

Graves, Bachofen and the Matriarchy Debate

*But I turn to her still, having seen she shall surely abide in the end;
Goddess and maiden and queen, be near me now and befriend.*

“Hymn to Proserpine”

(After the Proclamation in Rome of the Christian Faith)

Swinburne

This article deals with Graves' belief in the White Goddess and investigates possible sources for his credence of goddess-worship as matriarchy. As we know, Graves' belief in a matriarchal phase in the evolution of human societies was firm, and it occupied a fundamental position in his whole attitude towards the surrounding world. “In my view the political and social confusion of these last 3,000 years has been entirely due to man's revolt against woman as a priestess of natural magic, and his defeat of her wisdom by the use of intellect” (Graves, *Mammon*, 47). With the advent of the feminist movement, we are now less prone to regard ideas like these as mere expressions of freakishness. Indeed, one's first reaction to Graves' ideas may be that they actually adumbrate ideas already widespread in the modern feminist movement. But Graves' influence on the feminist movement has been very slight. We must look for his inspiration not to the future but to the past: Graves was influenced by attitudes and sentiments prevailing in the nineteenth century, and how he transformed them into a theory about the White Goddess without obviously being conscious of the origins of those influences and their late developments is of greater interest here.

The theory expounded by Graves in *The White Goddess*, that the present phase in the evolution of mankind is a patriarchal one and that the preceding phase was a matriarchal one, was not Graves' invention. One can find traces of this concept in the work of J.J. Bachofen, the Swiss lawyer who had studied goddess worship and who, like Graves, held that goddess worship always implies a matriarchy. Smart's “Study of Religion” introduces us to Bachofen's thesis in citing that scholars of comparative religion

who have looked at religions from an anthropological view have emphasised the importance, in a number of cultures, of the mother goddess (as distinct from the male sky god). A pioneer work in this direction was that of the Swiss anthropologist and jurist J.J. Bachofen (1815-87), whose *Das Mutterrecht* (“The Mother Right”) unravelled some puzzles in ancient law, mythology, and art in terms of a matriarchal society. (Smart 15:619)

Although Bachofen was a pioneer in the field of matriarchy studies, he was not the first to advance the matriarchy hypothesis. "Theories about goddess worship have been advanced ever since the emergence of the social sciences disciplines in the nineteenth century" (Preston 6:53). According to Campbell, "the first field anthropologist to recognize an order of matrilineal descent among primitive peoples was an eighteenth-century missionary...the Reverend Joseph François Lafitau, S.J. (1671-1746)" (Campbell xxxiii), whose *Moeurs des sauvages Américains comparées aux mœurs des premiers temps* was published in Paris in 1724.

That Bachofen was not alone in propounding a matriarchy theory in the middle of the nineteenth century is illustrated by James J. Preston's article in Mircea Eliade's *Encyclopedia of Religion*, according to which "as early as 1851 proponents of the matriarchy theory were embroiled in a controversy set off by the famous jurist Sir Henry Maine" (6:54). Preston does not explicitly mention who these proponents were, but they cannot have included Bachofen because his treatise on the subject was not published until 1861. In fact, when Bachofen's treatise had been published, it was not at all well received:

He was mercilessly massacred...in the academic journals. One of the learned reviewers of his work on mortuary symbols wrote: "408 closely printed pages, full of the queerest, most adventurous dreams—dreams that in their profundity pass, at times, into realms even of consummate imbecility." The work on mother right, two years later, received more of the same ruthless treatment. (Campbell xlxi)

But the initially negative reaction to Bachofen's ideas was soon to be followed by a more genuine interest in his views. At first, the Scottish lawyer John F. McLennan in *Primitive Marriage* (1865) recognised the work done by Bachofen in *Das Mutterrecht*; and then, in 1870, a young scholar from Geneva, Alexis Giraud-Teulon, "came to Bachofen's door full of admiration for the great man who had opened the world of mother right" (Campbell li). Later acknowledgement came from "that greatest anthropological traveller of all, Professor Adolf Bastian of the University of Berlin...and...from the leading American ethnologist of the period, Lewis Henry Morgan" (lii). Bachofen's ideas were given recognition in Morgan's "treatise on the stage-by-stage evolution of culture, *Ancient Society*" (lii) (1877) and in Friedrich Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884). His influence in the nineteenth century was such that the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* even today cites *Das Mutterrecht* as "a fundamental contribution to modern social anthropology" ("Bachofen, Johann Jakob 1:713"). But, "after attracting attention in his later lifetime, his work

was neglected" (Feldman 2:34). This may have been due to the publication of a treatise by Edward A. Westermarck in 1891 in which "again the matriarchy concept was discredited" (Preston 6:54). Bachofen did not live long enough to defend himself against Westermarck, for he died in 1887.

Although Bachofen's ideas were discredited, they nevertheless continued to exercise an influence within a surprisingly diverse spectrum of ideology. First, he influenced Engels, and consequently Marxism. Second, he influenced Nietzsche, "who came to Basel in 1869 as a young professor of classical philology and for the next half decade was a frequent guest in Bachofen's home" (Campbell xlvi). Third, "Bachofen influenced the portrayal of the primal sexual scene in Sigmund Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1913)" (Feldman 2:35). And fourth and finally, "the central problem under investigation [in J.G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*] is a piece with those by which Bachofen's interest had been aroused" (Campbell liv). According to Campbell, the affinity between the adherents of the Cambridge school of comparative religion and Bachofen was great; he even suggests that Jane Harrison's *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* could be read as "an intentional celebration and verification of [Bachofen's] view's...[if only] Bachofen's name were mentioned anywhere in its pages" (lv).

In spite of this spectrum of affinity, it is quite true, as Feldman writes in his article "Bachofen, J.J." in Eliade's *Encyclopedia*, that Bachofen's work was neglected after his lifetime (2:34). But Bachofen was rediscovered in the twenties "not by historians or anthropologists, but by a circle of creative artists, psychologists, and literary men: a young group around the poet Stefan George, in Munich" (Campbell xxv). This revival of Bachofen had an influence among other poets: "Rainer Maria Rilke was touched; Hugo von Hofmannsthal as well" (xxvii). A 1926 edition of Bachofen, edited by Rudolf Marx, was a product of this first renaissance for Bachofen; a second renaissance came in the sixties with the feminist movement. Rudolf Marx's edition of selected works by Bachofen was translated for the first time into English by Ralph Manheim and published in 1967.

There are some interesting parallels between Robert Graves and J.J. Bachofen. Not only did they both look for support for their views to ancient Graeco-Roman mythology (Bachofen had first studied Roman legislation and had drawn attention to some anomalies there which led to his conclusions in *Das Mutterrecht*), but both drew much of their evidence from an analysis of ancient pictures. Both believed that actual myths provide only illusory superstructure and that behind the plots lies something more serious: "Bachofen's concern was to go past plots to their symbolized sense, by grouping analogous figures and then reading these as metaphors of a common informing idea" (Campbell xxvi). What applies to Bachofen here

applies to Graves as well. Both were preoccupied with private interpretations of the etymologies of words—a popular nineteenth-century pastime. And finally, both had a similar interpretation of methods of thought. Where Graves saw “the difference that is constantly appearing between the poetic and prosaic methods of thought” (*The White Goddess* 223), Bachofen talked about imagination and understanding:

There are two roads to knowledge — the longer, slower more arduous road to rational combination and the shorter path of imagination, traversed with the force and swiftness of electricity. Aroused by direct contact with the ancient remains, the imagination [*Phantasie*] grasps the truth at one stroke, without intermediary links. The knowledge acquired in this way is infinitely more colourful than the products of the understanding [*Verstand*]. (Bachofen 11-12. Interpolations from Campbell’s introduction)

But it would be misleading to point out only those aspects of Bachofen which make him a kind of spiritual germinator of Graves’ goddess. Bachofen believed, like most of his contemporaries, in an evolution of mankind from a primitive stage into more advanced stages. Graves’ concept in this respect is not as nineteenth-century as most of his other ideas seem. Graves “regards life as a cyclic” (Seymour-Smith 400). Hence, the Gravesian land of Cockayne lies not in the future, as that of evolutionists, but in the past, the period preceding the past 3,000 years of political and social confusion. Thus the programmatic content of Graves’ poem “Return of the Goddess” is not a prophecy for the future but, characteristically enough, a return to the past.

Bearing in mind the similarities between Graves and Bachofen, it is most surprising that Graves, according to Seymour-Smith, “had never heard of Bachofen in the forties” (387). This is understandable, for Bachofen’s renaissance in the twenties probably did not affect Great Britain to such an extent that Graves would have paid attention to his ideas, and Bachofen was not translated into English until 1967.

However it is still possible that Graves may have adapted ideas supported by Bachofen from secondary sources. The first possible transmitting link between Bachofen and Graves is W.H.R. Rivers. Although Rivers is mentioned in Seymour-Smith’s biography mainly for the variant of Freudianism he transmitted to Graves, it is nevertheless worth remembering that Rivers, who became “increasingly important to Graves in the years after the [first world] war” (Seymour-Smith 83), was “something of a pioneer anthropologist” (83) as well as a psychologist and neurologist. Rivers had “in

1898 joined the Cambridge expedition to the Torres Strait [between New Guinea and Australia], and [become] keenly interested in anthropological fieldwork" ("Rivers" 8:603). He made a firsthand study of the Toda and paid several visits to Melanesia (8:603). He also showed an interest in kinship terminology (8:603), and that is where he is of interest to us: these kinship studies made him one of the foremost experts on mother-right in Britain in the beginning of the century, and in 1915 he was invited to write an article on that subject in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* edited by James Hastings. The article begins with a long list of cases of mother-right among primitive peoples in different parts of the world, analysing variants and expressions of this form of inheritance. If Graves in the twenties had read the following statement by Rivers, that "There is hardly a European people of antiquity to whom some form of mother-right has not been ascribed" (Rivers, "Mother Right" 8:856), then his association of that idea with his White Goddess in the forties is easily explained.

A second possible transmitting link between Bachofen and Graves is J.G. Frazer. Campbell believed that "the central problem under investigation" in *The Golden Bough* "is of a piece with those by which Bachofen's interest had been aroused" and that

the great British scholar [Frazer] in his own way, actually completed in this mighty work [*The Golden Bough*] the last task that Bachofen had set himself, "to assemble the evidences of the maternal system from all the peoples of the earth;" and he arrived as had his predecessor—apparently independently—at the recognition of an age of mother-right antecedent to that of the Greek and Roman patriarchal systems. (liv)

Similarly, Preston, in his article "Goddess Worship: Theoretical Perspectives," holds that "Sir James Frazer set himself the task of completing Bachofen's assemblage of evidence for matriarchy among world cultures" (6:54). Not that the extensive affinity and the parallels between Bachofen and Frazer as described above must be taken literally; there are only two explicit references to Bachofen in the whole of Frazer's twelve-volume work, and the footnote to one of these, dealing with the significance of the Roman festival of the Saturnalia, reads:

The learned Swiss scholar, J.J. Bachofen, long ago drew out in minute detail the parallel between these birth legends [i.e. of Romulus' and Servinus' birth from slave mothers] of the Roman kings and licentious festivals like the Saturnalia and the Babylonian Sacaea. See his book *Die Sage von Tanaquil* (Heidelberg, 1870), pp. 133 *sqq.* To be frank, I have not had the patience to read through his long dissertation (Frazer, *The Magic Art*, 313).

Both Bachofen's *Die Sage Von Tanaquil* and *Das Mutterrecht* are included in the bibliography of *The Golden Bough*, without being marked by the asterisk used by Frazer to indicate that "the work in question has not been seen by me (J.G. Frazer), and is known to me only by name or in quotation. Works not marked by an asterisk have been consulted in the originals" (Frazer, *Bibliography*, 3). In short, Frazer had consulted both *Die Sage von Tanaquil* and *Das Mutterrecht* in their original form without, however, having finished reading the former.

The licentious festival of the Saturnalia, mentioned above, fascinated not only Bachofen and Frazer; it aroused Graves' imagination as well. In *The White Goddess*, he presents as his own original view, arrived at in a state of trance, that the early kings of Rome were offsprings from erotic rituals: "Then I threw my mind back in an analeptic trance. I found myself listening to a conversation in Latin, helped out with Greek, which I understood perfectly" (350). Graves claims that the voices of the conversation belonged to Theophilus, a well known Syrian Greek historian, and Lucius Sergius Paulus, a Roman Governor-General of Cyprus under the Emperor Claudius. But anybody who has read *The Golden Bough* does not need an analeptic trance to recognize the great British scholar, Frazer, lending his voice to those ancient characters; their Latin and Greek is therefore artificial. So when Graves in Theophilus' voice says, "The kingdom [of early Rome] descended in a female line: a man was king only by virtue of a marriage to a queen or of descent from a queen's daughter. The heir to the kingdom, in fact, was not the king's son but the son of either his youngest daughter or his youngest sister" (356), he is echoing Frazer:

Now it is very remarkable that though the first king of Rome, Romulus, is said to have been descended from the house of Alba, in which kingship is represented as hereditary in the male line, not one of the Roman kings was immediately succeeded by his son on the throne. Yet several left sons or grandsons behind them. On the other hand, one of them was descended from a former king through his mother, not through his father, and three of the kings, namely Tattius, the older Tarquin, and Servius Tullius, were succeeded by their sons-in-law, who were all either foreigners or of foreign descent. This suggests that the right to the kingship was transmitted in the female line, and was actually exercised by foreigners who married the royal princesses. (*The Magic Art* 271)

And when Graves with the voice of Theophilus says
My view is that at midsummer during the Alban holiday, which
was a marriage feast of the Oak-queen—your Excellency's char-

ming nymph Egeria—with the Oak-king of the year, and the occasion of promiscuous love-making, the six Vestals, her kinswomen, coupled with six of the Oak-kings' twelve companions—you will recall Romulus's twelve shepherds. But silently, in the darkness of a sacred cave so that nobody knew who lay with whom, nor who was the father of any child born. And did the same again with the other companions at midwinter during the Saturnalia. Then, failing a son of the Oak-queen, the new king was chosen from a child born to a Vestal. (357)

he repeats the following facts cited by Frazer:

We may infer that the part of Saturn, who was commonly spoken of as a king, was formerly played at the Saturnalia by the Roman king himself...no time could be more suitable for the celebration of the Sacred Marriage...if the sacred marriage took place at a licentious festival like the Saturnalia,...it might well be that paternity of the children begotten at this time, including those of the royal family, was a matter of uncertainty; nay, it might be known that the king or queen had offspring by a slave. Such offspring of a royal father and a slave mother, or of a royal mother and a slave father, would rank as princes and princesses accordingly as male and female kinship prevailed. (*The Magic Art* 312)

Eventually, Theophilus concludes, "And thus it happened that a king was said to be born of a virgin mother, and either to have no known father, or to be the son of the God" (357). Frazer writes in the same spirit that "Thus the legends which tell how Latin kings were born of virgin mothers and divine fathers became at least more intelligible. For, stripped of their fabulous element, tales of this sort mean no more than that a woman has been gotten with a child by a man unknown" (272). The affinity of this triad of Romantic armchair thinkers, Bachofen, Frazer, and Graves, could hardly be better illustrated than by this example of how their imagination was sparked by the very same "licentious" Roman festival of the Saturnalia.

A third, less obvious but nevertheless very interesting link between Bachofen and Graves is Nietzsche. George Steiner believes that "many of the assumptions behind *The Greek Myths* are implicit in such classic works as Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* (to which Graves owes much despite his description of Nietzsche as 'a mad German ox')" (Steiner 359). It will be remembered that Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* is to a large extent concerned with the opposition between what Nietzsche calls the *Apollonic* and the *Dionysiac* in art (Nietzsche 9). The death of

tragedy in the title of Nietzsche's book is the death of the dionysiac spirit in Greece in the Classical era, that is, the era beginning with Socrates. Here the parallel between Nietzsche and Graves becomes obvious: Graves believed that the prosaic method of thought was an invention by Classical Greeks to combat the swamping of the intellect by mythographic fancy. Graves also used the word *apollonic* to describe poetry created by the prose-men. So if one substitutes for the word *dionysiac* the word *muses*, Graves' ideas come very close to Nietzsche's.

The link between Nietzsche and Bachofen is more obvious than the one between Graves and Nietzsche. In his preface to the 1967 edition of selected writings by Bachofen, George Boas writes:

There are themes in Bachofen which have a strong similarity to those of Nietzsche. Though Bachofen's name does not appear anywhere in the indexes to any of Nietzsche's works, Nietzsche was a great admirer of Bachofen's colleague, Jakob Burckhardt, and Burckhardt himself was an admirer of Bachofen. Both Nietzsche and Bachofen see in struggles the source of greatness, and both agree that every nation has a character of its own which expresses itself in its desire for power....It is to be noted also that in his early *Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche took over Bachofen's terms, the Dionysiac and the Apollonian, for the two types of will, the creative and the contemplative, and that he also maintained that they were fused into one in the Greek Tragedy before the time of Euripides. (xx)

A fourth transmitting link between Bachofen and Graves could have been Engels, who adapted the views of Bachofen and Lewis Henry Morgan uncritically. Seymour-Smith writes that Graves never read Engels, but ideas in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* may have been transmitted to Graves through Laura Riding, who could have adopted the idea of a matriarchy from her father, an active socialist. Riding recalls that her father hoped she would become an "American Rosa Luxemburg". (Wexler 6-7)

Finally, it was shown above that Bachofen influenced Freud. Of Freud's influence on Graves, Seymour-Smith writes that "Graves knew Freud only through Rivers and Head [a psychiatrist colleague of Rivers] and a hasty reading of *The Interpretation of Dreams*" (97). Yet for some time in the twenties, Graves' interest in psychoanalysis seems to have been deep and earnest. According to Seymour-Smith, Graves' first book on literary criticism, *On English Poetry* (1922) "is the first book of its time to take a truly psychological approach to poetry, and to make use of modern psychological methods" (97). Later on, however, Graves repudiated Freud.

Graves' belief in a matriarchy was not necessarily exclusively derived from the sources mentioned above, although they may have been fundamental in the formulation of his ideas. Boas writes in his preface to the English edition of Bachofen that "Bachofen's theory on a matriarchal society out of which modern patriarchal societies evolved was accepted pretty generally among sociologists until about the beginning of the twentieth century. It was the classical pattern for historians to follow" (xvii). Although Westermarck, according to Boas, cited "Bachofen as the principal sponsor of the thesis [of the pre-historic matriarchate]" (xvii), Feldman writes that "as early as 1851 proponents of the matriarchy theory were embroiled in a controversy set off by the famous jurist Sir Henry Maine, who insisted that the patriarchal family was the original social unit" (6:54). As 1851 was ten years prior to the publication of Bachofen's *Das Mutterrecht*, it may be assumed that the classical path for historians to follow was not entirely due to Bachofen. Rivers' article on "Mother-right" in Hastings' *Encyclopaedia* cites sources (not consulted for this study) such as B. Delbrück "Das Mutterrecht bei den Indogermanen" in *Preuss. Jahrbücher*, lxxix (1895) 14-27; L. von Dargun, *Mutterrecht und Raubehe*; G.A. Wilken, *Het matriarchaat bij de oude Arabieren*, Amsterdam, 1884, which may serve as illustrations that matriarchy studies in the nineteenth century were by no means confined to Bachofen, McLennan, and Morgan. This seemingly wide-spread romantic fascination with goddess-worship as matriarchy may account for the ideas expressed by Swinburne, for instance, in the poem quoted at the beginning of this paper. They may also account for Samuel Butler's *The Authoress of the Odyssey*, in which the thesis is presented that *The Odyssey* was written by Nausicaa. According to Seymour-Smith, Graves carried Butler's *Odyssey* with him during the First World War (37). In 1955 Graves himself published a version of *The Odyssey* called *Homer's Daughter* where the same thesis is repeated.

Rivers' article in Hastings' *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* has already been mentioned as a possible source of Graves' goddess myth. Graves may have been familiar with other articles in that encyclopaedia as well, particularly the one on "Aegean Religion" by D.G. Hogarth which may have influenced him. This article states that during excavations at Knossos a

chapel was opened and found to contain...three feminine idols...(and also) other and ruder idols of the same sex and type, but with snakes coiled about them, were brought to light....This snake-goddess was not found at Knossos till 1903....The goddess is probably to be recognized in many intaglio scenes...and is

more than enough to prove how the Aegean peoples, when they arrived at the iconic stage of religion, conceived divinity. This personified the Supreme Principle as a woman, to whom was subordinated a young male, less in honour and probably later in time. There is no evidence for more deities than these. (1:142-3)

Hogarth, whom Graves may also have known through T.E. Lawrence ("Hogarth, David George" 5:8), discusses the significance of these finds in the context of an Aegean religion. His style reminds one of Frazer:

In regard to the Aegean *Divine Spirit* itself, personified in the iconic stage of a goddess and a young god, the student of a comparative religion finds himself on very familiar ground. A goddess with a young subordinate god is known in early times on every coast of the Mediterranean which looks toward Crete. In Punic Africa she is Tanit with her son; in Egypt, Isis with Horus, in Phoenicia, Ashtaroth with Tammuz (Adonis); in Asia Minor, Cybele with Attis; in Greece (and especially in Greek Crete itself), Rhea with the young Zeus. (147)

Hogarth's article may also have given Graves the idea of using the *bipennis*, or Cretan double-ax, in his poems. In one of the most suggestive poems of his mythic period, "Darien," the *bipennis* is given a horrifying ritualistic role:

Often at moonrise I had watched her go.
And a cold shudder shook me
To see the curved blaze of her Cretan axe.

Later the poet encounters "the one Muse, [whom] it is a poet's privilege and fate / to fall enamoured of." Their eyes meet and

I knew then by the the trembling of her hands
For whom that flawless blade would sweep:
My own oracular head, swung by its hair.

And with the same subservience that Graves showed towards Laura Riding's rule the poet concludes by saying:

"Sweetheart," said I, "strike now, for Darien's sake!"

Hogarth deals with the subject of the *bipennis* in a chapter subtitled "Cult-objects" in his article on "Aegean Religion." First he mentions *spears* and *swords*, saying that "we have no evidence yet for the use of either...as a cult object. With the *bipennis*, or double ax" (1:144) he continues, "the case is

very different. The evidence for its cult use is overwhelming....Evans recalls the fact that since it appears in the hands of the goddess on a Knossian gem, ...it was at least as much her weapon as the god's" (1:144). Hogarth does not explicitly say that the *bipennis* was used in connection with human sacrifices, but he does bring up the subject saying that "the question of *human* victims cannot be determined at present" (1:146). For Graves the mere hint of human sacrifices in connection with goddess worship may have been sufficient to provide the inspiration for a poem.

In literary criticism the method of drawing parallels between the biographical lives of authors and their creative work has not been very much in fashion since the advent of New Criticism in the thirties, but with Graves the temptation to bring in autobiographical material in a study of his poetry is more difficult to resist, because he seems to have lived his own myths to such an extent that his life and myths almost became inseparable. In the case of the poem above, Seymour-Smith relates that at the time of writing it in 1950 Graves fell in love with one of his "post-Riding Muses... and announced her presence...by uninhibitedly telling his English correspondents that the Muse had turned up on the island—'unmistakable, wielding a Cretan axe' " (440).

Sir Arthur Evan's excavations of Knossos in Crete began in 1894. His "own definite treatment of his work" ("Evans, Sir Arthur (John)" 3:1011) was published in *The Palace of Minos* between 1921-36, the period when Graves became personally acquainted with Rivers and read Frazer. Evans' findings from Crete seem to have had considerable influence on Graves' later views in *The White Goddess* and *The Greek Myths*.

The picture of the sources behind Graves' goddess myth would not be complete without a few more autobiographical comments. Graves' first wife, Nancy Nicholson, is described by Seymour-Smith as a feminist (61). There is nothing to indicate that she ever came to link her views on the equality of the sexes with any theological speculations, but it is easier to understand Graves' views in *The White Goddess* when we know that at the same time as he read Frazer and made River's acquaintance, his wife "dismissed the Christian religion on the grounds that it must be rubbish if God was represented as a man" (61).

After Nancy Nicholson came Laura Riding, Graves' second and unquestionably most influential lover. Her role in the creating of Graves' goddess myth may have been decisive, but this study does not agree with the view presented by Randall Jarrell:

I believe that it is simplest to think of her as, so to speak, the White Goddess incarnate, the Mother-Muse in contemporary flesh. She seems to have had a radical influence on Graves' life, poetry, and opinions, until 1939; and it was only after Graves was no longer in a position to be dominated by her in specific practice that he worked out his general theory of the necessary dominance of the White Goddess, the Mother-Muse, over all men, all poets. (Jarrell 473-4)

That Riding was dominant is beyond doubt. Seymour-Smith writes that

while (Graves) was working on *Claudius* there was established the absolute, the carefully elaborated, "literal" rule of Laura Riding. Certainly, as everyone without exception who went there [Mallorca, Deyá] noted, she was effectively in charge by early 1932...Graves did what Laura told him to do, and he believed in what she believed. He also enforced her wishes. She did not initiate this state of matriarchy. They initiated it together. (Seymour-Smith 233)

Now there is an interesting ambiguity in the quotation above. At the same time as Graves did what Riding told him to do, he enforced her wishes; Riding did not initiate the matriarchy, they initiated it *together*. No wonder Seymour-Smith, holding these views, does not agree with Jarrell: "the goddess is by no means simply a 'transmogrification' of Riding (the Jarrell notion), whose behaviour was in large part adapted...to provide the Gravesian needs" (Seymour-Smith 408). Jarrell's view is, as he himself says, simple—perhaps even oversimplified. Seymour-Smith's idea is more subtle; he claims that Graves "invented Riding" (94). Riding, in other words, became a part of Graves' mythology, and she, in turn, lived up to Graves' expectations. After realising that the relationship with his first wife was drawing to a close, Graves

began to accept his fate: but he projected the old maternal strictness onto his conception of it—transforming that strictness, however, into something sophisticated, enlightened, and understanding. He would still *feel* misunderstood; but at the hands of this (so far) phantom woman of his imagination he would learn that such feelings were misguided....Thus, in a sense was Laura Riding born. (94)

Seymour-Smith's idea that Graves "invented" Riding does not exclude Riding from having had extraordinarily grandiose ideas about herself. She

explained to a correspondent, "quite frankly, it's not so equal" in Canelluñ [their house in Mallorca] as all that: "we don't believe in equality: the apparatus is rather that there are certain laws of being and procedure centralised in me on which Robert relies and which I am happy to realise cooperatively with him." (Seymour-Smith 233)

But from Riding's domination over Graves to *The White Goddess* is a long step. Bachofen's ideas were in many respects similar to Graves', but we have no evidence of any domineering female influence in his life. Many men have been dominated by strong women without having resorted to quasi-theological rationalisations of their personal experiences. Riding stands for certain of the cruel aspects of Graves' muse, but to what extent she actually provided the impetus for Graves' deification of the image of the female is uncertain. Some circumstances speak in favour of Riding's influence in the theological field, but others speak against her direct influence on *The White Goddess*.

One crucial question is to what extent Riding came to view herself, enforced by Graves, as a more-than-human muse to the poet. There is some indication that she may have mystified her own substance in the presence of others and developed interests in the ethereal aspects of her personality. In *Experts Are Puzzled*, Riding wrote: "[The Numquam] said: She was mad, she thought herself God. No she is mad, she thinks herself Laura" (Wexler 57). The equation God-Riding is also mentioned in Seymour-Smith's biography of Graves, and that circumstance seems to have been a joke: "someone complained that Laura behaved as though she was God, [Cameron] replied with gloomy earnestness, 'Maybe she is God' " (218). Tom Matthews, who lived in Mallorca for some time wrote that "there was something occult about Laura and her gradually revealed, gradually acknowledged domination" (217) and "Julie [Matthew's wife] and I thought Laura's mind was supernatural but that she used her extraordinary powers for good, not evil. The way we put it was: 'She's a witch, but a good witch.' We *believed* that" (Wexler 90). Riding's biographer, Joyce Piell Wexler, writes that Riding "has denied reports that her bedroom wall bore the inscription 'God is a Woman' " (Wexler 96), but does not elaborate with the particulars giving rise to such reports. In her characteristically cryptic style, Riding herself mystifies her presence thus:

As for Robert's knowing, or not knowing, whether I am a magician: Robert is very self-protective and on the whole doesn't let himself know more than he can absolutely help. And so it is satisfactory between us: I tell him what I am. And I do not tell him I am a magician. (Seymour-Smith 234)

The evidence does not suffice to prove that Riding was responsible for Graves' deification of the image of the female. If Riding had, as Seymour-Smith writes, been invented by Graves before they met, then we may assume that Riding was the first stage in the process of Graves' apotheosis of the image of the female. Otherwise, Riding's function in Graves' poetry must be linked to the division of Graves' being into two parts: an Apollonic side, inherited from his father; and a Muse-inspired, Dionysiac side—Dionysiac in an Nietzschean sense—inherited from his mother. Before meeting Riding, Graves had looked for ideas for his poetry in Freudian psychology and in philosophy, both representing in this paradigm Apollonic—male—tendencies. Now he needed something to counter-balance that influence in order to become whole again. He needed something of a more Dionysiac, more inspired spirit and may have thought that Riding's lack of literary background made her free from "intellectual encumbrance." He probably hoped that her literary co-operation would provide him with the inspiration he felt he badly needed. In this respect, Riding became Graves' muse in a literal sense. In a letter to Gertrude Stein, written sometime after the Second World War, Graves described (in retrospect) his ended relationship with Riding thus:

Laura: it is a very strange but familiar story. She was possessed for a great many years by a very cruel and beautiful Muse with which she identified herself; and then she found her position intolerable, and the spirit left her and she became common clay, an American-divorcee-remarried housewife, with a repudiation of all her work. The occasion of the change was very painful and doomful, like the morning when the tenor bell in the Cathedral springs a flaw and gives out a horrid discordant noise. (O'Prey, *In Broken Images*, 337)

There is nothing in Seymour-Smith's biography to indicate that during the Riding years (1926-1939) Graves came to link his ideas about the poetic impulse with the muses of ancient times, and the muses with Frazer's Great Mother-Goddess, and the goddess-worship with a state of matriarchy. Therefore it is probable that when Graves wrote in his "Postscript 1960" about the White Goddess as a "sudden overwhelming obsession," this was genuinely a new realisation to him. When Graves wrote to Seymour-Smith in August 1943 about a projected book on poetry, he does not sound as though he is rationalizing Riding. This is a book

for people of good sense who have shelved the consideration of poetry because it is too muddled a study..., [which] is going to be exciting to write because of discoveries I have already made, in the course of the Golden Fleece researches [Graves' novel on the Argonaut expedition theme], about Apollo and the Muse and the

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tenancy of Mount Parnassus....The Muse is—well she's the mouse-aspect of the moon, and it all starts with that, i.e. Big Medicine under the Moon on Mount Parnassus in matriarchal days. The connexion has never quite snapped. (Seymour-Smith 384)

— Nor does he sound as if he is repeating old stuff; rather the impression that one gets is that Graves has ventured upon something that is totally new to him.

To conclude, the theory of Goddess-worship in Graves' mythology is derived from Romantic notions about a pre-historic stage of matriarchy just as so many other of Graves' ideas about poetic composition are derived from Romantic sources. We must not, however, reduce *The White Goddess* to whatever sources Graves had for his ideas. The inspiration he gives expression to in his writing and the enthusiasm with which he presents his discoveries show that much of what Graves wrote in *The White Goddess* was a creation of his own genius, just as much as it is the result of close ideological ties to Bachofen and an intimate emotional bond with Riding. It is only a pity that Graves was too reluctant to reveal his sources or that he was not critical enough in his use of them. But such an Apollonic attitude may have killed off the provocatively passionate Dionysiac love Graves displayed for the goddess whom it was his "privilege and fate to fall enamoured of."

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