Robin Diver, "Entry on: Greek Gods and Heroes by Robert Graves", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Lisa Maurice. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2021). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1324. Entry version as of October 31, 2026.

Robert Graves

Greek Gods and Heroes

United States of America (1960)

TAGS: Admetus Alcestis Amphitrite Apollo Artemis Athena Hades Hera Heracles Hermes Marsyas Omphale Persephone Pirithous / Perithous Poseidon Theseus Zeus





We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Greek Gods and Heroes
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1960
First Edition Details	Robert Graves, *Greek Gods and Heroes*. New York: Doubleday, 1960, pp.150.
Genre	Anthology of myths*, Fiction
Target Audience	Crossover
Author of the Entry	Robin Diver, University of Birmingham, robin.diver@hotmail.com
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Susan Deacy, University of Roehampton, s.deacy@roehampton.ac.uk Lisa Maurice, Bar-Ilan University, lisa.maurice@biu.ac.il

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Creators



Robert Graves , 1895 - 1985
(Author)

Robert Graves (b. Wimbledon, London) was a British poet, novelist, mythographer and translator best known for his hugely influential works of classical reception *The Greek Myths* (1955) and *I, Claudius* (1934). He is one of the circle of British poets known for his World War I poetry. Graves had a tumultuous and often scandalous personal life. His work is as controversial as it is influential.

Graves was the son of Alfred Perceval Graves, a Gaelic scholar and poet, and Amalie von Ranke Graves, a relative of the German historian Leopold von Ranke. He was one of ten children, and described later how he was raised by his mother to be sexually prudish. He won a St. John's Scholarship to study at the University of Oxford, but left in 1914 to fight in World War I as a junior officer, publishing his first poetry book Over the Brazier in 1916. In 1929, he published his autobiography of World War I, *Good-bye to All That*. In the same year, he left his wife Nancy and four children for Laura Riding, an American poet, with whom he lived in Majorca.

Riding was influential on Graves' work, and in his writing Graves built up the idea of the Muse-like female "White Goddess" who inspired poets. He published a book devoted to the theme in 1948, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*. He also wrote the classical reception novels *I, Claudius* (1934), *Claudius the God* (1934), Count Belisarius (1938), and *The Golden Fleece* (1944). After his breakup with Riding, he had multiple other relationships, including a marriage to Beryl Hodge.

Graves' classical work has been hugely influential, with his mythography books often cited as a source explicitly in later mythographical writings, and many of his alterations to myth appearing as fact in the myth-related writings of others. However, Graves' mythical writings were informed by highly controversial ideas. Graves believed in Analeptic Thought, the idea forgotten events can be recovered through intuition, and he advocated for Greek myth holding truths about an earlier matriarchal society that worshipped a great goddess, later displaced by patriarchal invaders.

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Graves was a good friend and regular correspondent of younger-generation war poet Spike Milligan. During World War I, he was friends with Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, but he fell out with Sassoon over the publication of Graves' World War I autobiography. Graves appears to have been bisexual, and at different points in his life pursued forms of non-monogamy and polyamory. Many of his romantic relationships were highly erratic and destructive, with Graves even threatening violence against men involved in them. He also seems to have suffered with poor mental health after fighting in World War I.

Sources:

Poetry Foundation Bio (accessed: June 11, 2021).

Britannica Bio (accessed: June 11, 2021).

Wikipedia (accessed: June 11, 2021).

Bio prepared by Robin Diver, University of Birmingham, RSD253@student.bham.ac.uk.

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Additional information

Summary

This is a dryly humorous children's anthology of myth by Robert Graves, better known for his earlier mythography work *The Greek Myths*. It tells key Greek myths, with a focus on the personalities of the key gods who it introduces in the opening chapter. There are no illustrations. The stories included are:

- *The Palace of Olympus* (introduction to the different gods),
- *Other Gods and Goddesses*,
- *Demeter's Lost Daughter*,
- *The Titans*,
- *The Underworld of Tartarus*,
- *The Birth of Hermes*,
- *Orpheus*,
- *Deucalion's Flood*,
- *Orion*,
- *Asclepius*,
- *King Midas's Ears*,
- *Melampus and Phylacus*,
- *Europa and Cadmus*,
- *Daedalus*,
- *Bellerophon*,
- *Theseus*,
- *Sisyphus*,
- *The Labours of Heracles*,
- *The Giants' Rebellion*,
- *Two Other Rebellions*,
- *Jason and the Golden Fleece*,
- *Alcestis*,
- *Perseus*,
- *The Hunt of the Calydonian Boar*,
- *The Beef-eating Contest* (Idas, Lynceus, Castor and Polydeuces),
- *The Seven Against Thebes*,
- *The End of the Olympians.*

Analysis

In the opening, Graves introduces the reader to Homer and Hesiod, the conquest of the Greeks by Rome, Roman love for Greek poetry, the influence of Roman education on Britain and America, the Western history of Greek myth in education and the Roman names for the gods.

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He claims that "Almost all arts and useful sciences were given us by the ancient Greeks." (p. vii). This may have been a relatively uncontroversial claim to make to a popular audience in 1960.

Graves briefly contextualises myth for children who may be more familiar with Bible stories: "These myths are not solemn, like Bible stories. The notion that there could be only one God and no goddesses did not please the Greeks, who were a gifted, quarrelsome, humorous race. They thought of Heaven as ruled by a divine family rather like any rich human family on earth, but immortal and all-powerful; and used to poke fun at them at the same time as offering them sacrifices." (p. viii).

This anthology seems to have originally been intended as a collaboration with hugely influential American children's authors and illustrators the D'Aulaires, which fell through due to differences in vision.* It is therefore interesting to note that Graves describes the gods in precisely the opposite way to the D'Aulaires in the introduction to the children's anthology of Greek myth they ended up publishing.** Whilst Graves paints the gods as flawed, quarrelsome and unpleasant from the beginning, in the D'Aulaires: "The Greek gods... acted like [people] ... only they were taller, handsomer and could do no wrong."***

These disparate attitudes to the gods between Graves and the D'Aulaires are also immediately evident in the myth retellings. The D'Aulaires take a fairly positive attitude to Zeus' philandering and call Hera unreasonable and possessive for not accepting it. Graves, meanwhile, seems to invite the reader to poke fun at Zeus' justification to Hera that his relationships with mortals "did not count – his brides would soon grow ugly and die; but she was his Queen, and perpetually young and beautiful." (p. 4). This excuse is not accepted by Hera in Graves.

There are certain changes to ancient sources which both Graves and the D'Aulaires make in their respective anthologies, however. Both make Midas the judge in the Apollo-Marsyas music contest rather than the Apollo-Pan music contest, for example. Neither are particularly sympathetic to Marsyas. This may be because both anthologies are highly focused on the lives and personalities of the gods and are therefore less sympathetic to the lower orders of divinity. It may also be that both are working from an original version that they co-authored together when this was intended as a collaboration.

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Theseus' heroism is undermined in this version by the fact that, like Perseus killing Medusa in Ovid, he kills the Minotaur whilst the monster is sleeping. On the other hand, his attempt to help Perithous kidnap Persephone is made more sympathetic. Perithous points out that Persephone is unhappy with Hades and would prefer a husband who could give her children, something which Hades cannot do. When the two go down to the Underworld, Hades himself seems to agree that Persephone would have preferred Perithous. The focus on having children as the path to happiness and fulfilment is another thing this anthology shares with that of the D'Aulaires.

There is a rich and detailed description of the exotic palace in which the gods dwell, with features such as menageries of exotic animals, followed by descriptions of each Olympian, complete with backstory, symbols and the elaborate throne they occupy. For example Ares' throne has a cushion made of human skin.

Although Graves' great goddess theory is not explicitly present in this book, he makes certain claims reflecting its general principles. For example, in this anthology Amphitrite is a formerly powerful sea goddess whom Zeus marries to Poseidon after the Titan defeat and allows to take over all her powers. This idea regarding Amphitrite is repeated in the later children's myth anthology of Vinge, *The Random House Book of Greek Myths* (1999). Vinge in this instance is probably influenced by Graves' anthology. Graves also addresses the question of what happened to Rhea; she lives with the Olympians but is treated "shabbily" by Zeus, who is ungrateful for the help she gave him against Kronos.

Graves makes Hera the deity who does much of the real work of governing the world, since Zeus is often too lazy to do his job as chief god. Whilst still officially following the ancient narrative of Heracles as saviour of the gods in the war against the giants, Graves implies the Fates are perhaps the real champions who turn the tide by fighting on the side of the gods, since none can stand against them. He also emphasises the role of Artemis and Athene as capable giant fighters in this war. Athene in Graves is the only god willing to stand against Typhon; Zeus returns to join her only after she reproaches him for his cowardice. Graves also claims that Heracles finds dressing as a woman for Omphale restful; he does not portray it as shameful. There is thus a clear attempt to make female figures powerful, even inspirational to young readers in this anthology, as well as an attempt to override the implications in ancient myth of femininity as shameful

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or lesser.

The Admetus and Alcestis myth is told as a comedy. Admetus is a whining, ungrateful figure who seems to feel little guilt about allowing his wife to die for him, and is criticised on separate occasions by Persephone, Hades and Heracles. Alcestis drinks poison to save her husband, but is sent back to earth by a disgusted Persephone, who is appalled at the idea women should die for their husbands. Admetus, anxious Alcestis' return will get him in trouble, asks her if she should not return to the Underworld after all. However, everything is resolved and the right of both to continue living is confirmed. The story ends with Heracles asking Alcestis why she sacrificed herself for her husband. Alcestis answers matter of factly that she did it for her children, and that if Admetus had died they would have been murdered by the next king. Heracles comments dryly that "That explains everything", the implication being that Admetus is not a man anyone would be highly invested in saving by himself (p. 196). This version thus pokes fun at the idea of a character like Admetus having a selfless, loving wife, and at Admetus for expecting such absurd levels of sacrifice from Alcestis. Alcestis is simply a good mother who protects her children.

The anthology ends with a story about the Greek gods being driven away by Christians, who chase them first from Olympus and then from the countryside with crosses. This is narrated in neutral terms, as if it is a historical account of the replacement of one regime with another. However, Graves tells us, the stars remain in the sky as a reminder of "the Olympians ancient and savage reign." (p. 142).

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* Murnaghan, S. and Roberts, D.H., *Childhood and the Classics: Britain and America, 1850–1965*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, 120.

** D'Aulaire, I. and E.P., *D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths*, New York: Delacorte Press, 2003 (ed. pr. 1962).

*** Ibidem, 9.

Classical, Mythological,

Admetus Alcestis Amphitrite Apollo Artemis Athena Hades Hera Heracles Hermes Marsyas Omphale Persephone Pirithous / Perithous

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Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Poseidon Theseus Zeus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Appearances Christianity Femininity Heroism Relationships Sacrifice
Further Reading	D'Aulaire, I. and E.P., *D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths*, New York: Delacorte Press, 2003 (ed. pr. 1962). Graves, R., *The Greek Myths*, New York: Penguin Books, 2012 (ed. pr. 1955). Murnaghan, S. and Roberts, D.H., *Childhood and the Classics: Britain and America, 1850–1965*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Vinge, J.D., *The Random House Book of Greek Myths*, ill. Oren Sherman, New York: Random House, 1999.
Addenda	*Greek Gods and Heroes* was also published as *Myths of Ancient Greece*. Page numbers given in analysis refer to Dell Laurel-Leaf paperback edition.

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