

The latest galley, with its support of Elizabeth Davis' The First Sex by a quotation from Robert Graves, has simply piled one absurdity upon another. Robert Graves is one of the most notorious misreaders of poetry of the twentieth century. His widely reproduced collection of Greek myths, for example, is infamous among classicists for its unscrupulous mingling of fictive invention with accurate scholarly detail, so that it actually is completely useless as a reference work. His The White Goddess has many wonderful passages, but is filled with unreadable linguistic meanderings in Welsh, a language about which Graves blithely admits he knows absolutely nothing! This is a work not of scholarship but of a consciously self-referential personal poetic mythology. No Bennington feminist could continue to cite Graves as an authority once she has assimilated his outrageous assertion in The White Goddess that no woman can be a true poet: "Woman is not a poet: she is either a Muse or she is nothing" (p. 446). This sounds suspiciously like Picasso's "For me a woman is either an idol or a doormat." Moreover, Graves is vicious in his contempt for homosexuality: he denies that first-rate art can be produced by a male homosexual, and he insists, in the face of incontrovertible evidence, that the great Sappho could not possibly have been a Lesbian. The half-mad Graves is plainly not a worthy object of feminist devotion.

Before continuing, I think it best to follow the advice of certain students, who suggest that I set forth my credentials in this area. Classical archaeology has been my greatest interest since grade school; I have had years upon years of training in Latin, Greek, and ancient art, history, and literature; the art of Egypt, Crete, Greece, and Rome is one of my special areas of expertise. In researching my dissertation, I spent two years in the Yale library investigating precisely the question which is the subject of the library's current exhibit: for the purposes of the argument of my dissertation I desperately wished to prove the existence in the ancient Mediterranean of primeval matriarchies and, moreover, of Amazonian bands. After exhaustive research in historical, anthropological, and psychoanalytic primary and secondary source material, however, I sadly and reluctantly concluded that indeed there is not a shred of evidence anywhere in the world of a government composed solely of women. In fact, this is the one error of the great Cambridge anthropologist Jane Harrison, who should more justly have been the authority for the current exhibit, rather than the ludicrously professionally untrained Elizabeth Davis (who, incidentally, after several years of mental illness committed suicide earlier this year).

In a college which is famous for its identification with the arts, it is scandalous that the library should formally display so wanton and amateurish an abuse of art-historical methods as is demonstrated by the horrendously inaccurate captions beneath the photographs of ancient art objects. For example, the exquisite fifth-century "Mourning Athena" is described as perhaps "mourning the collapse of the matriarchies": what nonsense! Athena is leaning upon her spear plainly contemplating a tombstone, which probably marks the grave of a youth slain in battle: there are many grave steles in this mode, which is an elegiac version of the athletic kouros tradition. It is stated here that Athena was the "Great Goddess" in the pre-Hellenic era: there is really very little evidence to support this rash statement. In her worship on the Acropolis, Athena was venerated in two forms, Athena Polias, the patron of agriculture and the olive tree, and Athena Parthenos, the armed maiden of the fighting line. Athena Polias apparently did indeed descend from one of many Cretan fertility goddesses, but the armed Athena Parthenos, the true symbol of fifth-century High Classic Athens, as she was seen in the giant chryselephantine statue by Pheidias in the Parthenon, came from the citadels of the savage Mycenaean war-lords. The "Mourning Athena" is armed: this is the Parthenos, not the Polias, form.

A Roman relief of three figures is described in the exhibit as significantly placing the female figure upon a higher pedestal than the male figure, a difference, by the



way, of scarcely a millimeter. Moreover, the female is said to have a "relaxed but seemingly apprehensive" posture. This is the height of absurdity: not only is there not the slightest apprehensiveness in the nonchalantly lounging female figure, but there is not the slightest meaning whatever to be attached to the difference in pedestal size in this very minor work by a very minor craftsman. The Romans would be extremely surprised to learn that a worship of the great goddess could be attributed to them, since Roman society was from its beginning to its end rigidly patriarchal! (The Asiatic great goddesses were randomly imported for worship during the late-Empire phase of religious syncretism, but they were simply the equals of scores of other deities, ultimately officially presided over by Jupiter.) Here, as everywhere in this exhibit, periods separated from each other by two to three thousand years are indiscriminately mingled: let us not forget that there is as great a lapse of time separating the Romans from the Cretans as there is separating the Romans from us. Only persons whose knowledge of history is at a grade-school level could make so woeful and elementary an error.

A head of Aphrodite here is described as possessing an "intense, almost raging beauty": this is an amazing visual misreading of what is very obviously a perfectly serene, slightly melancholy Hellenistic head, probably derived from Praxiteles' relatively modest and unassuming "Knidian Aphrodite". It is declared here, completely falsely, that the word "hero" is derived from "Hera": linguistically, the two words are probably, but not definitely, cognate; neither one is derived from the other. The Cretan double-ax, the labrys, which is continually misspelled in several different ways throughout the exhibit, is cited here as a symbol of the power of the Great Goddess: it is interesting to note how easily and effortlessly one of the great puzzles of Minoan archaeology is solved by persons without the slightest knowledge of the ancient world. The labrys is one of many ancient symbols--the uraeus, the uroboros, the swastika, the cornucopia, etc.--which may indeed have an arcane bisexual meaning, but about which not much is actually known. Certainly it is inadvisable for the sponsors of the exhibit to cite this as an emblem of a "peaceful" Great Goddess: the one thing that is clear is that the ax represents bloody ritualistic sacrifice.

This is one of the major errors of the exhibit: the ancient Great Goddess is described as "all-merciful" and ruling over an era without war or aggression. In fact, as the briefest perusal of Erich Neumann's The Great Mother will immediately make clear, the Great Goddess is spectacularly ambivalent: she is both benevolent and tyrannical, dispensing, like the Indian goddess Kali, boons with one hand and murderous destruction with the other. The rites of the Great Mother everywhere in the ancient world were accompanied by ritual castration, flagellation, slashing of the body with knives, and amputation of breasts. Moreover, the continual reference in the exhibit to a peaceful "Golden Age" preceding the Hellenic period is a gross fabrication that belongs to the history of fairy tales rather than scholarship: for heaven's sake, the ancients themselves had the sense to be skeptical about this myth! Common sense alone would reveal what was in fact the case: the pre-Hellenic world had very few moments of tranquility in what was a long series of wars, piracy, and invasion-migrations. Life in the primitive world was barbaric, not idyllic. It is incredible that people can still seriously indulge in this kind of sentimental Rousseauistic fantasy of a primeval paradise state: it is as ridiculous as Marie Antoinette's pastoral games in the Petit Trianon. The lack of an historical sense in this exhibit is also evident in the quotation which has been adapted from the Elizabeth Davis book: here "Sumer, Crete, and Egypt" are cited as examples of "gynocracies" after 2000 B.C. One can scarcely resist bursting into laughter at this astonishing fiction! Sumeria and Egypt were two of the most savage, imperialistic, male-centered societies that have ever existed upon the face of the earth. The history and art of ancient Egypt, with the exception of the fascinating, ephemeral Tel-el-Amarna experiment, are the record of bloody conquest and masculine royal monomania.

One of the great misfortunes of contemporary feminism is that at a time when women should be proving their equality to men in mental discipline and philosophic rigor, the American feminist movement as a whole has increasingly discredited itself intellectually by its vulgar and uncritical acclaim for books of empty pseudo-scholarship. No American feminist has yet produced anything of the cultural caliber of Simone de Beauvoir's superbly researched Second Sex or Germaine Greer's witty Female Eunuch, although a case might be made out for Mary Ellmann's wise but unambitious Thinking About Women. These are women who are committed to truth, not propaganda, for however worthy a cause. The most ancient charge against women has been that they permit their emotions to overrule their reason, that their objectivity is hopelessly at the mercy of mere feeling. The sponsors of the current exhibit have unwittingly reinforced this old stereotype. Merely because we intensely want something to be true, however, does not make it true. Do Bennington feminists not see that they are employing the same arrogant and potentially fascistic methods as did those centuries of theologians and historians who found innumerable "facts" to support their emotionally determined view of the mental inferiority of women? I need not add that this same brutal tunnel-vision technique has been used in the past to "prove" the inferiority of Jews and blacks. Let us not disgrace the magnificent future of women by petulantly forcing a priori theories upon the enormous mass of historical evidence. Only years of omniverous reading, research, and self-discipline can give us the authority to produce a truly revolutionary and intellectually responsible feminist revision of western history.

Camille Paglia