

Why can't we see this controversy? Bruno Latour, Greek myths, local alternatives

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Abstract. This paper proposes (once again) that a controversy has been omitted from Robert Graves's account of how the Greek myths became an established part of the British education system. I address a question from the secondary literature on Bruno Latour: why can't we see this controversy? Two reasons are speculatively identified.

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The only homeware shop open tonight is the sky

With fluffy cushions for sale

And a large bright lamp

Behold the opening to the introduction to Robert Graves's famously unreliable *The Greek Myths*:

The mediaeval emissaries of the Catholic Church brought to Great Britain, in addition to the whole corpus of sacred history, a Continental university system based on the Greek and Latin Classics. Such native legends as those of King Arthur, Guy of Warwick, Robin Hood, the Blue Hag of Leicester, and King Lear were considered suitable enough for the masses, yet by early Tudor times the clergy and the educated classes were referring far more frequently to the myths in Ovid, Virgil, and the grammar school summaries of the Trojan War. (Graves 1960)

As mentioned before, I believe that the Greek myths did not acquire an established place in education systems here without opposition (Edward 2022). There would have been people who said, “If you like those kinds of stories, we can provide some like that. You should prioritize local goods over foreign ones.” Graves has omitted the opposition from his account. Now an interesting question from the secondary literature on a French philosopher of science, who recently passed away, is “Why can’t we see controversies?” (2005: 287) I shall give two speculative reasons for why we cannot see this opposition to the “invading” Greek myths.

1. Oral literature. I speculate that a lot of the attempts to compete were oral rather than written. They were not written down because the expert audience did not regard them as good enough to compete against the Greek myths. That makes the opposition there was harder to detect. For example, there were conversations like this.

Mythmaker: I’ve got a myth. Once I swam to the bottom of a lake and there was a mermaid there. And the mermaid said, “Can you bring me some gold coins and I shall love you forever?” So I swam back up and I asked a peasant woman where I could get some gold coins. And she said “They are buried by that tree.” So I dug a hole there until I found the coins. But then the tree fell and broke my arm. And I could not swim back down to the mermaid!

Critic 1: It’s not good enough.

Critic 2: I doubt the Cyclops and the Centaurs will be shaking in their boots over this!

2. Nationalism versus nationalism. I have read some Italian literature from the second half of the twentieth century and if you ask me what the best thing I have read is, it is an imitation of some Japanese literature, whatever its flaws as imitation (Calvino 1981). I cannot say why the pastiche was written, save perhaps for its literary function within a book, but the thought of its being the best is helpful for realizing a problem. Imagine, a few

centuries back, someone from broadly nationalist or tribal reasons trying to produce Greek-like myths: so that the Greek myths themselves do not become established in their culture and yours. But you don't want the alternatives to displace the literature which is your main national kind, around which your identity is based: a kind which is irregular in form and manifests an unusual sense of humour, say. But this seems a near impossible combination:

- a. The local Greek-like alternatives to Greek myths must be good enough to compete with the originals.
- b. They must not be so good as to outshine the kind of storytelling works regarded as "our kind."

I have cautiously said, "This seems a near impossible combination," but if we imagine ambitious literary contributors of the time, many must have noticed the advertisement to oppose the Greek myths by producing local alternatives but avoided the task, in the belief that (a) and (b) simply are an impossible combination.¹ That explains, or partly explains, why the controversy is so hidden. Seasoned professionals must have mostly thought, "What they are actually after is not doable," and left the job to literary backwoodsmen, apologies for the prejudiced term. The efforts of such people are probably more likely to disappear from the record or not reach wider audiences.

References

Calvino, I. (translated by W. Weaver) 1981. *If on a winter's night a traveller*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.

¹ I have focused on the problem of competing while not outshining "our kind" of storytelling works. One might envisage a literary culture in which storytelling works in general are marginal, but that seems irrelevant for the country, or countries, being discussed.

Edward, T.R. 2022. On the exhaustion criterion of difficulty, with Wittgenstein, Robert Graves, and Kripke. Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/EDWOTE>

Graves, R. 1960 (revised edition). *The Greek Myths*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Martin, A. 2005. Agents in Inter-Action: Bruno Latour and Agency. *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 12 (4): 283-311.