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Myths of the Greeks: the Origins of Mythology in the Works of Edith Hamilton and Robert Graves

Two mid twentieth-century myth collections, Edith Hamilton's Mythology (first published in 1940) and Robert Graves' The Greek Myths (first published in 1955), remain among the most widely read and influential introductions to Greek mythology. Both integrate mythology into continuous narratives, but Graves' treatment is so compendious that it is more often used as a reference work, while Hamilton's more straightforward and accessible version is widely used as a textbook in schools. Both authors express a scholarly awareness that their narratives are constructed out of disparate sources from various periods of classical culture, acknowledging in effect that there is no unified phenomenon that can be labeled "Greek mythology." Yet each is invested in a view of Greek history in which a particular period defined Greek culture and produced the most authoritative version of mythology. Hamilton and Graves differ, however, in the particular periods they consider definitive, and this difference reflects opposite responses to the anthropological approaches to Greek antiquity that arose in the early twentieth century and especially to the treatment of the Greeks as comparable to peoples labeled "primitive."

For Hamilton, the Greeks were most themselves during the classical period, a time of humanism and rationality expressed in myths that are "friendly," "reassuring," and "sensible," "freed from the paralyzing fear of an omnipotent Unknown." While she necessarily draws on Hesiod and Ovid, she prefers sources that fit in her developmental scheme between Hesiod's crudeness and Ovid's frivolity and makes most use of Pindar and the tragedians. Graves, on the other hand, locates the formative phase of Greek mythology in the Bronze Age, a supposed period of matriarchy and goddess worship that was obliterated through a series of "Achaean invasions" beginning in the thirteenth century. For him, all of our literary sources are thus compromised by their lateness. He draws on them even-handedly, combining information from major and minor authors, and he supplements the results with extended footnotes identifying the original myths behind that information.

This paper will explore the ramifications of these differences for the versions each author gives of certain particularly challenging episodes in mythology, of which the sacrifice of Iphigenia provides a good example. Hamilton describes the sacrifice briefly through a paraphrase of the parados of the Agamemnon, stressing Agamemnon's anguish and reluctance. She dwells much more fully on the story told in the Iphigenia in Tauris, invented by "the Greeks" out of their loathing for human sacrifice, for "They thought about such sacrifices as we do." For Graves, Iphigenia's sacrifice is also problematic, but because the sacrificial victim was originally a male figure, the Mother Goddess' mortal lover who was sacrificed annually at midwinter. He sees the story of Iphigenia's sacrifice as evidence of the Dorian barbarism infecting the Troy legend, and devalues the tragedies on which Hamilton relies: the myth has survived in "so stylized a dramatic form that its origins are almost obliterated." He lays greatest stress on the sacrificial death of Agamemnon, declaring that the goddess in whose honor Agamemnon was sacrificed has

been reconceived in triple form as Agamemnon's daughters, including Iphigenia, whose name means "mothering a strong race." He also gives weight to a variant of the Iphigenia in Tauris story told by Hyginus, according to which Electra hears a false tale that Orestes has been sacrificed by Iphigenia, concluding that this false tale preserves the original version.