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INTRODUCTION

✦ On the afternoon of March 20, 1889, slender, brown-haired, twenty-one-year-old Edith Hamilton, visiting New York City from her hometown of Fort Wayne, Indiana, slipped into the Lyceum Theatre on Fourth Avenue and was transported back to ancient Athens—or so she told her cousin and confidant Jessie, almost three years her senior.¹ The vehicle for this remarkable experience was a production of the *Electra* of Sophocles conforming as closely as possible to the conventions of ancient Greek theater, complete with a brief ritual honoring Dionysus at an onstage altar before the play began. The entire performance was set before the exterior of the palace of Agamemnon, with its three doors. The only exceptions to the production's efforts to faithfully reproduce an ancient Greek tragedy were that the cast did not wear masks, the fifteen-member chorus was composed of women (not men), and the actors spoke English, but in verse form. Edith was enthralled, telling Jessie, "I enjoyed it all intensely, it was so entirely new."² For its producer, David Belasco, it was an experiment, one that was becoming increasingly common at the turn of the century, when devotees of the theater longed to see the stage freed from commercialism to pursue an artistic path.³ Still, this production, mounted by Franklin H. Sargent's American Academy of Dramatic Arts, was the only ancient Greek tragedy seen on the New York stage between 1882 and 1908, making it an unusual event.⁴ Edith was not alone in her enthusiasm; four additional performances had had to be added to the original schedule to accommodate the demand for tickets, and it was one of these that she attended.⁵

By that March afternoon, Edith Hamilton already aspired to a career as a writer and a classical scholar, two ambitions that she would eventually merge in her books. The 1889 performance of *Electra* was one of her first experiences of the movement to improve American theater through a deeper understanding of the historical roots of drama and the contexts in which genres such as ancient Greek tragedy had originally been performed. Such efforts would help to inspire Edith's first book, *The Greek Way*, still over forty years in her future.⁶ At the age of twenty-one, however, she was already certain of her fascination with the ancient Greeks. To see a performance that so faithfully attempted to recreate one of their greatest artistic achievements thrilled her by making ancient Greece come to life. Her father, Montgomery Hamilton, had been her first classics teacher, beginning her instruction in Latin when she was ten years old. To this she had added her passionate study of the ancient Greeks, which had already developed to the point that she could discern to Jessie the few ways in which Belasco and Sargent had departed from the conventions of Greek drama in the presentation of *Electra*. Still, it brought the ancient Greeks near, prompting her to tell Jessie, "I have been in Ancient Greece to-day, I have been through one of the experiences of a Greek of the time of Pericles."⁷ It was a significant moment for her, one demonstrating that, despite the span of centuries, the cultural achievements of the ancient Greeks endured. Moreover, this production of *Electra* showed that neither actors nor audience had to understand ancient Greek to appreciate tragedy. For Edith Hamilton, it was appropriate that her realization of the enduring nature of the ancient Greeks' achievement occurred in a popular setting, not a scholarly one. She would become the most prominent interpreter of the relevance of ancient Greek culture for the modern world, writing for an audience who had not studied ancient Greek but who sought knowledge of the roots of Western civilization.

More than fifty years after her death, Edith Hamilton's argument for the unique achievements of the ancient Greeks continues to attract readers. *The Greek Way* was first published in 1930, but it remains in print, as do all her other books. Her volume *Mythology*, which first appeared in 1942, has become the standard rendering of the ancient tales.⁸

Her distinctive writing style, with its remarkable lucidity, must account for part of this endurance. As an author, Edith Hamilton had a unique ability to explain to her readers the essence of an important idea.

Her inspiration was the ancient Greek language itself, a reflection, she felt, of the clarity of the ancient Greek mind.⁹ The study of ancient languages, she believed, helped to produce clarity in writing, a notable aspect of her own style. Hamilton's essential ideas about the ancient Greeks began with the assertion that Athens in the fifth century BCE was the only society that had achieved balance between the individual's need for spiritual and intellectual development and society's need for ordered freedom. This freedom, political and spiritual, was a Greek discovery and could be maintained only if individuals practiced self-restraint.¹⁰ The ancient Greeks were therefore relevant to the modern world, for which they had laid the groundwork by applying reason to solve problems. Seeking answers to intellectual, political, or spiritual questions from the ancient Greeks was possible both because of their essentially modern nature and the unchanging needs of humanity.¹¹ To Edith, the ancient Greeks had discovered the individual and permitted each member of society free inquiry to seek spiritual and intellectual truth.¹² In later life, she connected this more closely to early Christianity. She argued that the early church had been free of confining doctrines and formalism and had allowed individuals to follow, as best they could, the spiritual path set down by Jesus, to whom Socrates had been a worthy predecessor.¹³ In her writings, Edith thus linked the two fundamental influences in her life: Christianity and ancient Greece.

Certain key phrases that appeared frequently in her texts reinforced her blend of classical and Christian inspiration. These included biblical phrases such as "clouds of witnesses" to describe the spread of the prophets' teaching.¹⁴ She referred, often without quotation marks, to lines from English poetry that evoked classical themes, such as the close of John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn": "Beauty is truth, truth beauty."¹⁵ The phrase "sunlit heights," taken from the 1881 Oscar Wilde sonnet "Helas!," also appeared often in her texts. This last phrase Edith used in her later writing to describe humanity's quest for knowledge of the good.¹⁶ Early in her writing career, however, she used it in the sense that

Wilde had intended, to convey the heights and corresponding depths of ancient tragedy. Appropriately, it opened Edith's January 1926 essay "Tragedy," which appeared in the magazine *Theatre Arts Monthly* and was the seed of *The Greek Way*.¹⁷

Such an individual approach to the ancient world was necessarily selective, and contemporary critics, as well as later ones, have questioned her claims to the unique qualities of the ancient Greeks. In the opening chapters of *The Greek Way*, Edith Hamilton asserted a stark dichotomy between East and West that was criticized by contemporary critics.¹⁸ In the twenty-first century, her work has received more criticism. Classical scholar Dr. Bruce Thornton, one of her admirers, wrote in his volume *Greek Ways*, published in 2000, that Hamilton's assertion of the ancient Greeks as the founders of Western civilization has caused her to be viewed as among the "apologists for Western hegemony and oppression."¹⁹ Her reputation among academic classical scholars has fallen due to the forces of multiculturalism—forces that question the assertions of superior qualities in Western culture as compared to other regions of the world. Her arguments for the relevance of the ancient Greeks to the modern world have been rejected.

This stands in contrast to her experiences later in life, as she reached her nineties, when academic classicists reviewed her book *The Echo of Greece* favorably and she was twice invited to address the Classical Association of the Mid-Atlantic States (in 1957 and 1960).²⁰ As the post-World War II world struggled with the spread of communism, the dissolution of old European empires, and the efforts to establish democracy in former colonies and in war-torn Europe, Edith Hamilton's *The Echo of Greece* was an exposition of how the United States should exercise its new political power cautiously and how its democracy, preserved by citizens, could serve as an example to other nations. It warned against the abuse of power in which Athens had engaged after leading the Greek city-states to victory in the Persian Wars. It showed Americans what the ancient Greek political experience could teach its twentieth-century practitioners and asserted the value of the continued study of the classical world. Academic classicists expressed their appreciation of Edith Hamilton's achievement in the wake of the book's publication. Of all

Hamilton's books, *The Echo of Greece* is the one that most fully reflects the historical and political context that produced it. However, a full understanding of Hamilton's arguments is impossible without consideration of the contexts in which she wrote them. Although her books separated East and West, her writing also showed her strong opposition to communism, anti-Semitism, fascism, and imperialism. She was a pacifist and, in her support of the League of Nations, she showed herself to be a supporter of equality among nations. She was an opponent of the use of the atomic bomb. These aspects of her thought show that she was far from a simple apologist for Western hegemony. To her, the development of the atom bomb was certainly proof that not all achievements of Western societies contributed to the knowledge of the good that Plato had sought. She also realized that if Cold War America was going to stand as a model of democracy, it had to extend justice to all its citizens. In August 1958, she was one of thousands who spoke out against the death sentence issued to Jimmy Wilson, an African American in Alabama who had been convicted by an all-white jury of the theft of \$1.95. The case caused an outcry, both domestically and internationally, as many argued that the United States could not be the leader of the free world if some of its citizens were the victims of racism. Ultimately, Wilson received clemency.²¹ Her letter to the editor of the *New York Times* on the Wilson case also revealed a broader opposition to the death penalty in general.

The examination of Edith Hamilton's personal life also brings to light the fact that she chose to live her life with another woman. Hamilton and her partner Doris Fielding Reid were together for over forty years and raised a family, composed of Doris's nephews and nieces. At first glance, this might seem to challenge the conception of Edith Hamilton as a conservative defender of Western values. In fact, it is rare to find anyone in their social circle, including their Republican friends in Washington, D.C., where Edith spent the last twenty years of her life, commenting on their relationship. They lived in the capital during the years of what historian David K. Johnson has termed the "Lavender Scare," which, from 1947 until 1955, linked homosexuality to adherence to communism and pushed thousands of homosexuals out of government jobs,

particularly at the State Department.²² Edith and Doris, both strong anticommunists, were not directly affected. Neither worked for the federal government, and lesbians were targeted in smaller numbers than gay men in the purges.²³ Still, Edith and Doris's life together was a challenge to some of the rhetoric in the capital during these years. They were well-known in the city's social and political circles, and the Washington press regularly reported on Edith's literary achievements. Although even her friend the drama critic John Mason Brown suggested that she often ignored the Greek attitude toward homosexuality, Edith was writing about how the political experience of the ancient Greeks was relevant to the twentieth-century world, just as Washington was referred to as "the Platonic and Socratic homosexual playground" of the nation by one of the promoters of the purges, the medical doctor Arthur Guy Matthew.²⁴

The legacy of the ancient Greeks was a contested space that Edith entered into during these years, with the full approval of her politically conservative friends such as the journalist Felix Morley, the Republican senator from Ohio Robert A. Taft, and the U.S. Army general Albert Coady Wedemeyer. Although her personal life might place her on the political left in the twenty-first century world, her arguments in favor of continuing the study of the ancient classical roots of Western civilization were valued among her social circle in Washington, D.C. The few comments on their relationship that did survive expressed approval. Morley wrote privately in his diary about how well suited Edith and Doris were to each other. Another Republican senator, Ralph E. Flanders of Vermont, a longtime Washington friend, wrote Doris a letter of condolence after Edith's death in 1963, a tacit acknowledgment of his understanding of what the two women had meant to each other.²⁵ In her private life and in her published writing, Edith Hamilton was a strong advocate of individual freedom. This position was widely accepted by her friends, who worried that the spread of communism would make the individual citizen insignificant and powerless.

All of Edith Hamilton's books addressed contemporary problems, an aspect of her writing that became more pronounced as her career

progressed. *The Greek Way*, while written amid a social circle dedicated to improving the artistic quality of the New York stage, argued for the status of the ancient Greeks as the first modern people, a characterization widely held to be true by writers after the First World War, who tried to understand how the Greeks had created such a culturally advanced civilization in the wake of their own conflagration, the Persian Wars. In the aftermath of the First World War and the establishment of the League of Nations, with its vision of equality among nations, *The Roman Way*, published as a companion volume in 1932, offered the Roman Empire as an example of the successes and pitfalls of international relations more closely bound. For Edith, the rise of fascism and the Second World War were crises that could only be answered by books that tried to address spiritual concerns. Horrified by Hitler's rise to power and his subsequent treatment of Germany's Jewish population, Edith wrote *The Prophets of Israel*, published in 1936, to emphasize the Jewish contribution to Western civilization and to describe what she felt was the prophets' idealist vision for society. Even her 1942 volume *Mythology*, devoted to the recounting of the great Greek tales, had an introduction filled with references to the unique place of Greece in Western civilization, a reflection of how the Nazi conquest of the nation the previous year had stifled its resistance to fascism. She characterized the titan Prometheus, chained to a rock by Zeus, as someone who "refused to submit to cruelty and tyranny," a portrayal that has struck some as unusual but which countered the Nazi claim to him as the progenitor of the Aryans, as asserted in Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.²⁶ That same year, her expanded version of *The Greek Way*, published as *The Great Age of Greek Literature*, included a chapter on Thucydides that offered a means of understanding the Second World War through the Peloponnesian War and the suffering it had engendered. Her second book on the bible, *Witness to the Truth: Christ and His Interpreters*, published in 1948, outlined an essential Christianity, free from dogma and miracles, which Edith thought would answer the great crisis of faith that many felt in the wake of the horrors of the Second World War. Her revised edition of *The Prophets of Israel*, published as *Spokesmen for God: The Great Teachers of the Old Testament*, published in 1949, made it clear that one of those horrors was

the Holocaust. Finally, *The Echo of Greece*, published in 1957, was a Cold War–era attempt to ask citizens to exercise the responsibility that the maintenance of democracy demanded. All of Edith Hamilton’s books tried to answer important questions raised by the times in which she lived. As the historical events that inspired her books have become more distant chronologically, it has been possible to see her legacy as only her arguments for the uniqueness of the ancient Greeks and the sharp division between East and West that was too pronounced even for some of her contemporary critics.

It is the goal of this biography to place Edith Hamilton’s books in their proper historical context and to examine how her life experiences informed her works. Her written works, all published after she was sixty years old, encourage this. Snippets of autobiography, which appear in all of Hamilton’s books, were meant as illustrations of how individual experience related to humanity. This book also remedies the fact that, in spite of Edith Hamilton’s wide and enduring reading audience, no full-length biography of her has been written. The only such effort, *Edith Hamilton: An Intimate Portrait*, written by Doris, was published in 1967 and remains notable for the number of anecdotes she collected about Edith during the years of her writing career. But Reid left out much of Edith’s life. After earning both bachelor’s and master’s degrees at Bryn Mawr College in 1894, Edith spent a year in Germany as a graduate student in classics at the universities of Leipzig and Munich. Upon her return to the United States, she began a twenty-six-year career (1896–1922) as headmistress of the Bryn Mawr School in Baltimore, a preparatory school then closely linked to the Pennsylvania college. During her years in Baltimore, Edith was active in the women’s suffrage movement, formed a friendship with Gertrude Stein, and traveled extensively abroad, to Europe, Japan, and China with Lucy Martin Donnelly, an English professor at Bryn Mawr College with whom she tried, unsuccessfully, to have a romantic relationship. These formative events and experiences received short shrift from Doris, decades Edith’s junior. For example, Doris left out Edith’s participation in reform movements and her friendships with women reformers of the Progressive Era. Edith, a classic liberal in her political orientation, participated mainly in the

movement for women's suffrage, but also campaigned actively for compulsory school attendance laws in Baltimore and Maryland. Her later writings indicate that she opposed some Progressive Era movements such as temperance.²⁷ Nevertheless, Edith had been introduced to the idea that women could play a role in reforming society, first in her childhood and later during her student years at Bryn Mawr College. In Baltimore, she fell naturally into a social circle of highly educated, activist women; some, such as Dr. Mary Sherwood, were on the Bryn Mawr School faculty and others, such as Elizabeth King Ellicott, had been active in founding the school and later turned to suffrage activity. Doris, decades younger than these women, felt uncomfortable around the independent, college-educated women who confidently set about the tasks of municipal reform, increasing educational opportunities for women, and securing the vote. Doris set herself and Edith apart from them, referring, even in her biography of Edith, to the new women reformers as "old war horses."²⁸ Later in life, Edith downplayed her role in the women's suffrage movement, yet doing so ignores how the movement helped to develop Edith's ideas of citizenship, which she would discuss in *The Echo of Greece*, and it led eventually to her participation in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, which led to her support of the League of Nations.²⁹

Doris's characterization of Edith as completely different from the women campaigners of the Progressive Era, however, resulted in the complete omission of many of the women who were important to Edith before she began her writing career. Until she left the Bryn Mawr School in 1922, she socialized almost exclusively with women of a similar age and level of education as herself. These included Lucy Martin Donnelly, probably the most notable omission Doris made from Edith's life. Lucy was not only a woman who had, like Edith, embarked on a profession, she was also a supporter of women's suffrage, and, more importantly, she was Edith's aesthetic and intellectual guide. Doris certainly knew Lucy but may have come to view her as a rival for Edith's affection.

Edith was a popular writer with some claim to a scholarly background, a condition that has given rise to questions about how to assess her work. She herself valued creativity, and one of her editors understood

that she thought of herself as a writer more than a scholar.³⁰ Late in life, she embraced the identity of “popularizer.”³¹ It is appropriate and valuable to view her as her contemporaries did. Dudley Fitts, a poet whose translations of ancient Greek tragedy Edith respected, called her translation of *Prometheus Bound* “beautiful” and included it in a 1947 anthology of ancient Greek plays rendered in English.³² Her friend the literary historian Van Wyck Brooks described her as a scholar, as did Huntington Cairns, the secretary-treasurer of the National Gallery of Art with whom she coedited an edition of Plato’s dialogues.³³ Brooks may have recognized something of himself in Hamilton, since he too lacked a doctorate and wrote for a popular audience only to become a widely recognized authority on early American writers. To Cairns, who helped establish the Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington, D.C., Edith represented an ideal: an individual with the education of an academic classicist whose writing talents enabled her to spread the influence of classical thought in American society.³⁴

The role Edith valued most was as an advocate for the continuing study of classics. As the Cold War developed, her stature as a public intellectual who stood for democracy and against communism increased. The greatest recognition she received was in 1957, when she was honored by the Greek government. She traveled to Athens to witness a performance of her translation of *Prometheus Bound* of Aeschylus, given in the ancient theater of Herodes Atticus at the foot of the Acropolis. It was a scholastic honor with contemporary relevance. The Delphic festival during which this took place was a Cold War event, meant to celebrate Greece’s postwar emergence as a democracy in a region where communism had taken hold. Much to her delight, Edith was made an honorary citizen of Athens and given the Gold Cross of the Legion of Benefaction by King Paul of Greece.³⁵ This honor placed her in an elite circle of classicists, few of whom have received official recognition from the Greek government for their contributions to greater understanding of the nation’s ancient history and culture.³⁶

By the end of her life, Edith Hamilton was regarded as an authority on what twentieth-century America could learn from the ancient Greeks. After her death in 1963, at the age of ninety-five, her books continued to

serve as a popular source of reference for the classical past. Her books have remained popular because of her ability to make the classical world accessible through her comparisons of ancient and modern authors. The classic liberal ideas expressed in her books, including her emphasis on the importance of the individual, continue to resonate with readers as well. Her own fascination with the ancient Greeks is also evident in her books, an interest that already was apparent as she watched the groundbreaking production of the *Electra* of Sophocles in 1889 and began to consider the enduring power of ancient Greek tragedy to affect audiences and to consider the relevance of the ancient Greeks to the modern world.

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