-ix, xx-xxii, 791.

includes Graves' extensive notes and explanations. There are also some more specialized editions reflecting an interest in Graves himself as a literary figure: an illustrated limited edition published by the Folio Society in 1996 with an appreciative introduction by Kenneth McLeish, and a 2001 edition published in a series with other works of Graves and with an introduction by an expert on early twentieth century literature.

The staying power of these books is partly due to an imputed timelessness that is transferred to them from their subject matter. If the myths of the Greeks are immortal, so must be these classic accounts of them, and it is interesting to consider the marketing strategy that led to Hamilton's book acquiring at some point the subtitle: *Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*. But it is also clear that, despite (or perhaps because of) the deficits that make scholars queasy, both works retain a capacity to speak to contemporary readers that we should take note of. A look at some of the reviews submitted to the Amazon.com website suggests that in both cases it is primarily the author's evident passion for mythology and intense stake in its meaning that keeps readers hooked.

Both of these works were commissioned. Hamilton was approached in 1939 by an editor at Little, Brown, who had decided that Bulfinch was dated and should be replaced.<sup>99</sup> Graves was asked in 1951 by E.V. Rieu to provide a reference work that would be a companion to the new Penguin Classics series, of which Rieu's own 1946 translation of the *Odyssey* had been the inaugural volume.<sup>100</sup> But, in responding to these requests, both were taking on material in which they had a strong personal interest. As I have suggested already, that interest was connected to the nature of the Greeks, and especially their degree of primitivism, the extent to which they could be identified with the inhabitants of prehistory and/or the far-flung subjects of modern anthropology. The identity of the Greeks was for both Hamilton and Graves an urgent and personal matter, since both identified themselves and their own culture strongly with the Greeks.

The positions of the two on the nature of the Greeks are diametrically opposed. Hamilton repudiates, while Graves embraces, a vision of the Greeks as primitive. But in promoting their opposed views, both are similarly prone to forms of myth-making of their own, even in the context of what is ostensibly a utilitarian handbook of mythology, and the works of both are marked by an interesting tension between that myth-making and the author's unmistakable erudition. Both Hamilton and Graves are alert to the challenge that faces anyone who produces a summary or compendium of mythology: the fact that mythology is not a unified body of stories, but a huge array of various and often contradictory narratives produced for multiple purposes over a long period of time. This is a feature of mythology that bothers modern mythographers more than ancient ones, but to which it is hard for any to do justice. Shaped by their own academic training, both Hamilton and Graves make it clear that they

<sup>99</sup> Reid 1967:81–82.

<sup>100</sup> On the inception and development of *The Greek Myths*, see Graves 2001:x–xiii.

wish to honor the variety and chronological range of their sources. But this wish is, in each case, overridden by an even stronger impulse to deal with the question of Greek identity by identifying and privileging one historical era in which the Greeks were most themselves. The stories generated in that era then take on an authority that shapes and colors, in each case, the entire presentation of mythology.

Hamilton, as I have said, was convinced that the Greeks had nothing in common with primitive people. This is claimed in her "Introduction," where she evokes and dismisses the notion that mythology takes us back to an earlier time of greater closeness between man and nature. That, she says, is a "romantic bubble," then goes on to add, in a passage which well illustrates the energy of her writing style:

Nothing is clearer than the fact that primitive man, whether in New Guinea today or eons ago in the prehistoric wilderness, is not and never has been a creature who peoples his world with bright fancies and lovely visions. Horrors lurked in the primitive forest, not nymphs and naiads. Terror lived there, with its close attendant, Magic, and its most common defense, Human Sacrifice. Mankind's chief hope of escaping the wrath of whatever divinities were then abroad lay in some magical rite, senseless but powerful, or in some offering made at the cost of pain and grief.

And then, in a new paragraph: "This dark picture is worlds apart from the stories of classical mythology."<sup>101</sup> This sentence is especially striking, both for its breathtaking, sweeping, and willfully inaccurate view of classical mythology, and for the desire voiced in the expression "worlds apart" to cordon the Greeks off from their own prehistory. Hamilton has, of course, to admit that the Greeks had a prehistory, but she maintains that their mythology has almost nothing to do with it.

Of course they too once lived a savage life, ugly and brutal. But what the myths show is how high they had risen above the ancient filth and fierceness by the time we have any knowledge of them. Only a few traces of that time are to be found in the stories.

We do not know when these stories were first told in their present shape; but whenever it was, primitive life had been left far behind.<sup>102</sup>

For Hamilton, nothing we know about the Greeks pertains to their primitive past, which might as well, therefore, never have happened. And so she can explain that when people speak of "the Greek miracle," what they are trying to express is "the new birth of the world with the

<sup>101</sup> Hamilton 1940:4.

<sup>102</sup> Hamilton 1940:7.

awakening of Greece....[I]n the earliest Greek poets a new point of view dawned, never dreamed of in the world before them, but never to leave the world after them. With the coming forward of Greece, mankind became the center of the universe, the most important thing in it."<sup>103</sup> The most significant result of this for Hamilton was freedom from terror, as the Greeks imagined gods in their own image, who were "normal and natural," "friendly," and "companionable"<sup>104</sup>—but also beautiful. And, she claims, "nothing humanly beautiful is really terrifying."<sup>105</sup>

Although Hamilton puts all of known Greek culture on the same side of an unfathomable divide, it is also the case that she sees some Greeks and Romans of the historical period as truer witnesses to Greek experience than others. This emerges when she discusses her use of ancient sources. In a "Foreward," she makes a point of the variety and temporal range of her sources as a problem she has had to face and has determined not to misrepresent, promising "to keep distinct for the reader the very different writers from whom our knowledge of the myths comes."<sup>106</sup> She fulfills this promise largely through italicized headnotes that identify the sources of the stories she goes on to paraphrase, often in remarkably close detail, but always in her own distinctive and consistent style.

Furthermore, those very different writers are not, as it turns out, equal in her eyes. Rather they represent a historical progression from Hesiod, who is "a notably simple writer and devout...naive, even childish, sometimes crude, always full of piety," to Ovid, who is "subtle, polished, artificial, self-conscious, and the complete skeptic."<sup>107</sup> She is clearly happiest with the Greek poets of the classical period, especially Pindar and the tragedians, who represent the ideal mid-point in this trajectory, combining the refinement Hesiod had not yet attained with the belief that Ovid had lost. Any Greek poet is better than Ovid, whom she avoids as much as she can even though he is admittedly an incomparable source. "Undoubtedly he was a good poet and a good storyteller and able to appreciate the myths enough to realize what excellent material they offered him; but he was really farther away from them in his point of view than we are today. They were sheer nonsense to him."<sup>108</sup> Later she concludes, "The best guides to a knowledge of Greek mythology are the Greek writers, who believed in what they wrote."<sup>109</sup>

Belief, it turns out, is somehow essential to the experience of Greek mythology, and it is also the quality in Hamilton's imagined audience that somehow makes "us" closer to the point of the view of classical mythology than Ovid. The Greeks of the classical period gain their special authority from their assimilation to Hamilton herself with her strong Christian, and specifically Protestant, faith. The Protestant basis of Ham-

<sup>103</sup> Hamilton 1940:7.

<sup>104</sup> Hamilton 1940:9.

<sup>105</sup> Hamilton 1940:11.

<sup>106</sup> Hamilton 1940:viii.

<sup>107</sup> Hamilton 1940:viii.

<sup>108</sup> Hamilton 1940:15.

<sup>109</sup> Hamilton 1940:18.

ilton's admiration for reassuring, pragmatic Greek humanism is especially clear in *The Greek Way*, the study of Greek culture she published in 1930. There Greece is contrasted with the East, represented by Egypt, where powerful priests presided over a religion that focused unduly on the world beyond and stifled individual thought. Hamilton's own myth of the Greeks situates them in the fifth century and makes them the original model of a specific spiritual state, which corresponds to the best of modern experience. Her location of the true Greeks in that one period is tellingly reflected in the title of the book she wrote about Greek culture in the fourth century: *The Echo of Greece*.

Turning to Graves, we find virtually everything I have noted in Hamilton inverted. Graves relished the connections to be drawn between the Greeks and primitive peoples. He was an admirer of Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, and happily drew on any available cross-cultural example to support his vision of the Greeks. In the "Introduction" to *The Greek Myths* Graves embraces anthropology, asserting that "the historical and anthropological approach is the only reasonable one."<sup>110</sup> It is significant that he here links anthropology to history. In his view, cross-cultural parallels do not testify to fundamental features of the human mind, and he explicitly rejects such a conclusion in the form of a Jungian approach. "... the theory that Chimaera, Sphinx, Gorgon, Centaurs, Satyrs, and the like are blind uprushes of the Jungian collective unconscious, to which no precise meaning had ever, or could ever have been, attached, is demonstrably unsound."<sup>111</sup> And, in fact, Hamilton, with her vision of spontaneous outbreaks of a certain spirit, is closer to a Jungian view than Graves.

For Graves, parallels from other cultures help to support the vision of Greek history to which he was dedicated and which he champions in his book, *The White Goddess*: the view associated with Bachofen and others that Greek pre-history was matriarchal and characterized by worship of the Great Goddess, a powerful, immutable female force, identified with the moon and the three stages of female experience: maiden, nymph (nubile woman), and crone, possessed of many lovers—of whom one was sacrificed each year. This for Graves was the definitive period of Greek culture, to which our surviving myths all point. The fact that our myths actually stem from the historical period does not mean for him, as it does for Hamilton, that they have nothing to do with prehistory. Rather, they are the products of and witnesses to the historical shift by which the goddess-worshipping culture was replaced by patriarchy: "when the Dorians arrived, towards the close of the second millennium, patrilineal succession became the rule" and—Graves further declares—"Patrilineal descent, succession, and inheritance discourage further myth-making."<sup>112</sup> The accounts of mythology that we have are, then, products of the replacement of matriarchy by patriarchy: they either record the progress of that replacement or uphold its aims through misrepresentation,

<sup>110</sup> Graves 1960:1.20.

<sup>111</sup> Graves 1960:1.20.

<sup>112</sup> Graves 1960:1.19–20.

distorting the matriarchal system that gave rise to those myths in their original forms. Graves coins a term for this misrepresentation, “iconotropy,” which he defines as “deliberate misinterpretation” of ritual icons. Ritual icons are what Graves thought true myths were: “the reduction to narrative shorthand of ritual mime performed on public festivals.”<sup>113</sup> Most surviving myths are misrepresentations of ritual icons “adopted in ancient Greece as a means of confirming the Olympian religious myths at the expense of the Minoan ones which they superseded.”<sup>114</sup>

Far from honoring, as Hamilton did, classical Greek sources, such as the tragedians, as authoritative voices from the era of true belief, Graves saw them as repositories of distorted evidence, needing his interpretive efforts to tease out the truths concealed within them. Thus he takes a different attitude towards his sources than Hamilton does; for him, all writers whose work survives come after the true period of Greek mythology, so all are equally capable of truth and falsehood.

...genuine mythic elements may be found embedded in the least promising stories, and the fullest or most illuminating version of a given myth is seldom supplied by any one author; nor, when searching for its original form, should one assume that the more ancient the written source, the more authoritative it must be. Often, for instance, the playful Alexandrian Callimachus, or the frivolous Augustan Ovid, or the dry-as-dust late-Byzantine Tzetzes, gives an obviously earlier version of a myth than do Hesiod or the Greek tragedians; and the thirteenth century *Excidium Troiae* is, in parts, mythically sounder than the *Iliad*.<sup>115</sup>

Graves is exhaustive in his use of sources, which is one reason his book is so long, and scrupulous about indicating them, and he uses a complicated schematic format, which contributes to the appearance of science that Victor Bers finds deceptive.

Each myth is first recounted as a narrative, the paragraphs being identified by italic letters (*a, b, c,...*). Next follows a list of sources numbered in accordance with the references in the text. Then comes an explanatory comment, divided into paragraphs identified by italic numbers (*1, 2, 3,...*). Cross-references from one explanatory section to the another are made by giving the myth number and paragraph number, thus: (43.4) directs the reader to par. 4 of the third (explanatory) section of myth 43.<sup>116</sup>

<sup>113</sup> Graves 1960:1.12.

<sup>114</sup> This particular formulation, which comes from Graves’ “Historical Commentary” on his 1946 work *King Jesus*, is quoted at Pharand 2003:189.

<sup>115</sup> Graves 1960:1.12–13.

<sup>116</sup> Graves 1960:1.24.

While Graves wears his scholarship less lightly than Hamilton does, he is just as much a myth-maker as she is, extracting the evidence for his myth of Greek prehistory through a selective and highly interpreted account of the sources, and he too is involved in assimilating the Greeks to his own culture. In his case, though, the mainstream culture of his own day resembles Greece of the historical period in its willful blindness to the truth. Thus he told an audience in Boston in 1963 that “in my view, the political and social confusion of these last 3,000 years has been entirely due to man’s revolt against woman as a priestess of natural magic, and his defeat of her wisdom by the use of the intellect.”<sup>117</sup> Graves’ role is not that of official interpreter of a cultural tradition to itself, as Hamilton’s is, but of a renegade unmasker of culture’s errors. The countercultural dimension of Graves’ mythography surfaces most colorfully in the Forward he wrote to a new edition to *The Greek Myths* in 1960. There he announces his discovery that the intoxicant that animated the Centaurs, satyrs, and maenads of ancient Greece—and also nectar and ambrosia—were in fact the mushroom *amanita muscaria* (note the scientific name). Among his proofs is the testimony of his own experience: “I have myself eaten the hallucinogenic mushroom, *psilocybe*, a divine ambrosia in immemorial use among the Masatec Indians of Oaxaca Province, Mexico; heard the priestess invoke Tlaloc, the Mushroom-god, and seen transcendental visions.”<sup>118</sup>

The inverse approaches of Hamilton and Graves play out in their very different treatments of individual myths. A good example is the story of Iphigenia, which includes the troublesome theme of human sacrifice, something that, in Hamilton’s view, is intrinsic to primitive life, but absent from the world of the Greeks. Hamilton addresses Iphigenia’s sacrifice twice, first in an account of the Trojan War where, as she herself notes, she relies entirely on the *Oresteia*. Her account is essentially a paraphrase, interspersed with some quotations, of the parados of the *Agamemnon*, in which she emphasizes Agamemnon’s anguish, although she does not gloss over his responsibility. She concludes on a strong, moral note: “She died and the north wind ceased to blow and the Greek ships sailed out over a quiet sea, but the evil price they had paid was bound some day to bring evil down upon them.”<sup>119</sup>

Even though the *Oresteia* is at the top of Hamilton’s hierarchy of sources and she summarizes it extensively in her book, she cannot allow Aeschylus’ version of the Iphigenia story actually to represent the view of the Greeks. In a subsequent section on the House of Atreus, she presents the version in which a deer is substituted for Iphigenia as the version that reflects the thinking of “the later—[i.e. truer]—Greeks.” “The Greeks, as has been said, did not like stories in which human beings were offered up, whether to appease angry gods or to make Mother Earth bear a good harvest or to bring about anything whatsoever. They thought about such

<sup>117</sup> Pharand 2003:190.

<sup>118</sup> Graves 1960:1.10.

<sup>119</sup> Hamilton 1940:262.

sacrifices as we do."<sup>120</sup> And so, she claims, they rejected the old account (leaving unaddressed the question of why it was still being told by Aeschylus), largely because it did not do justice to the friendliness of Artemis. "Never would such a demand have been made by the lovely lady of the woodland and the forest, who was especially the protector of little helpless creatures."<sup>121</sup> This then leads to another detailed paraphrase of a tragedy, in this case of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*, in which Iphigenia both has not herself been sacrificed and avoids sacrificing her brother.

The sacrifice of Iphigenia provides Graves with a completely different problem. He has no trouble with the idea that the Greeks could tell tales of human sacrifice, and in fact he is disgusted with them when they try not to; his problem is that this is a tale of a woman sacrificed by a man, while in the religious scenario that generated genuine myth, a man would be sacrificed in the service of a more powerful woman. Thus he has no patience with the tragic sources that Hamilton welcomes for their stress on Iphigenia's helpless pathos and their alternative account of her rescue. He declares that the myth of Agamemnon and his family has survived in "so stylized a dramatic form that its origins are almost obliterated."<sup>122</sup> But, with the aid of the *Mabigonion* and Saxo Grammaticus' *History of Denmark*, he can still detect in the death of Agamemnon "the familiar myth of the sacred king who dies at midsummer." The goddess in whose honor Agamemnon is sacrificed "appears in triad as his 'daughters': Electra ('amber'), Iphigeneia ('mothering a strong race'), and Chrysothemis ('golden order')."<sup>123</sup> Graves retells Iphigenia's killing by Agamemnon in a way that removes the element of sacrifice, and turns it into an assault on female power: "Originally, the myth seems to have run somewhat as follows: Agamemnon was prevailed upon, by his fellow-chieftains, to execute his daughter Iphigenia as a witch when the Greek expedition against Troy lay windbound at Aulis. Artemis, whom Iphigenia had served as a priestess, made Agamemnon pay for this insult to her..."<sup>124</sup> He goes on to identify Iphigenia even more closely with Artemis. "Iphigenia seems to have been a title of the earlier Artemis, who was not only a maiden, but also nymph—Iphigenia means "mothering a strong race"—and crone..."<sup>125</sup> And, of course, he thinks the story of Iphigenia not sacrificing Orestes at Tauris is a cover-up, generated by "patriarchal Greeks of a later era." He even manages to dig up a story told by the Alexandrian mythographer Ptolemy Hephaestion, as quoted by Photius, according to which Helen and Menelaus sailed to Tauris and were sacrificed there by Iphigenia.<sup>126</sup> Here we can see how well Graves is served by his deployment of a large range of sources.

<sup>120</sup> Hamilton 1940:363. Strikingly, Hamilton here associates human sacrifice with the worship of a fertility goddess.

<sup>121</sup> Hamilton 1940:364.

<sup>122</sup> Graves 1960:2.55.

<sup>123</sup> Graves 1960:2.56.

<sup>124</sup> Graves 1960:2.78.

<sup>125</sup> Graves 1960:2.82.

<sup>126</sup> Graves 1960:2.68–69.

Even this one example shows how, in both of these authors, attentiveness to the variety of our disparate sources for classical mythology becomes as much a vehicle for myth-making as a badge of disinterested expertise. With our increasing distance from Graves and Hamilton, we can see them more and more as the fantasists they are rather than the straightforward conduits of ancient information that they may have once seemed to be. And it is easy to foreground those aspects of their works that have come to seem obviously far-fetched. But we should also note that nothing like them has appeared to take their place in the intervening 50-60 years. There has been a great deal of exciting scholarship on myth that draws on anthropology in the context of greater reflectiveness about how the Greeks are and are not like "us." But general compendia of myth now take the form of textbooks explicitly aimed at students; or they are written for children rather than adults. Classicists who address general audiences and relate past and present have turned to other topics, especially political ones like democracy and imperialism. And that leaves a space in which both the versions of Greek myths given by Hamilton and Graves and their own myths about the Greeks continue to flourish.

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