

Edith Hamilton, *The Greek Way* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1930, 1943), reissued 1993, 2017. Paperback. ISBN 978-0-393-35444-7-pbk. pp. 9-266

W.W. Norton, which originally published Edith Hamilton's *The Greek Way* in 1930, and brought out a significantly revised and expanded version in 1943, has reissued its paperback version from 1964 (itself reprinted in 1983). It is not clear why. Or what distinguishes the 2017 from the 1993 reissue. 2017 marks the 150th anniversary of Hamilton's birth, to expatriate American parents, near Dresden, Germany, on August 12, 1867. Yet the brief biography on the back cover does not mention that fact, nor her credentials as a classically trained educator—a BA and MA in Latin and Greek from Bryn Mawr College, and a further year as a fellow in Latin there; a year of graduate study in Leipzig and Munich; twenty-six years as headmistress of the Bryn Mawr School in Baltimore, the first all-female secondary institution in the US with an exclusively college preparatory curriculum — before she launched a new career, in her sixties, as a popularizing writer on classical antiquity. It merely asserts that she was made an honorary citizen of Athens, won the National Achievement Award, received honorary degrees from Yale, Rochester and the University of Pennsylvania, and was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Norton's only new additions are apparently the facsimile of a vase painting featuring scenes from the Trojan War on the front cover, and a quote from *New York Times* columnist David Brooks on the back.

To wit, “Hamilton is at her best describing the tragic sensibility, the strange mixture of doom and exaltation that makes Greek drama. It was based on the conviction that good grows out of bad, virtue out of hardship, and that wisdom is born in suffering.” The decision to choose Brooks' words is also puzzling: only four of the book's seventeen chapters treat tragedy and the three Athenian tragedians. The choice of Brooks himself is equally so, since his columns do not regularly adduce evidence, or offer analogies, from classical antiquity. Oddly, too, he is not identified as writing for *The New York Times*, although the brief summary of the book's contents, directly below this quote, begins by stating “In *The Greek Way*, Edith Hamilton captures with ‘Homeric power and simplicity (*New York Times*) the spirit of the golden age of Greece”, words taken from the *Times*' own obituary of Hamilton on June 1, 1963. One infers, therefore, that Norton hoped to capitalize upon Brooks' image as a conservative political voice for an intellectually prestigious newspaper, and attract well-educated readers of a similar persuasion, not necessarily those with any serious interest in the writers or topics featured within the book's pages: Homer, Pindar, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Aristophanes, Euripides, Plato, Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophon; the philosophy of Socrates, the Greek wars with Persia and Sparta, and civilized living.

Hamilton's representation of ancient Greek society in her writings may justify such a decision. From the early 1920's onward, after partnering with Doris Fielding Reid, a politically conservative former Bryn Mawr School student twenty seven years her

junior (and the dedicatee of *The Greek Way*), Hamilton distanced herself from the progressive values of her family. Most notable among them was her younger sister, Alice, a longtime resident of Jane Addams' Hull House, activist for global peace and social reform, and public health pioneer who was appointed to Harvard Medical School in 1919 as the university's first female faculty member. In comparing "the Greeks", by which she invariably means fifth century BCE democratic Athens, favorably to her own mid-twentieth century US milieu, Edith Hamilton's writings sharply criticize various American institutions that protected, nurtured and offered opportunities for self-advancement to those lacking material and other inherited advantages, from labor unions to public schools to efforts at ending inequality resulting from race-based slavery.

But even so, her devotees numbered the politically progressive Senator Robert F. Kennedy. He engraved the contents of *The Greek Way* upon his heart, frequently quoting her words, and spontaneously incorporating two quotes from her works in his most memorable speech, delivered in Hamilton's home state of Indiana on April 4, 1968, upon learning that the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. had just been murdered in Memphis. I myself have explained her appeal to RFK by adducing "the sheer power of her lucid and lapidary language", and her "mesmerizing narrative about, *inter alia*, human fate, that brought him emotional solace and made his existence more meaningful in deeply painful, truly tragic personal circumstances."¹

Significantly, the "quote" from Brooks appeared in his *NYT* column of November 26, 2006, inspired by Emilio Estevez' movie "Bobby". After describing the film as "introducing the martyrdom of Robert Kennedy to another generation of Americans," Brooks devotes the rest of his words to "Robert's reaction to his brother's death", drawing heavily on Evan Thomas' splendid 2000 biography, *Robert Kennedy: His Life*.

In claiming "in the ensuing months [after JFK's assassination]" RFK "was devoured by grief," Brooks furnishes two verbatim quotes from Thomas about Kennedy's "wasted and gaunt appearance" and "flat, unrhythmic voice with a mournful edge" when reading from *The Greek Way*, initially identifying Thomas as "one of [Kennedy's] biographers." Yet Brooks never acknowledges that his entire analysis of how *The Greek Way* influenced RFK personally and intellectually derives from Thomas' book, particularly Thomas' brilliant insights about why Kennedy embraced Hamilton's idiosyncratic views of Greek tragedy. Among them: "The saving grace for Kennedy was the exultation Greeks found in suffering...By reading the great tragedies, Kennedy could find meaning (and relief) because 'tragedy is nothing less than pain transmuted into exaltation by the alchemy of poetry.' Hamilton writes,

¹ "Greek (and Roman) Ways and Thoroughfares: The Routing of Edith Hamilton's Classical Antiquity," in Ropsie Wyles and Edith Hall, eds. *Women Classical Scholars: Unsealing the Fountain from the Renaissance to Jacqueline de Romilly* (Oxford 2016) 216–242.

‘Tragedy’s one essential is a soul that can feel greatly.’ Few souls ever felt more than Robert Kennedy’s” (Thomas 287).

My question, therefore, is why Norton did not quote what Evan Thomas wrote about *The Greek Way* and its appeal to Robert Kennedy, rather than Brooks’ paraphrases of Thomas that did not give Thomas due credit. Was it because Thomas’ own father, Evan Welling Thomas II, worked as an editor for W.W. Norton; or Thomas’ grandfather was an icon of the American left, Norman Thomas, six-time Presidential candidate for the Socialist Party of America; or that the Brooks-blurb does not indicate the original context of Brooks’ words, in a column about RFK? Whatever the reasons, by failing to give due credit to earlier, serious research and thinking about Robert Kennedy, Brooks’ column, and its quote on the Norton cover, replicate Edith Hamilton’s own citation practices in *The Greek Way* and subsequent writings. They, as I have also observed, rarely acknowledge the work of professional classics scholars, and do not undertake or present original, responsible research in a documented scholarly format.

Maybe these practices sell books. They certainly have not harmed Edith Hamilton’s own phenomenal sales. But W.W. Norton’s recognition of why Edith Hamilton’s writings, whatever their scholarly shortcomings, have sold, and mattered— to important political figures like RFK as well as young readers, such as myself, who embraced classics as a vocation because of their early encounters with her books— would do much to make a stronger case for their value as worthy of wide attention today.

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