

## **Objections to Robert Graves's *The Greek Myths***

The scholarly consensus appears to be that Graves's book is unsuitable as a companion to Penguin Classics – it has memorably been described as a monument of pseudo-scholarship (Dimock 1955: 454) – but what more detailed criticisms have been made of it? Below are some criticisms, with no attempt to place them in order of importance.

**Faux ancient claims.** Graves's tellings of the myths are supposed to be based on ancient sources and he introduces claims which are like claims from such sources but which you will not find in any ancient sources and are probably his own addition. For example, Dionysus sits at the right hand of Zeus. "This sort of thing makes a great trap for the unwary and a great botheration for the wary who look up Graves' references." (Dimock 1955: 450; see also Rose 1955: 208).

**Altered tone/perspective.** Ancient seriousness about mythology is absent. No opportunity is lost to make Zeus look silly. G.E. Dimock Junior explains that this is because "he can only see the gods as ludicrous pretenders to the power which rightfully belongs to the female. If the goddesses are spiteful and shrewish, this is not so much their own fault as the fault of their unnatural position." (1955: 452)

**Outdated anthropology.** The editors claim that the book embodies conclusions of modern anthropology and archaeology, but it uses outdated anthropology (Dimock 1955: 454).

**Unsupported interpretations.** Also Graves usually interprets an artefact in a way which no archaeologist would dare, says Dimock – I presume that the archaeologist would regard the interpretation as insufficiently supported (1955: 454). Dimock says other interpretations are overlooked (1955: 455) and H.J. Rose describes Graves as making romantic interpolations out of place in a handbook (1955: 208).

**Unjustified order.** Rose cannot see any justification for Graves's order of myths (1955: 208).

**No source evaluation.** Graves takes from any sources without asking what the reliability of the source is (Rose 1955: 208). Note that a later specialist, Sheila Murnaghan, praises his use of a large range of sources, focusing on one myth retelling (2009: 88).

**Low readability.** The result of Graves's keenness to include every detail, without evaluating source reliability, is a work which is difficult and tedious to read, says Rose. But another reviewer finds the language similar to the Greek in its supple strength (Weisinger 1956: 236).

**Inconsistent interpretive methods.** Herbert Weisinger argues that Graves inconsistently combines the view that myths are the spoken counterpart to ritual actions with the view that they record historical events (1956: 240-241).

**Compounding of sources.** Graves often draws from various ancient sources to produce a myth telling, which is a questionable practice, says Jay Macpherson (1958: 15).

**Poor referencing.** Graves's footnotes to the myths do not adequately specify which material comes from which source (Macpherson 1958: 15). The referencing is all but useless, we are later told (1958: 19).

**Improved continuity.** Given the sources identified, the myths are not as continuous as Graves's telling, judges Macpherson (1958: 15).

**Later source assumption.** In this book and elsewhere, Graves assumes that a source which is later is more uncorrupted and generally reliable, observes Macpherson (1958: 15). He has a preference for later writers like Dictys and Dares.

**"Theory-laden mistreatment."** Graves's book is based on a theory which is supposed to provide a key to all mythologies – "true myth, regardless of origination in place and time, deals with a universal female figure and her relations with subordinate male figures who are at once her sons, lovers, and victims" (Macpherson 1958: 18)– but myths that do not fit this theory suffer in how they are told and this can only make us sceptical about the idea of a single key (1958: 18-19; see also Herbert 1956). Earlier Rose describes Graves as relating myths to rituals in a matriarchal society, but says the society actually never existed in Europe (1955: 208).

**Misleading handbook history.** Graves implies that no comprehensive handbook was published between Smith's *Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, first published in 1844, and his own effort, but that overlooks recent and adequate books by H.J. Rose and K. Kerényi, judges Macpherson (1958: 18). Rose himself made a similar criticism earlier (1955: 508), as does a non-classicist reviewer (Weisinger 1956: 235), but C.M. Bowra thinks a new book was needed, identifying two weaknesses in the old handbooks (1956: 498-499): variations from a certain standard version are treated as abnormalities to be dismissed with contempt; and lack of interest in origins. Note: Rose favours the authorities' versions for a handbook (1955: 208) A recent article tells us that Graves's theory was that such authorities produced deliberate misinterpretations (Murnaghan 2009: 86).

**A cruel "ethic."** Graves is healthy-minded, rather than decadent, but "his vitality has something in it of the cruel and monstrous; he frequently seems about to suggest a good bloodbath makes things grow, and that the last word in favour of ithyphallic orgies is still to be said." (Macpherson 1958: 24)

**References.** Bowra, C.M. 1956. The Greek Myths. *The Sewanee Review* 64 (3): 498-507.  
Dimock Jr., G.E. 1955. Robert Graves and Greek Mythology. *The Hudson Review* 8 (3): 449-455.  
Herbert, K. 1956. Review of *The Greek Myths* by Robert Graves. *The Classical Journal* 51 (4): 191-192.  
Macpherson, J. 1958. Review article: *The Greek Myths*. *Phoenix* 12 (1): 15-25.  
Murnaghan, S. 2009. Myths of the Greeks: the origins of mythology in the works of Edith Hamilton and Robert Graves. *The Classical Bulletin* 84 (1): 81-89.  
Rose, H.J. 1955. Review of Robert Graves: *The Greek Myths*. *The Classical Review* 5 (2): 208-209.  
Weisinger, H. 1956. "A Very Curious and Painstaking Person" Robert Graves as Mythographer. *Midwest Folklore* 6 (4): 235-244.