



1-2022

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Olsen, Rebekah (2022) "Another Paris: Gabriel and Greek Mythology in “The Dead”," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol14/iss2/8>

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Cover Page Footnote

Thanks to Dr. Jarica Watts and the faculty of the BYU English Department. Your dedication is invaluable.

Another Paris

Gabriel and Greek Mythology in "The Dead"

Rebekah Olson

James Joyce's book *Dubliners*, published in 1914 Ireland, is full of stories dealing with epiphany and paralysis, interwoven throughout with discussions of gender, marriage, and sexuality. In one of these stories, "The Dead," Gabriel Conroy, husband of Gretta and patriarch of his extended family (which includes two elderly maiden aunts and their niece), goes to a dinner party, and then goes home with his wife where he realizes he knows less about her and her past than he thought he did. The critical conversation surrounding this story places a strong emphasis on differing feminist readings of the text, with some authors focusing on the "three graces of Dublin's musical world," while most other scholars emphasize the relationships that the three women in the new guard (Lily the maid, Molly Ivors the teacher, and Gretta Conroy, Gabriel's wife) have with Gabriel and the relevance of those relationships in historical context (Joyce 178).

I am arguing that Lily, Molly Ivors, and Gretta represent the transition away from traditional women's roles by inverting mythical attributes associated with the classical Greek graces: Euphrosyne (joy) is antithetical to Lily's bitterness, which shocks Gabriel; Aglaia (elegance or brightness) represents Molly Ivors as a bright woman, but one who is too modern to

be elegant and leaves early; and Thalia (bloom) represents the closing up of Gretta and her loss of beauty. However, while these subversions of the graces are part of their character, I believe that the three women end up being more closely linked to the three goddesses who act as contestants in the myth of the Judgment of Paris: Lily's bitterness towards unfaithfulness is a nod to Hera; Molly's modern, combative nature is associated with the feminine war deity Athena; and Gretta's allure as a lover makes her a strong parallel with Aphrodite, the eventual winner of the contest. In "The Dead," Joyce undercuts traditional female roles and attempts a shift away from aesthetic ideals towards active participation for Lily, Molly, and Gretta. This transition serves to frame Gabriel's own confused masculinity as well as how he deviates from the soldier-hero model of masculinity into something more domestic—the same kind of domestic masculinity observed in the Paris myth.

Gabriel's identity as a confused and nontraditional man is emphasized in contrast with the rigidity of Edwardian expectations of manhood. The period just before World War I was a time with a straightforward definition of what it meant to be a man. Graham Dawson, a scholar of WWI masculinity, writes of Edwardian England as a time when "masculinities are lived out in the flesh, and fashioned in the imagination" (Dawson 1). This concept emphasizes the ways in which gender norms constitute a sort of box which is impossible to transcend. To Dawson, the idea of the soldier-hero has been "one of the most durable and powerful forms of idealized masculinity within Western cultural traditions since the time of the ancient Greeks" (Dawson 1). Dawson is not the only one who realizes the strength of the archetypal soldier-hero in Edwardian England. Michael Roper, a scholar who deals primarily with WWI notions of masculinity, explains why the soldier-hero had taken such hold of the Edwardian cultural landscape: "the 'muscular Christianity' of the mid-nineteenth century, which had emphasized such qualities as compassion, fairness, and altruism had given way to secular and more aggressive ideals" (Roper 347). Because masculinity had been trending further and further away from traditionally feminine traits, Edwardian masculinity especially prized "stoic endurance, that is, the forbearance of pain and the suppression of sentiment" (Roper 347). While Victorian men had been expected to understand sensibility, Edwardian men were expected to eschew it completely, and self-controlled stoicism was the widely accepted norm.

However, Jessica Meyer, another influential author of WWI masculinity criticism, is quick to point out that “ideals of a more domestic form of masculinity also existed in British culture at the time” (Meyer 6). She emphasizes that, while many men preferred adventuresome, exciting soldier-heroes of masculinity, “the power of the domestic roles of men as providers and protectors remained strong” (Meyer 6). Meyer identifies a split that has existed since the days of Hellenic Troy—the “potential for conflict between these two identities, the domestic and the martial” (Meyer 12). It is in this context of brittle masculinity, that we must see the interactions between Gabriel and the three women who so disconcert him—women with whom, “personal encounters disturb [Gabriel’s] poise until he finally gives in to the annihilation he has not only anticipated but invited,” as Edward Brandabur concludes in his book *A Scrupulous Meanness*, about Joyce’s early work (Brandabur 116). Brandabur argues that Gabriel deserves his tragic ending in some way, in part because he has invited this annihilation through his perfect misunderstanding of the nature of the women around him.

Gabriel tries to define his own masculinity based on the three women he interacts with, and over the course of the story, he realizes that Lily, Molly, and Gretta are not ornamental, but instead they have much more power than he initially ascribes to them. David Daiches, one of the defining theorists on “The Dead,” established that “Gabriel Conroy’s encounters with three women—Lily, Molly Ivors, and Gretta Conroy— which mark the several stages in his journey toward self-knowledge, constitute the heart and soul of the story’s technique, theme, and pattern” (Higdon 179–80). This commentary on both the technique and the pattern of “The Dead” highlights the fundamental nature of these encounters to the story; without these encounters, there would be no Gabriel. There are some similarities in his interactions with all three women, like how he initially describes their physical attributes (Lily’s complexion or Molly’s high-necked blouse) and how, almost immediately, in conversation, he loses his edge.

However, I am most interested in the classical allusion in the idea of the “three graces” which is identified during Gabriel’s speech when he says, “I will not attempt to play tonight the part that Paris played on another occasion. I will not attempt to choose between [the graces]” (Joyce 178). This recollection of the famous myth about the Judgment of Paris, however, is an incorrect retelling. Paris in myth does not have to choose between three minor graces. Paris has to choose between three goddesses—an apple from

the garden of the Hesperides is inscribed “to the most beautiful,” and Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite pick Paris, the Trojan prince, to decide which of them is most worthy of the apple. Paris chooses Aphrodite because she promises him Helen of Troy, a choice which Gabriel mimics, although, like Paris, he has very little idea initially of the powers at play. Gabriel knows about the graces, but now he has to adapt to goddesses in his life—women who have vastly more power than he ever thought. In the story, Lily represents the inversion of Hera, disappointed by the unfaithfulness of men (Hera was a notorious victim of her husband’s infidelity), while Molly Ivors is Athena, a well-educated but often masculine-coded warrior. Meanwhile, Aphrodite is represented by Gretta as Gabriel realizes just how little he truly knows about the love of his life and is forced to confront whether he even knows how to love her properly.

Gabriel’s conversation with Lily is brief but terribly disconcerting for him, as it subverts his expectation that all women should like to be in love. As Gabriel first walks in, he notices Lily’s appearance, smiling at the way she says his name and noticing how pale she looks in the lamplight. However, a familiar remark about whether she is dating goes awry as Lily responds with unforeseen heat. As the foil to Euysonthe’s joy, Lily is full of “bitterness” towards her prospects in love, saying, “the men that is now is only all palaver and what they can get out of you” (154). The word “palaver” is an unusual one. It was most often used in West Africa as a pidgin word that helped traders negotiate (“Palaver”). In context, it seems like a dig by Joyce at the transactionality of marriage—not only are men all “palaver” but they are also “what they can get out of you.” Both phrases say, more or less, the same thing, that men want something from Lily, something that she is unwilling to provide. “Palaver” can also refer to trouble or “hassle,” which makes sense because, at this moment, Gabriel is more or less hassling Lily by asking her condescending questions. The scene so disconcerts Gabriel because he has been thinking of Lily exclusively as an underclass maid. Maybe he realizes that her bitter comments are in reference to him as well, a hassle who also wants her to provide a service. This is the first glimpse Gabriel gets of a woman responding to him in a way completely unexpected to him, and highlights that she has value for her interior mind as well as the shallow exterior he saw before.

Gabriel’s interaction with Lily is the first moment where a woman transitions from being an ornamental “grace” in Gabriel’s mind and starts

becoming a real person with thoughts and feelings he cannot predict, potentially even a goddess. He feels that his misreading of the Lily situation “had cast a gloom over him” and has to wait for a minute outside the ballroom to compose himself (Joyce 155). Lily is less of a “grace” than she first appeared in his mind—she’s not an ornamental object, but rather a depiction of the goddess Hera, who is the goddess of marriage but is constantly disappointed by her husband’s philandering. Hera is also notoriously bitter, a goddess who made life difficult for heroes. This complete role reversal from servant to fellow human being makes it clear to Gabriel that Lily is an agent now, with the power to make Gabriel uncomfortable, and the second he realizes that the only perceived power he can maintain in light of his embarrassment is to buy her off. Lily’s statement makes Gabriel confront what Zach Bowen, a Joyce scholar, calls “[Gabriel’s] own patronizing treatment of the maid with its attendant palaver and tries to buy her indulgence” (Bowen 108). Bowen emphasizes the transactionality of the exchange, by using the Catholic indulgence, another idea that means Gabriel feels bad for hassling Lily, but he also believes money can atone for that. I think that idea of forgiveness for crimes yet to be committed means that Gabriel is covering his bases with Lily. He is doing his best to throw money at the situation in order for it to go away, which is a classic upper-class reaction to lower-class discontent. However, that moment could further be seen as Gabriel making a sacrifice to the goddess—indulgences being a common way to pay off the god of Catholicism for your sins. Gabriel is not choosing to let Lily change him, but rather he is trying to appease the anger of a newly identified goddess.

Molly Ivors is a modern new woman, which is just as threatening as it sounds. At first, Gabriel attempts to view her as decorative as well—he almost manages, saying, “She was a frank-mannered talkative young lady with a freckled face and prominent brown eyes. She did not wear a low-cut bodice . . . ” and she was wearing an Irish brooch (Joyce 162). By attempting to reduce her to a type, Gabriel is also trying to reduce her to manageable proportions. Gary Leonard, a Joyce scholar using a Laconian lens, writes that Gabriel is so disconcerted by her because there “is nothing about *her* (either in appearance or manner) that might help identify *him*” (Leonard 300). Molly’s brooch has meaning to her that he cannot identify. Her absence of a low-cut bodice means she is not dressing to please him at all. The first thing she says once they start dancing is “I have a crow to pluck with you,” and it does not get better for Gabriel after that (Joyce 163). Her frankness disconcerts Gabriel,

and he stays on the defensive for almost the entire conversation, especially once she accuses him of being a West Briton. His response is to, as Bowen puts it, “insulate himself from exposure to the inclemencies of patriotic and simplistic belief by a cloak of sophistication and feigned dispassion” (Bowen 108). This attempt at putting up barriers is similar to what we see him do with Lily; with Lily, he offers her money as a way to put up class barriers between them, but here, because Molly is someone of his own class, he reinforces the boundaries of belief between them. But, we almost immediately see Gabriel’s cloak start to unravel. Molly challenges his notions of what kind of young woman he should have to dance with. As a fairly young man he should be open to change, but instead, he is incapable of moving with the times and is threatened by the changes that this new femininity presents.

Molly’s war-like behavior as well as her lack of traditional femininity links her closely with the goddess Athena. As the goddess of wisdom and battle strategy, Athena is the intelligent foil to Ares’ violent war. Miss Ivors spends time at university, cares about her native lands and language, speaks almost exclusively in interrogatives (like Athena’s pet bird, the owl), and is not afraid to challenge Gabriel to a battle (in this case, a battle of the wits). She outstrips him in conversation, finishing their conversation with a disgusted “Of course, you’ve no answer,” and yet in the dance, he almost deceives himself into thinking that she is just teasing (Joyce 165). Joyce writes, “She looked at him from under her brows for a moment quizzically until he smiled. Then . . . she stood on tiptoe and whispered into his ear: West Briton!” (165). This moment is a critical one in their battle and in the challenging of Gabriel’s overall ideas about women. He relaxes into a comfortable position with Molly, and as she studies him, he smiles. He is unafraid of what she will see and he believes in the idea that her impression of him will, in fact, be favorable. However, as she leans in to deliver her parting epithet, she does the exact opposite of what he expects. Molly Ivors insults him and walks away, leaving him flustered and confused.

Of course, the most important woman in the story is Gretta, who is a clear parallel to Paris’ Aphrodite. Gabriel says how much he prefers her over the other two women who have embarrassed him tonight by asserting their power over him when he says, “There was grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something” (Joyce 182). The word “grace” is not an accident here—it ties into the three graces mentioned previously, and it shows not only that Gabriel thinks of his wife as one of

the sweetly submissive women of past femininity, but also that grace has deep theological connotations, defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “a quality of God: benevolence towards humanity, bestowed freely and without regard to merit” (“Grace”). It is also tied to purity, virtue, strength to resist temptation, and marks of divine favor. One last definition that might be especially pertinent here is an obsolete definition that defines grace as “a gratuity, a tip” (“Grace”). In light of Gabriel’s attempts to buy Lily off after his humiliation, this definition adds layers of meaning to this idea, making Gabriel’s relationship with Gretta transactional as well—as much as he would likely recoil to admit it.

As Gabriel’s Aphrodite, Gretta forces Gabriel to confront feelings of love and lust, as “moments of their secret life together burst like stars upon his memory” (Joyce 185). She affects him differently near the end of the story, and his attraction to her seems to be heightened to such a degree that “only the stress of his nails against the palms of his hands held the wild impulse of his body in check” (Joyce 187). Like Aphrodite, she completely controls his thoughts, filling him with absolute passion, but is completely unattainable. What she is offering him is, in some ways, a consolation prize. After all, Aphrodite offered Paris the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen, who was already married to someone else, which parallels how Gretta was loved by Michael Furey before she was ever loved by Gabriel. This matter of precedence leads to Gabriel at the end feeling as if he has lost, much like Paris at the end of *The Iliad*, his love to her first love. She successfully masters the art of being unattainable, goddess-like in the passion she inspires, but also in the distance she maintains: one second kissing him suddenly, the next neither answering his questions “nor yield[ing] wholly to his arm” (Joyce 189). As Gabriel chooses love like Paris before him, he ends up choosing to try and purchase something that cannot be bought—the love of another person.

At the nexus of this story is the choice that Gabriel has to make between power, wisdom, and passion, and like Paris, he is an unlikely person to make this choice. In the myths, Paris is a prince. He is also a beautiful, slightly effeminate, intelligent shepherd, who is sent away to be killed because his role in the destruction of Troy was foretold at his birth, and yet was saved by a herdsman who could not stomach killing the infant. Paris is not the soldier-hero of Troy, any more than Gabriel is the soldier-hero of this narrative. Neither man is particularly stoic, although we do see Gabriel try to hide his emotions, exhibiting Edwardian stoicism in his refusal to make the first

move in the bedroom, saying, "If she would only turn to him or come to him of her own accord!" (Joyce 189). Both men are eventually disappointed by their choices, as the result of their desire to be masters of their women proves that they can never fully control another human being. Finally, both do prove the superiority of the domestic over the soldier-hero masculinity, with Paris's defeat of Achilles and Gabriel's victory in marrying Gretta, at least for a time, but both of their stories end in tragedy. At the end of *The Iliad*, Paris is killed in battle and dies, while Gabriel is left isolated from his wife, looking out at the snow and thinking about the dead.

This similarity between Paris and Gabriel is evidence of the cyclical nature of the decisions that men—especially domestic men—throughout the ages have access to, as opposed to the decisions that soldier-heroes have access to. Domestic men must choose to be good providers and hope that the women in their lives stay because of that. Domestic men sometimes have to rely more on the hand of fate than their own merit, with Paris famously being saved by Aphrodite any number of times, and Gabriel only getting a chance to court Gretta because of Michael's death. Gabriel cannot access a wide variety of choices in Edwardian England, and neither could Paris in early Troy. Joyce would likely argue that because domesticity necessitates transactionality; it is almost impossible for the domestically masculine man to love his wife without reservations, and even more difficult for her to reciprocate. Not only that, but given a choice between power, wisdom, and passion, it seems that the domestic man will choose passion every single time, because it reinforces his notions of what it means to be a man and plays on his insecurities that he may not be as manly as he is expected to be. Leonard argues that "Gabriel desires to be the desire of the Woman—of Lily, Molly Ivors, or Gretta—because she/they . . . can then provide what he lacks, or rather protect him from realizing that he lacks anything" (Leonard 303). Leonard explains that feeling desirable is a key motivator of masculinity, and I believe that as both Paris and Gabriel have been made to feel undesirable, they latch on to the women in their lives whom they need to justify their manhood.

Joyce has written Gabriel as a timeless character, a mimic of one of the most timeless characters in one of the most timeless tales ever. Gabriel, in filling the part of Paris, is first forced to acknowledge that he is dealing with goddesses, not graces, in the persons of Lily, Molly, and Gretta. Then, he is forced to choose between them, "the part that Paris played on another

occasion" (Joyce 178). By aligning himself with Paris, he demonstrates the cyclical nature of his choice and proves that, although neither of them is a typical soldier-hero of masculinity, both are motivated to choose passion in part because it reaffirms their own domestic masculinity. However, the passion that both Gabriel and Paris choose seems to be doomed from the start. Joyce was clearly thinking about the universality of myth, the tension between different kinds of masculinity, and how different kinds of men react to different kinds of women. Overall, I think there are two clear messages of "The Dead": the importance of making decisions from a place of security and strength, and the complete impossibility of forcing feelings. Only from that perspective can anyone break the Paris-cycle of choosing exactly what is worst for both themselves and the people they care about in pursuit of love.

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