

Handbook battles, H.J. Rose versus Robert Graves: a lesson in common ground

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Abstract. This paper proposes that there is common ground between H.J. Rose's *A Handbook of Greek Mythology* and Robert Graves's *The Greek Myths*, in that both seem to think that it is a bad idea to meet a certain demand: to provide a handbook that is reliable, easy to consult, and suitable for students of certain literary tastes.

Draft version: Version 1 (29th July 2022).

What have I mistook?

Says the picture on this book.

The preface to H.J. Rose's *A Handbook of Greek Mythology* opens with the following sentence:

As a teacher of Classics I have often felt handicapped by the lack of a book of moderate length, containing an accurate account of Greek mythology, in accordance with the results of modern research. (1989: vii)

Rose's handbook has an introduction which is conveniently divided into numbered sections specifying different theories of what myths are: the allegorical theory; the nature forces theory; etc. But when Rose begins actually telling myths, one gets chapters which are undivided. Chapter 3, "The Children of Kronos," is more than twenty pages in the edition I have, with about 480 words per page, and there is no division into sections concerned with one child and then another. That is not very

convenient for quickly locating material.

Robert Graves's popular *The Greek Myths* is conveniently divided into short sections and I find it much easier to consult. But its reputation amongst specialists is that it is very unreliable. Graves just makes up bits of myth, which sound as if they could come from an ancient source but no known ancient source says that. And there is no warning that this is what he is doing (Dimock 1955: 450; Ihm 2015: 166-167.). Rose criticizes Graves for "romantic interpolations and sentimentalities of his own devising, legitimate enough in a work of imagination, but quite out of place in a handbook of mythology" (1955: 208). Dimock complains, "This sort of thing makes a great trap for the unwary..." (1955: 450)

The debate between Rose and Graves has attracted some interest, with Rose described as merciless and also sniffy (Weisinger 1956: 244; Zajko 2015: 196). Graves meanwhile has been criticized for declaring that his is the first comprehensive handbook since 1844, overlooking Rose's effort, first published in 1928 (Weisinger 1956: 235; Macpherson 1958: 18). This seems a minor complaint compared to just making up stuff but it is part of a portrait of severe opposition. I think that portrait is misleading. From the decisions of both authors, it seems there is remarkable common ground. I suspect they both agree on a counterintuitive proposition. Here is a first statement of this proposition:

(Rookie error) There are students who want a readable, easy to consult, academically reliable handbook of mythology, suitable for their literary tastes and also their attention spans, which are probably slightly above average. For those capable of providing that desired handbook, it is a mistake to do so.

The literary tastes I have in mind are not too demanding or unorthodox, by the way.

Probably some of my papers meet their tastes, in terms of writing style. But why is it a mistake to provide such a book? I don't know. That is what I would have tried to do if I set out on this project of making a mythology handbook! Here are some explanations, none of which I have sufficient evidence to endorse – there are others.

Top down management. One answer is that the world of English letters – I mean the world of English writings accorded some literary merit – is managed, and it is managed like this: anyone with the talent to provide the desired handbook should actually be doing more creative work. If some people find out that you are attempting such a book with a good chance of success, you will be provided with incentives against doing so; and if you succeed in the aim you will somehow be punished. (I wonder whether such a book will even produce a disgust reaction, despite everything appearing to be as it should be. It looks as if everything is in place, but actually your talent is not.)

“Undiscriminating” reviewer. Such a handbook is likely to contain some mistakes. And unless the work is perfect, it is likely to encounter an influential reviewer who treats it in the same way as Graves's effort. Either everything is exactly right or the reviewer dismisses the work, owing to inaccuracies. The reviewer has little sense that, as far as handbooks go, this is the best they can get. Everything else is severely faulty, in one respect or another.

Unreasonable students. The official purpose of this handbook is teaching but the students one will attract if one provides the desired handbook are going to prove a problem. For example, one has to continuously meet their tastes, or they complain: “I thought it would always be like in the handbook!”

One might worry that the fate of such a book is probably to become a useful

secret. It will never reach many others who could benefit from it. At the moment, I think that is a bit too pessimistic.

References

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