

## Freedom to Invent: Graves's Iconoclastic Approach to Antiquity

In *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, Robert Graves begins his investigation into the mysterious nature of poetic inspiration by reflecting on the fundamental importance of poetry in his own literary endeavours and personal affairs:

Since the age of fifteen poetry has been my ruling passion and I have never intentionally undertaken any task or formed any relationship that seemed inconsistent with poetic principles; which has sometimes won me the reputation of an eccentric. Prose has been my livelihood, but I have used it as a means of sharpening my sense of the altogether different nature of poetry, and the themes that I choose are always linked in my mind with outstanding poetic problems.<sup>1</sup>

Despite this 'passion' for poetry as a way of life, Graves claims that he was saved from a falsely reverential attitude for poets by growing up with a poet for a father, one whose 'light-hearted early work' included 'The Invention of Wine'.<sup>2</sup> He describes Alfred Graves as 'a dear old fellow who in young and vinous days used to write with some spirit and very pleasantly', and was 'hand in glove with Tennyson and Ruskin and that lot' (other friends included the Pre-Raphaelite poets Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris).<sup>3</sup> Robert Graves may define himself as an 'eccentric', an outsider, yet his account of his early life repeatedly emphasises

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, ed. Grevel Lindop (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p.15.

<sup>3</sup> *In Broken Images: Selected Letters of Robert Graves, 1914-1946*, ed. Paul O'Prey (London: Hutchinson, 1982), p. 30.

literary connections. Even in a description of childhood walks, Graves self-consciously creates a suitably eccentric chain of literary connections, linking him to Swinburne, Walter Savage Landor and Dr Johnson.<sup>4</sup> In regarding poetry as a ‘passion’ and prose merely as a ‘livelihood’, a lesser although financially rewarding art, Graves echoes a writer he particularly admired. Thomas Hardy, distinguished first as a Victorian novelist and later as an innovative poet in the early decades of the twentieth century, was a potent influence on Graves’s early writing. Hardy told Graves that he prized the poetry that ‘came to him by accident’ more highly than the novels he could make himself write ‘by a time-table’.<sup>5</sup>

Graves has little confidence in the poetic canon and a very personal sense of what makes a true poet: Virgil, Pope, Milton and Dryden attract his censure, although Romantic poets such as Keats, Blake and Coleridge are favourably received; some other touchstones include Skelton, Apuleius and Homer.<sup>6</sup> He records in *The Common Asphodel* that he was often told that he would be carried away by Swinburne’s ‘melodious’ opening chorus in *Atalanta in Calydon*, but found it lacking in ‘technical competence’, an opinion confirmed by Robert Bridges.<sup>7</sup> His opinions about contemporary poets are similarly dogmatic, and personal connections do not inhibit Graves’s uncompromising judgments. While acknowledging (somewhat reluctantly) to T. S. Eliot that he is ‘obviously and ungainsayably a poet’, Graves

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<sup>4</sup> Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, p.9.

<sup>5</sup> Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, p. 249. Graves might be said to have followed the example of Sir Walter Scott, a poet who wrote himself out of debt with a series of historical novels.

<sup>6</sup> Graves describes himself as reading Keats and Blake in the trenches while other soldiers read military texts or rubbishy novels, and ‘some of the poems in *Over the Brazier* were written in the Everyman edition of Keats’s poetry given to Graves by his father.’ Frank N. Kersnowski, *The Early Poetry of Robert Graves* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), p. 31.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Graves, *The Common Asphodel: Collected Essays on Poetry, 1922-1949* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1949), p. 9.

writes that he has ‘consistently denied’ the title of poet to Eliot’s friend Ezra Pound, arguing that he could not find ‘a single line or stanza’ that was ‘true or beautiful’.<sup>8</sup> In the Clark Lectures, delivered at Cambridge in 1954-5, Graves attacks poetic ‘idols’ such as Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Auden and Dylan Thomas, and their academic acolytes, complaining that the ‘living poet-hero is a modernism’;<sup>9</sup> his praise is reserved for Laura Riding, Robert Frost, e. e. cummings, Alun Lewis and Siegfried Sassoon. However, while Graves isolated himself from modernist revolutions in poetry, his stimulating effect on younger poets was intense: Ted Hughes received a copy of *The White Goddess* as a present from his English teacher, and found that the text confirmed his idea of poetry as ‘a bardic, prophetic, shamanic calling’;<sup>10</sup> Seamus Heaney also experienced a ‘profoundly felt’ influence.<sup>11</sup> Miranda Seymour remarks that Graves received many ‘letters from young poets in the Sixties and Seventies who had chosen him for their mentor and exemplar.’<sup>12</sup>

In a letter following the publication of *Claudius the God*, Graves recalls that he ‘was never a Classical scholar of any accuracy or distinction and stopped dead off when the war broke out.’<sup>13</sup> As Frank N. Kersnowski observes, ‘Graves had the classical education of his

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<sup>8</sup> *In Broken Images*, p. 342. Graves’s antipathy for Pound was anticipated by T. E. Lawrence, who introduced them by saying that they would dislike each other. Frank N. Kersnowski, ed. *Conversations with Robert Graves* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), p. 39.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick McGuinness, ‘Robert Graves, Modernism, and the “Poetic Body”’, *New Perspectives on Robert Graves*, ed. Patrick J. Quinn (London: Associated University Presses, 1999), p. 46; p. 53.

<sup>10</sup> Keith Sagar, ‘Ted Hughes and the Classics’, *Ted Hughes and the Classics*, ed. Roger Rees (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp.2-3.

<sup>11</sup> Fran Brearton, ‘Heaney and the Feminine’, *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, ed. Bernard O’Donoghue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 73.

<sup>12</sup> Miranda Seymour, *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* (London: Doubleday, 1995) p. xviii.

<sup>13</sup> *In Broken Images*, p. 240.

class; but he never accepted its confines, though he would never completely leave it.’<sup>14</sup> It was a classical education on a Victorian model that was already much criticised. Graves’s father selected Charterhouse, a public school with no entrance paper in Greek grammar, so that Graves was able to secure the top scholarship of his year.<sup>15</sup> Graves does not seem to have had a high opinion of the school’s classical teaching, and quotes a disparaging comment made by a contemporary who was to accompany him from school to St John’s College, Oxford, to study *Literae Humaniores* or ‘Greats’: ‘we have spent fourteen years of our lives principally at Latin and Greek, not even competently taught, and now we’re going to start another three years of the same thing’.<sup>16</sup> Graves takes pride in the family talent for ‘writing graceful Latin verses’, a pursuit for which his father had rigorously trained him, with Virgil and Ovid as the prescribed models of metrical correctness; this aptitude is listed not as evidence of poetic inclinations but as one of a set of skills that includes taking examinations, solving puzzles and filling in forms.<sup>17</sup> In a school where other boys were less skilled at the production of verses, Graves had access to a valued currency: in ‘Alcaics Addressed to my Study Fauna’ (1913), published in the school magazine, the *Carthusian*, he describes one of the ornaments in his study at school as ‘Bought for a couple of Greek Iambics’.<sup>18</sup> Miranda Seymour observes that such composition gave Graves ‘a lasting distaste for virtuosity as opposed to inspiration’, and as a critic, he is dismissive about the kind of poems that were inspired by the ‘*gradus ad*

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<sup>14</sup> Kersnowski, *Early Poems*, p. 42.

<sup>15</sup> Seymour, *Robert Graves*, p. 19.

<sup>16</sup> Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, p.37.

<sup>17</sup> Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, p.16.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Graves, *The Complete Poems in One Volume*, ed. Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000), p. 730. Further references to this edition are given parenthetically in the text.

*parnassum spirit*’, the odes and pastoral poems of eighteenth-century Augustanism.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, he did publish a few Latin poems later in his career.<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that he found it ‘easy’ to compose ‘mock-heroic satires’ about his teachers ‘from sheer boredom with the literary epic.’<sup>21</sup> An aversion to Virgil and an inclination towards satire and parodic forms persist throughout Graves’s career.

Graves describes Homer as a bard ‘chanting his epic to the sound of his lyre’, affecting his listeners as profoundly as the music and dance of the tragic chorus: ‘the poet and his listeners fall under the spell; and whether the mood is love, terror, or a sudden deep understanding of the past or future, the experience is always something that no so-called “prose poetry” can achieve.’<sup>22</sup> Virgil, on the other hand, represents Apollonian ‘literary or academic poetry’ in which the poet only pretends to be entranced by the Muse: Graves condemns him as ‘a literary pretender to poetry.’<sup>23</sup> In ‘Virgil the Sorcerer’, Graves justifies

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<sup>19</sup> Seymour, *Robert Graves*, p. 23. The *Gradus ad Parnassum* was a dictionary that gave the quantities which would enable the student to select a Latin word which would fit the allocated metre, and also suggested synonyms.

<sup>20</sup> One brief example is ‘Jugum Improbum’: ‘Pyrrha, jugo tandem vitulum junges-ne leoni? / Sit tibi dilectus, num stricto verbera debet / Compelli pavitans medium moriturus in ignem?’ (*Collected Poems*, p. 610).

<sup>21</sup> Qtd. in Seymour, *Robert Graves*, p. 23.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Graves, *Difficult Questions, Easy Answers* (London: Cassell, 1972), p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> Graves, *Difficult Questions*, p. 2. Graves was elected Professor of Poetry at Oxford 1961-66: recent predecessors included Maurice Bowra, Cecil Day-Lewis and W. H. Auden, and Graves was followed by Edmund Blunden. He lectured on Virgil, the ‘Anti-Poet’, whose two thousand years of unmerited influence over Western culture were, Graves argued, based on the cowardly subservience that endeared him to ‘government circles’. For Graves, Virgil was unoriginal, lacking a sense of humour and ‘animal spirits’. Quoted in Jasper Griffin, ‘Virgil’, *The Legacy of Rome: A New Appraisal*, ed. Richard Jenkyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp.141-2.

his aversion to the ‘suave hexametrist’, ‘glib, bald-pated / Self-laurelled Maro’, by condemning the ‘golden and lick-spittle tongue’ that served ‘Caesar’s most un-Roman tyrannies’ (pp. 270-2). Virgil abandoned pastoral poetry in favour of epic, establishing a formula for a successful poetic career that Graves saw as a disastrous influence on Western literature.<sup>24</sup> In *The White Goddess*, he dismisses the *Aeneid*, ‘designed to dazzle and overpower’, and offers faint praise of Virgil’s ‘musical and rhetorical skill, the fine-sounding periphrases, and the rolling periods’. Virgil and Horace (a witty and affable ‘elegant verse-writer’, not a poet), are contrasted unfavourably with the ‘fearlessness, originality and emotional sensitivity’ and the ‘sincere love of women’ that Graves finds in Catullus.<sup>25</sup>

Charterhouse proved crucial to Graves’s poetic development because of his friendship with George Mallory, who introduced him to Eddie Marsh, a friend of Rupert Brooke and one of the editors of the anthology *Georgian Poetry*. Marsh praised Graves’s poems, but pointed out that his diction was outdated: readers of poetry in 1913 might not be receptive to ‘the fashions of 1863’.<sup>26</sup> Graves responds that ‘it would be most extraordinary if my technique wasn’t obsolete’: his style had been formed by his ‘reading, the immense preponderance of the “classical” over the modern’, and the Victorian literary tradition embodied by his father. Nevertheless, Graves pledges, ‘when this ridiculous war is over’, ‘I will write Chapter II at the top of the new sheet and [...] try to root out more effectively the obnoxious survivals of Victorianism.’<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See Robert Davis, ‘The Pastoral Vision of Robert Graves’, *New Perspectives on Robert Graves*, ed. Patrick J. Quinn (London: Associated University Presses, 1999), pp. 209-19.

<sup>25</sup> Graves, *The White Goddess*, p. 383.

<sup>26</sup> Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, p.48.

<sup>27</sup> *In Broken Images*, p. 30.

Mallory encouraged Graves to read modern authors such as George Bernard Shaw, Rupert Brooke, H. G. Wells, John Masefield and, crucially, Samuel Butler. In *The Humour of Homer* (1892), Butler seeks to present the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to a new readership in an unconventional and unintimidating manner. The domestic comedy he finds in Homer often features female characters, in line with his theory that the ‘authoress of the *Odyssey*’ was more novelist than epic poet. His idiosyncratic interpretations provoked readers such as the classical scholar Jane Harrison, whom Butler suspected of having written a scathing anonymous review titled ‘How to Vulgarize Homer’.<sup>28</sup> His rapid paraphrases pile up mundane details in a gossipy tone that anticipates James Joyce’s treatment of the Nausicaa and Penelope figures in *Ulysses* (1922): ‘First [Juno] bolted herself inside her own room on the top of Mount Ida and had a thorough good wash. Then she scented herself, brushed her golden hair, put on her very best dress and all her jewels. When she had done this, she went to Venus and besought her for the loan of her charms.’<sup>29</sup> Like Joyce, Graves appreciated and imitated Butler’s good-humoured assaults on the dignity of Homer. The idea that Homer was a ‘deadpan’ joker, an entertainer who knew what the public liked, is one that Graves keeps returning to, excavating the real Homer from the dusty platitudes of centuries of schoolmasters and classical scholars: ‘The point missed by dreary generations of dull dogs, says Mr. Graves, is Homer’s caustic humour.’ Graves’s Homer was a satirist rather than a

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<sup>28</sup> Annabel Robinson, *The Life and Work of Jane Ellen Harrison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 115.

<sup>29</sup> Samuel Butler, *The Humour of Homer and Other Essays*, ed. R.A. Streatfeild (London: A.C. Fifield, 1913), p. 70.

tragedian, ‘an iconoclast with a deep sense of irony who had to wrap up his jokes about the gods and his lampooning of the ancient heroes to get them by his stuffy public’.<sup>30</sup>

The ease with which classically-educated officers such as Rupert Brooke, Charles Hamilton Sorley and Robert Graves translated their wartime experiences into Homeric terms has been explored in scholarship on the literature of the Great War.<sup>31</sup> Officers who were barely out of school or university read Homer in the trenches, but discovered the ideal of epic heroism to be impossible to reconcile with the conflict in which they found themselves. Rupert Brooke died of blood poisoning on the Greek island of Skyros before he ever reached the Dardanelles, where he had hoped to fight on ‘the plains of Troy’.<sup>32</sup> In a letter to Eddie Marsh, Graves undercuts his father’s sentimental image of the poet as a Greek hero: ‘my Father (dear old man!) said that this was a fitting end for Rupert, killed by the arrows of jealous Musagetes [Apollo] in his own Greek islands; but fine words won’t help’.<sup>33</sup> Romanticised allusions to fallen heroes and Georgian lyricism in the style of Brooke proved

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<sup>30</sup> Qtd. in Kersnowski, *Conversations*, pp. 69-70. Graves gives a similar justification of his enjoyment of Apuleius: ‘*The Golden Ass* is a very much better book than I had suspected and the queer Latin is a deliberate joke, a parody of the high-faluting style of the popular story teller who liked to impress audiences at fairs and street corners.’ Robert Graves, *Between Moon and Moon: Selected Letters of Robert Graves, 1946-1972*, ed. Paul O’Prey (London: Hutchinson, 1984), p.47.

<sup>31</sup> See Elizabeth Vandiver, “‘Millions of the Mouthless Dead’: Charles Hamilton Sorley and Wilfred Owen in Homer’s Hades’, *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 5 (1999), 432-55, and *Stand in the Trench, Achilles: Classical Receptions in British Poetry of the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>32</sup> ‘Do you think *perhaps* ... they’ll make a sortie and meet us on the plains of Troy? It seems to me strategically so possible. ... Will the sea be polyphloisbic and wine-dark and unvintageable?’, *The Letters of Rupert Brooke*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Faber, 1968), p.662.

<sup>33</sup> *In Broken Images*, p. 31.



untenable as Graves became increasingly cynical about the war; Siegfried Sassoon, who said that war should not be written about in ‘a realistic way’, had not yet experienced trench warfare.<sup>34</sup>

In 1916 Graves was reading Charles Hamilton Sorley, ‘a brilliant young poet’ killed in action in 1915, who had been awarded a classical scholarship in Graves’s first year at Oxford.<sup>35</sup> In an early example of his habit of rewriting other poets’ texts to produce versions that he considered superior, Graves writes in 1916 to Siegfried Sassoon, saying that he would ‘love’ to suggest some emendations to Sorley’s ‘When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead’ and what Graves calls the ‘Odyssey poem’.<sup>36</sup> This last is a verse letter addressed to the ‘bard’ of Marlborough (the public school at which Sorley was a pupil), beginning ‘I have not brought my Odyssey / With me here across the sea’. The poet is confident that his reader will ‘remember’ the Homeric poems, and can therefore mingle recollections of Greek epic with the diction of twentieth-century warfare and a wistful stanza about the pastoral delights of the England the poet is fighting for, before briefly alluding to the realities of the ‘battered trenches’. However, given Graves’s admiration of the poem (the emendation he suggests is a minor one), it is worth noting that Sorley treats Homer’s characters with the conversational irreverence that Graves appreciates in Samuel Butler and emulates in many of his own poems:

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<sup>34</sup> Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, p.

<sup>35</sup> *In Broken Images*, p. 39.

<sup>36</sup> *In Broken Images*, p. 48. For Graves’s revisions of Milton, Wordsworth and other poets as ‘powerful misreadings’, see John Bennett, ‘Revising for Reasonableness: Robert Graves as Critic and Poet’, *New Perspectives on Robert Graves*, ed. Patrick J. Quinn (London: Associated University Presses, 1999), pp. 19-35.

The honey-sweet converse of men,  
The splendid bath, the change of dress,  
Then – oh the grandeur of their Mess,  
The henchmen, the prim stewardess!  
And oh the breaking of old ground,  
The tales, after the port went round!  
(The wondrous wiles of old Odysseus,  
Old Agamemnon and his misuse  
Of his command, and that young chit  
Paris – who didn't care a bit  
For Helen [...].)<sup>37</sup>

Sorley's poem reflects a distrust of military commanders, but an appreciation of the camaraderie of the army. Graves was increasingly cynical about the purpose of the war, which he saw as a trade rivalry carried on for profit, but considered the idea of belonging to a regiment as a beneficial one for men.<sup>38</sup> He does not represent war in terms of heroic deeds or national glory but as a mundane existence. In 'The Legion', a Roman centurion who has survived battles with Belgian and Gallic tribes grumbles about the new recruits who have replaced his dead comrades, describing them as 'Unsoldierlike, slovenly, bent on loot'. He is rebuked by his companion, who reminds him 'The Legion is the Legion while Rome stands' and predicts a victory over Gaul. Graves, like other writers at the time, is responding to the invasion of Belgium and France by the Germans, suggesting a parallel to Roman incursions,

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<sup>37</sup> Charles Hamilton Sorley, *Marlborough and Other Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1916), p. 74.

<sup>38</sup> Kersnowski, *Early Poems*, pp. 43-6.

yet the ‘Roman’ soldiers have much in common with British troops. Elizabeth Vandiver remarks that in the poem Rome is an important and ambivalent ‘symbolic equivalent’ for Britain and Graves invites different readings of the relationship.<sup>39</sup> In ‘The Cuirassiers of the Frontier’, the speaker describes a camp full of soldiers, ‘Goths, Vandals, Huns, Isaurian mountaineers’, who are fighting for Rome, a metropolitan civilisation they do not belong to, and who are loyal only because they receive food, arms and the opportunity to fight. Graves often chooses to speak from the point of view of an outsider rather than a central figure: in the prose poem ‘As It Were Poems’, the speaker claims to have been present at the events recorded in a variety of legends, including those of Reynard the Fox, Robin Hood, Isis and Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*. In most of these legends, he does not identify with the hero – like T.S. Eliot’s Prufrock, who sees himself not as Prince Hamlet but an ‘attendant lord’, ‘almost ridiculous— / Almost, at times, the Fool’.<sup>40</sup> Graves often takes on the perspective of hurt, sick or dying men: in the legend of the Trojan War, he is Ajax, the son of Telamon, whom Odysseus cheats of the dead Achilles’ armour. The speaker goes on to accuse Odysseus of setting him up to be seen as a ‘madman’ by replacing the Trojans he had killed with ‘slaughtered sheep’ (p. 334).<sup>41</sup>

Even in contemplating his own nearness to death, Graves adopts a tone of humorous detachment. Seriously wounded at the Battle of the Somme in 1916, he was thought to have died. Although he survived and was taken to hospital, his death had already been reported in

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<sup>39</sup> Vandiver, *Stand in the Trench, Achilles*, pp. 21-7.

<sup>40</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), p. 7.

<sup>41</sup> In Sophocles’ *Ajax*, when the hero experiences a fit of madness sent upon him by Athene, he attacks a flock of sheep in the belief that he is killing the Greek kings who cheated him of Achilles’ arms, and then commits suicide when he realises that he has brought shame on himself.

the *Times*. In 'Escape' (p. 27), Graves depicts his experience as a temporary death, a journey to the Underworld followed by a return to life. His Underworld is a mythical realm inhabited by figures from Greek and Roman literature. Unlike Virgil's Aeneas and Dante in the *Inferno*, he does not have to pass Cerberus, as he is already 'half-way along the road to Lethe' when he becomes conscious. Proserpine, the queen of the underworld who remains connected to the earth and returns there every spring, decides that he is not really dead and sends him back along the road he unconsciously travelled. He is pursued by comically indignant groups of 'demons, heroes, and policeman-ghosts', and at first thinks he can get past Cerberus by threatening him with his revolver, before realising that he has no weapons. He succeeds in escaping by addressing the three-headed beast like a pet, and pacifying him with a drugged morsel based on army rations:

Not even a honeyed sop ...

Nothing. ... Good Cerberus! ... Good dog! ... but stop!

Stay! ... A great luminous thought ... I do believe

There's still some morphia that I bought on leave.

Then swiftly Cerberus' wide mouths I cram

With army biscuit smeared with ration jam;

And sleep lurks in the luscious plum and apple.

He crunches, swallows, stiffens, seems to grapple

With the all-powerful poppy ... then a snore,

A crash; the beast blocks up the corridor

With monstrous hairy carcass, red and dun—

Too late! for I've sped through.

O Life! O Sun!

The pathos of untimely death is forgotten as the soldier dodges the unconscious monster and sprints back to earth. Elizabeth Vandiver notes that while there is an obvious reference to the Sibyl in the *Aeneid* overcoming Cerberus with a similar honeyed sop, the ‘comic touch’ with which the scene is handled recalls another *katabasis*, that of Dionysus in Aristophanes’ *Frogs*.<sup>42</sup>

Nietzsche was one of a small number of authors (including Keats, Homer and Samuel Butler) whose works Graves had with him during the war: these books had a powerful influence over his development of theories of poetry.<sup>43</sup> *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) identifies a struggle between Apollonian and Dionysian elements, two irreconcilable aspects of human experience, as the central theme of Greek literature and myth. The Delphic god Apollo is associated with civilisation, intelligence and technical skill in art; Dionysus with wine, festivals, music and instinct. Graves emphasises the Dionysian origins of poetry in religious ritual and in dance. He wants poets and critics to accept his theory that Apollo (the sun god) had usurped the position of a female lunar deity, the White Goddess, just as he later took control of the Delphic oracle from its priestess. Where Nietzsche saw the balancing of Apollonian and Dionysian elements in Athenian tragedy as the ideal form of art, Graves condemns Apollonian classicism as harmful to poetry. For Graves, genuine poetry is invariably concerned with ‘the relations of man and woman, rather than those of man and man’. He criticises ‘Apollonian Classicists’, who attempt to be independent of women and ‘fall into sentimental homosexuality’.<sup>44</sup> In ‘Apollo of the Physiologists’ (408), his detestation

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<sup>42</sup> Vandiver, *Stand in the Trench, Achilles*, pp.317-8.

<sup>43</sup> Seymour, *Robert Graves*, p. 44.

<sup>44</sup> Graves, *The White Goddess*, pp. 437-8. Graves describes here a conversation in which one of his Oxford tutors will only admit that Sappho is ‘very, very good’ once he is sure that his confession will not be

of the ‘Victorian-Hellenistic’ ‘academic god’ even extends to his role as healer. Poetry, Graves asserts, must deal with love and death: ‘a true poem is necessarily an invocation of the White Goddess, the Muse, the Mother of all Living, the ancient power of fright and lust [...] whose embrace is death.’ He finds classical poetry unsatisfactory because Apollonian poets, influenced by philosophers like Socrates, value logic and decorum too highly and do not acknowledge the authority of the White Goddess, ‘a lovely, slender woman with a hooked nose, deathly pale face, lips red as rowan-berries, startlingly blue eyes and long fair hair; she will suddenly transform herself into sow, mare, bitch, vixen, she-ass, weasel, serpent, owl, she-wolf, tigress, mermaid or loathsome hag.’<sup>45</sup> Graves first found a version of the muse who embodies love and death in a poem by Keats, ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’,<sup>46</sup> and although he criticises Romantic writers for their mental and physical weaknesses, he acknowledges that they can achieve a properly ‘fatalistic regard for the Goddess’.<sup>47</sup> Grevel Lindop argues that the White Goddess owes something to the later nineteenth century in the idea of the ‘eternal feminine’, a divine female power that possesses the mortal women who inspire artists and poets.<sup>48</sup>

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overheard. In asserting Sappho’s ‘unique authority’, Graves also refutes the ‘malevolent lies of the Attic comedians who caricature her as an insatiable Lesbian.’

<sup>45</sup> Graves, *The White Goddess*, p. 20.

<sup>46</sup> R. P. Graves, ‘Robert Graves and the White Goddess: An Introduction’, *Graves and the Goddess: Essays on Robert Graves’s ‘The White Goddess’*, ed. Ian Firla and Grevel Lindop (London: Associated University Presses, 2003), p. 22.

<sup>47</sup> Graves, *The White Goddess*, p. 21.

<sup>48</sup> The *femmes fatales* Lindop invokes as a comparison include Pater’s ‘Gioconda’ from *The Renaissance* (1873), Swinburne’s Proserpine, and the triple figures of the ‘Well-Beloved’ in Thomas Hardy’s novel. ‘Introduction’, in Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*, p. xi.

On returning to Oxford after the war, Graves decided to study English instead of Classics (as did Edmund Blunden, also a war poet and friend of Siegfried Sassoon, although he only stayed for one term). However, this change of degree did not involve a complete rejection of the classical tradition: Graves valued St John's for the College's association with A. E. Housman, who had become a distinguished poet and classical scholar despite his disastrous results in Greats. Living in a house rented from the poet John Masefield, in an area nicknamed Parnassus (Boars Hill), Graves was surrounded by poets and scholars who were immersed in Greek and Latin literature and whose own work renewed those classical texts for a twentieth-century readership, such as the Poet Laureate Robert Bridges and the classical scholar and translator Gilbert Murray.

At this time, Graves was also influenced by the psychologist and anthropologist W. H. R. Rivers, an expert in shell shock whose patients had included Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. Rivers helped Graves to explore the connection between the unconscious and creativity, persuading him that writing about pain and then analysing the poems he produced would be more effective than attempting to repress his war experiences.<sup>49</sup> Graves remained sceptical about Freud, as the poem 'Hippopotamus's Address to the Freudians' suggests.<sup>50</sup> Rivers also introduced Graves to Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890), a work of comparative mythology that proposed a new understanding of primitive religions and influenced T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922).<sup>51</sup> Grevel Lindop argues that Frazer's work

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<sup>49</sup> Seymour, *Robert Graves*, p. 106.

<sup>50</sup> Responding to Plutarch's *Of Isis And Osiris*, the poem represents the hippopotamus indignantly claiming that the Oedipus has been improperly credited for what should be the Hippopotamus complex: 'I slew my sire, / I forced my dam. [...] Free from repression / Or urge to confession, / Freud's little lamb.'

<sup>51</sup> Shalom Goldman describes Graves's *The White Goddess* as 'a kind of displacement and rearrangement of the central themes of *The Golden Bough*, [...] radically different' from Eliot's response: 'White Goddess,

was ‘probably the one book most fundamental to the methods and conclusions of *The White Goddess*’. Frazer contended that ancient religions centred on the death of a god-king who killed his predecessor and reigned until he was either killed by his successor or sacrificed at the end of the year. Graves’s ‘brilliantly simple transformation’ of Frazer’s theory suggested that the god-king was only important because he married the immortal goddess-queen whom Graves called the White Goddess.<sup>52</sup> Miranda Seymour comments that the synthesis of ‘magical and dangerous’ maenads and muses in Jane Harrison’s *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903) is a vital addition to Frazer in Graves’s developing idea of the White Goddess. Harrison’s writing on matriarchy influenced his theory (first explored in 1944 in *The Golden Fleece*) that the Greeks had defeated an earlier matriarchal civilisation and challenged the supremacy of the Triple Goddess (bride, mother and crone), replacing her with Zeus and the Olympian pantheon.<sup>53</sup>

Graves’s friend T. S. Matthews describes his approach as the creative restoration of an original myth:

To Robert the orthodox version of the Greek myths was an attempt to cover up or give a false interpretation to the older myths that lay behind them, and he set himself the task of peeling off the top layer of the palimpsest and restoring the faint traces of the original. Pure scholarship would have been unequal to this job, since too much

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Hebrew Goddess: The Bible, the Jews, and Poetic Myth in the Work of Robert Graves’, *Modern Judaism* 23 (2003), 43.

<sup>52</sup> Grevel Lindop, ‘The White Goddess: Sources, Contexts, Meanings’, *Graves and the Goddess*, ed. Firla and Lindop, p.30.

<sup>53</sup> Seymour 306-8. See also R. P. Graves, ‘Robert Graves and the White Goddess: An Introduction’, *Graves and the Goddess*, ed. Firla and Lindop, pp. 16-18.



evidence was lacking. Robert undertook to supply the missing evidence, either by setting the scholars at naught and reinterpreting what they had misunderstood or by imagining the nature or even the form of the missing facts.<sup>54</sup>

Graves himself repeatedly distinguishes his own ‘heterodox’ approach from that of university scholars who must take care not to get out of step with their colleagues.<sup>55</sup> In some notes on his approach to history in *I, Claudius*, Graves comments ‘wherever authors have disagreed, or there has been a gap or confusion or mystery or they were obviously lying I have felt free to invent’.<sup>56</sup> In his treatment of myth, whether in poetry, fiction (*The Golden Fleece*) or non-fictional prose (*The Greek Myths*), Graves appears to operate on similar principles, taking liberties that a classical scholar could not. Much of his work on myth depends on the assumption that the Greek myths have a basis in historical fact, and in particular on changes in religious belief and ritual. In *The Golden Fleece*, a priestess of the matriarchal moon goddess in the sacred orange grove at Deya (near Graves’s home in Majorca) is seen as resisting the influence of Ancaeus, the last surviving Argonaut, and ordering her followers to kill him. She is horrified by his tales of Greek society, in which a man is the head of the household and they despise the Triple Goddess:

The Nymph wondered whether she had misheard the words. She asked, ‘Who may the *Father God* be? How can any tribe worship a *Father*? [...] The woman, not the man, is the agent, he the tool always. She gives the orders, he obeys. Is it not the woman who chooses the man, and overcomes him by the sweetness of her perfumed presence and

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<sup>54</sup> Kersnowski, *Conversations*, p. 20.

<sup>55</sup> Graves, *The White Goddess*, p. 235.

<sup>56</sup> *In Broken Images*, p. 349.

[...] takes her pleasure of him, and when she has done, leaves him lying like a dead man?’<sup>57</sup>

Ancaeus explains the Greek system by which a father chooses a woman to be the mother of his children and then has the power to reject her and send her back to her father’s house if he wishes. It is significant that Graves chooses to locate the last surviving outpost of matriarchy so close to home, as the balance of power between man and woman, or the masculine and the feminine, is a constant preoccupation in his poetry and criticism. If a poet must love his muse, who is an incarnation of the White Goddess, his relationship to her will be closer to that described by the Nymph than to the patriarchal system Ancaeus defends.

In the surprisingly brief account of Pygmalion and Galatea Graves gives in *The Greek Myths*, Pygmalion falls in love with Aphrodite and ‘because she would not lie with him, made an ivory image of her and laid it in his bed, praying to her for pity. Entering into this image, Aphrodite brought it to life as Galatea’.<sup>58</sup> Graves wrote two poems based on the myth: ‘Pygmalion to Galatea’ (1926) and ‘Galatea and Pygmalion’ (1938). In the first of these, the sculptor addresses the woman he designed for himself, describing the qualities he wishes her to possess. She is to be his ideal woman: ‘lovely’, ‘merciful’, ‘constant’ yet ‘various’. As he elaborates on these attributes, he begins conventionally with her beauty, then asks for a mercy that ‘abstain[s] from pity’, desiring her to prize her ‘self-honour’ and allow him to preserve his. When he asks for constancy, he wants her not to ‘mask’ the beauty he created, but to keep their love ‘aloof and strange, / Keep it from gluttonous eyes, from stairway gossip.’ She must be ‘various’ enough to keep the relationship interesting inside the confines of their ‘fair-

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<sup>57</sup> Robert Graves, *The Golden Fleece* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2011), pp. 8-9.

<sup>58</sup> *The Greek Myths* 65. Graves cites Apollodorus, Ovid and Arnobius as sources of the myth, and explains the statue as ‘the goddess’s white cult-image’, which Aphrodite’s priest kept in his bed.

paved garden', graceful, 'witty, kind, enduring, unsubjected' (pp. 272-3). As Simon Brittan notes, Galatea is no longer a statue but not yet fully human: to reach Pygmalion she must step down from her pedestal and be debased, in order to comply with a 'sequence of demands and conditions so stringent that they would be more suitably addressed to Galatea as statue than as human.'<sup>59</sup> This domineering Pygmalion wants to mould Galatea as a lover, just as he shaped the beautiful limbs that he admires at the start of the poem.

In 'Galatea and Pygmalion' (pp. 353-4) the sculptor is no longer happy with his creation. The artist who 'enchanted' her from marble with his 'furious chisel' then sees his 'longings' fulfilled when she descends from her pedestal to his bed. He is 'lubricious' and drunken, she a 'woman monster' who 'Enroyalled his body with her demon blood'. Patrick Quinn interprets the poem in relation to Graves's life, as an 'allegory of a fading relationship' that reflects his increasingly intense artistic and personal conflicts with Laura Riding, who forced Graves to remain celibate.<sup>60</sup> Pygmalion's monstrous creation is also an artistic rival, as she attracts the attention of 'schools of eager connoisseurs' and, despite his jealousy, asserts her independence. She seeks fame for herself, not for him. Essaka Joshua argues that this poem is part of a 'revolution in viewpoint' in interpretations of the myth that 'concentrate keenly on Galatea's rights, her choices and her reaction to being created by Pygmalion.'<sup>61</sup> However, Graves is more concerned with the suffering of the artist whose cruel muse has sapped his artistic and sexual energies. Another poem from this period is 'Leda' (pp. 356-7),

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<sup>59</sup> Simon Brittan, 'Graves and the Mythology of Desire', *New Perspectives on Robert Graves*, ed. Quinn, p. 88.

<sup>60</sup> Patrick Quinn, 'The Breaking of the Spell: Graves's Dissatisfaction Poetry of 1937', *New Perspectives on Robert Graves*, ed. Quinn, pp. 101-2.

<sup>61</sup> Essaka Joshua, *Pygmalion and Galatea: The History of a Narrative in English Literature* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), p. 137.

in which the 'Heart' develops a lecherous fantasy about Leda's 'horror' at being raped by Zeus in the guise of a swan, which becomes a dismayed depiction of her enjoyment:

Then soon your mad religious smile  
Made taut the belly, arched the breast,  
And there beneath your god awhile  
You strained and gulped your beastliest.

Quinn argues that this stanza is a concession to Riding's belief in celibacy: 'by surrendering to sensual pleasure, the human is reduced to the status of a dumb beast, reminiscent of the Circe myth perhaps.'<sup>62</sup> Douglas Day compares Graves's depiction of an 'ugly occurrence', a 'terrifying and sordid exhibition of lust' with that of Yeats in 'Leda and the Swan' (1923), 'primarily a mystical or religious experience' that leads to the founding of a new civilisation.<sup>63</sup> The final stanza of Graves's poem is filled with a disgust that extends beyond the critique of Leda's lustful response to Zeus and reminds the reader that the conception of Helen led to 'bawdry, murder and deceit'.

In 'Judgement of Paris' (p. 536), Graves ponders how different Greek myth would have been if Paris had not chosen to give the apple to Aphrodite, but had instead 'favoured buxom Hera, / Divine defendress of the marriage couch'. Then Helen would have stayed with Menelaus, Hector might have died 'unhonoured in his bed', and the poets would have had to celebrate 'a meaner siege'. Graves argues in a lecture that the 'theme of complementary love does not occur in Classical literature, even by Homer.' Paris and Helen are drawn together by

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid. p.98-9.

<sup>63</sup> Douglas Day, *Swifter than Reason: The Poetry and Criticism of Robert Graves* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1963), p. 135.

physical attraction, but Helen blames herself for having deserted Menelaus. Graves suggests that the 'domestic affection between Hector and his wife Andromache' is an enduring love, ended only by the masculine code of honour that sends him to his death, 'but the blind overwhelming power which took Helen to Troy has been sanctified in poetry at the expense of all other emotions, despite the eventual defeat of both lovers.'<sup>64</sup> The speaker of 'New Legends' (pp. 316-7) affirms the satisfaction of domestic contentment with an undemanding mistress. She is the opposite of a number of mythic heroines: a serene Andromeda, 'Chained to no cliff, / Asking no rescue of me', a Niobe with no children, an Atalanta who does not challenge him to race with her. D. N. G. Carter describes this poem (originally titled 'The Age of Uncertainty'), dating from an early and harmonious phase of Graves's relationship with Laura Riding, as a celebration of freedom from traditional gender roles, so that a man who recognises a woman as an individual is enabled to 'cast off the burdensome prejudices of his patriarchal conditioning.'<sup>65</sup> In 'Anchises to Aphrodite' (p. 506), Anchises happily accepts his subservient position and marvels that the goddess has deigned to warm his couch. He is happy to take his place as one of thousands of lovers, even though he is aware that those who preceded him are 'gone as if they had not been.' This 'man-lion' adopts the kind of submissive tone that Graves's Pygmalion wants to hear from Galatea, 'Enroyalled I await your pleasure / And starve if you would have it so'.

Another poem that questions whether the patriarchal model of love can work is 'Ovid in Defeat' (1925). Graves imagines the poet in exile, still teaching the arts of love. Theodore Ziolkowski cites this poem as evidence that efforts to rehabilitate Ovid's reputation in the recent '*annus mirabilis Ovidianus*' (1922) had not been 'widely successful. He describes

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<sup>64</sup> Robert Graves, *Collected Writings on Poetry*, ed. Paul O'Prey (Carcanet, 1995), p. 475.

<sup>65</sup> D. N. G. Carter, *Robert Graves: The Lasting Poetic Achievement* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1989), p.

Graves's 'bitter' poem as betraying 'an almost personal animosity towards Ovid [...] and toward the love code of his *Ars amatoria*.'<sup>66</sup> The last two lines of the first stanza describe Ovid's outlandish appearance in 'bearskin breeches', and are based on a line from Ovid's *Tristia* that Graves cites in a footnote: '*pellibus et sutis arcent mala frigora braccis*.'<sup>67</sup> Some of the precepts attributed to Ovid in this poem allude to the *Ars Amatoria*, although others have no obvious parallel. Genevieve Liveley describes Graves's poem as 'a neat synthesis of Ovid's erotic teachings', with a 'parodic abbreviation' of Ovid's own parodic farming imagery:<sup>68</sup>

Let man be ploughshare,  
    Woman his field;  
Flatter, beguile, assault,  
    And she must yield.

As Liveley observes, while flattery, deceitful promises and some degree of force are all part of the strategies Ovid suggests a lover will need to employ, Graves's rendering makes the 'aggressive power play' explicit and threatening. Graves reverses the Ovidian image, in which the persistent lover is like the field that gradually wears down the ploughshare.<sup>69</sup> The seriousness of Graves's pseudo-Ovidian proposition is called into question by the chiming of

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<sup>66</sup> Theodore Ziolkowski, *Ovid and the Moderns* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 73.

<sup>67</sup> *Tristia* 3. 10. 19. 'They keep off the dreadful cold with trousers of sewn skins.'

<sup>68</sup> Genevieve Liveley, *Ovid: Love Songs* (London: Duckworth, 2005), pp. 41-4.

<sup>69</sup> *Ars Amatoria* 1. 474: '*interit adsidua vomer aduncus humo*' – 'a curved ploughshare crumbles with constant ploughing of the ground.'

‘field’ and ‘yield’; the comic use of rhyme in this poem is best exemplified by the Byronic ‘gist is’ and ‘*tristis*’:

Follows his conclusion

Of which the gist is

The cold ‘*post coitum*

*Homo tristis*’.<sup>70</sup>

Graves then tries out another version of the image of the field and the ploughshare to characterise a ‘newer vision’, a simple reversal of gender roles so that man is the field ploughed by a woman. He develops the theme by further describing the man with a traditionally feminine metaphor, as a ‘plucked flower’ lying in the mire, seduced and abandoned by a woman who no longer desires him. Graves appears to argue that men are either vulnerable or already defeated by their cruel mistresses, the ‘unfair fair’. However, this is not the conclusion of the poem – he goes on to establish that the reader (addressed by the poet as ‘My amorous brother’) must progress beyond such ideas of conflict and domination to an understanding that women are men’s equals, ‘Neither more nor less’. ‘Plough then salutes plough’, the final stanza begins, without attempting to explain how this symbolic parity might work. This is not the bitterly personal rejection of Ovidian precepts that Ziolkowski suggests,

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<sup>70</sup> In ‘Ovid and the Libertines’, a review of Guy Lee’s 1968 translation of the *Amores*, Graves takes up this phrase again, claiming that ‘Ovid’s generalization *post coitum homo tristis* (“after coition a man feels sad”) is no longer challenged because simple, affectionate, trustful love-making has gone out of fashion. Nor has any convincing solution to the problem of how to reconcile marital with romantic love yet been offered.’ He contends that modern life has blighted marital romance, especially for couples with children. *Difficult Questions*, p. 133.

although Graves does disapprove of the Roman poet's 'erotic gamesmanship'.<sup>71</sup> In the end, the poet mockingly triumphs over the wretched Ovid, who stamps off through the snow with a 'toothache' inflicted on him by Graves.

Illicit longings underlying quiet domestic affection are the theme of 'An Idyll of Old Age' (pp. 140-2), in which Graves revises an episode from Book 8 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the story of the aged couple Baucis and Philemon. Like Ovid, Graves expands on an element of the original myth and treats it from a comically unexpected point of view. Zeus and Hermes visit these poor but virtuous rustics and consume their simple food and drink. Then, as the gods lie 'shivering' in the spare bedroom, they eavesdrop on their hosts' conversation. The theme of their dialogue is love: Philemon celebrates married love as the merging of souls, and goes on to question the significance of the boyish 'ideal friendship' that he had experienced before marriage. Such affection is innocent and holy, when the lover is afraid even to touch the beloved. For a reader who is familiar with the Ovidian account of the devoted couple, Baucis's response is unexpected. She expresses affection for her husband, but also longs to be set free: she confesses that her eye is drawn to younger men, like the guest (Hermes) whose 'body brings my heart hotter romance / Than your dear face could ever spark within me'. Philemon is not shocked, but prepared to consider whether 'adulterous licence' might make them happy, whether the pure of soul would lose anything by experiencing 'the body's rapture / With a body not its mate'. He goes on to grant Baucis permission to go her own way and find love, and she offers him the same freedom. Zeus, despite his own multiple infidelities, is 'struck dumb at this unholy compact', but Hermes assumes that their faithful marital love will prove greater than the lust they talk about. The joke, in this poem, is on the gods, who are taken in by an invented dilemma, one that acts as

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<sup>71</sup> *Difficult Questions*, p. 135.



entertainment for a couple who are physically beyond the infidelities they enjoy  
contemplating:

Eternal Gods deny the sense of humour  
That well might prejudice their infallible power,  
So Hermes and King Zeus not once considered,  
In treating of this idyll overheard,  
That love rehearses after life's defeat.  
Baucis, kind soul, was palsied, withered and bent,  
Philemon, too, was ten years impotent.

Past love is also the subject of 'Theseus and Ariadne', in which Graves again tells the story from an unexpected perspective. While many poets and artists had depicted the sufferings of the deserted Ariadne, or her dramatic rescue by Dionysus, Graves focuses on Theseus's lonely old age. He dreams of the lost Ariadne, although he had once 'weariest of her constancy'. She, meanwhile, plays the queen 'to nobler company' (p. 404). Graves represents the aged Theseus once more at a disadvantage again in 'Heroes in their Prime'. This poem highlights the discreditable stories that counter more commendable exploits in the lives of several Greek heroes: Theseus is mocked as the 'old, bald King of Athens', 'forced into self-banishment' by his own folly, before he is praised as the 'tall youth who laid low Procrustes' and killed the Minotaur. Similarly, Bellerophon is seen as the undignified 'tattered outcast' 'pitched into a thorn-bush' by Pegasus, before he is applauded for his victory over the fiery Chimaera. The apex of Jason's career is the capture of the Golden Fleece, contrasting with his miserable end as a 'chap-fallen beggar' in Corinth. The last two stanzas reveal Graves's twist on these extremes of heroic experience: while Theseus,

Bellerophon and Jason were distinguished as young men and later betrayed their early promise, there is a hero who achieved his prime as an old man. This hero is Nestor, who as a 'young braggart' hid from the Calydonian boar by climbing a tree, but in old age is revered by the heroes of Troy (p. 489). Graves brings out the untold stories and lampoons the ancient heroes, exposing them to a bracing realism that reveals their comic potential. It is no surprise that Ovid should have inspired such mocking treatment of gods and heroes, and Graves's aversion to Virgil, his resistance to academic poetry, and his fascination with the arts of love suggest that he might see himself as an Ovidian artist. As in his retelling of the Greek myths and the legends of the White Goddess, Graves's appetite for narrative, his appeal to multitudinous sources, and his unorthodox scholarship combine to create an interpretation of the classics that is distinctive and engaging. His love of Homer, the 'true poet' who casts a spell over his audience, pervades Graves's poetry, and his description of Homer might well apply to Graves himself as an interpreter of the classics: 'an iconoclast with a deep sense of irony.'

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