

SONGS FOR THE DYING KING

MARY N. LIVERMORE LIBRARY
PEMBROKE STATE UNIVERSITY
PEMBROKE, N. C. 28572

Submitted in Fulfillment of
the Requirement for
Independent Study CMA 499

Presented to:

Prof. Richard Vela
Communicative Arts Department
Pembroke State University

STEPHEN by:
S. Phillip Miles

December 5, 1976

PRESS
CARD
HERE

Cage
AS
36
-N6
P45
1976
no. 10

Part One

The Dying King

Symbolic of fertility, the moon is the psychic and physical focus of pre-Greek myth. Rites of moon worship were structured as early as Paleolithic times by predominately matriarchal societies which flourished on the Aegean coastlines of Greece and upon the islands of the eastern Mediterranean. In Crete the moon was worshipped as the prime diety because of its connection with essential rhythms of life (the tide, the menstrual cycle). The moon became the symbolic sanctuary of the powerful and matriarchal White Goddess. According to Robert Graves, she was the first diety to be worshipped by a civilized mankind and preceded the patriarchal Jahweh by at least a millineum. This White Goddess, whose several manifestations occur in many mythologies, was a triple diety: the chaste maiden, the nubile woman, the withered hag, the Persephone--Demeter--Hecate triad of later Greek mythology. A cold and powerful Goddess of fertility, she exacted from her subjects an annual tithe: the life's blood and seed of a royal consort, known, for obvious reasons, as the Dying King. Her commands were executed by priestess-queens who ruled their tribes through the power of their Goddess.

This ritual was both complicated and simple: complicated because the development of the White Goddess as a diety which must be placated

by elaborate ritual undoubtedly followed a complex train of connective thought; simple because the end result of such elaboration was a flat human sacrifice. As stone-age intelligence moved into the complexities of metallurgy and animal domestication this religion changed. By degrees, the males in societies following the White Goddess became aware of their own roles in the mysteries of birth and procreation. From that point on, the sacrifice of male kings was doomed to end. Slowly, by stolen increments, the length of time given to the Dying King was extended into a longer and longer period culminating in a sort of "cosmic year" equal to three-hundred lunations or twenty-five solar years. Eventually, the Dying King began to appoint a surrogate king (usually a child, hence the proliferation of abandoned children in myth), who was sacrificed in his stead.

It was not until much later, when the patriarchal Dorian Greeks invaded the peninsula from the north, that the sacrifice of male kings was abandoned by conquest and religious compromise. This invasion and the subsequent final collapse through natural disaster of matriarchal Minoan Crete, marked the end of wide-scale matriarchal society. Although scattered groups of people continued to worship the White Goddess from whom all men sprang, were nurtured, and to whom they returned, the patriarchal Greeks developed their myths and legendary heroes largely to combat her worship by the surviving Earthlings (their title as worshippers of Earth Mother Dea). Even so, the custom of male sacrifice survived into myth (Theseus at Troezen and Elusias) and into practice (Dionysian Rites and Elysian Mysteries) into classical times. It is this period in the declining fortunes of matriarchy

which has left us with so much of our classical Greek myth and legend. This great shift from female to male domination has influenced Western thought up until the present day. From Greek myth to Arthurian Romance to modern novelist Thomas Tryon's Harvest Home, the theme of a male-female struggle for domination has haunted creativity ever since.

Originally, the king ruled until the autumn harvest ritual at which time he would be slain and his blood and seed used to insure a good harvest the following year. As the king of the vegetative cycle and sexual reproduction in general, he was responsible for the health of the crops sown and fertilized by his predecessor. His duties included trips to the growing fields to walk among his children, and, as custom dictated, to speak with his Goddess. These duties were also frequent reminders of the Dying King's greater duty to his people and their mistress. As the crops grew taller, his life-thread grew correspondingly shorter--to be snipped completely by the White Goddess (as crone) when the fields had ripened to harvest. The growing plants also symbolized a resurrection after death as the reincarnations of Dying Kings past.

The summer festivals marked a midpoint in the Dying King's rule and also the beginnings to his end. As the moon rhythmically expanded and contracted throughout the spring and summer months, the king must have begun to dwell on the more relative natures of time. Among the deep warmth of summer and pitter against the lazy overwhelming hugeness of the growing season, the king had to harden his resolve with the knowledge that the few brisk months of autumn were all that remained

of his reign in the service of the triple-faced muse. They were busy months, and it is not difficult to imagine the feelings of an annual consort chosen to serve as both lover and blood sacrifice to his White Goddess.

As is often the case in mythical (and thus, human) motif, the Dying King was torn between his duty and role in society and his own instinct for self-survival. As may easily be imagined, this ambivalence in duty and events must have sent his thoughts constantly moving in opposite directions. Just as surely, his thoughts would have dwelled on his beautiful queen's ability to be a warm and loving female and at the same time, have the icy emotional courage necessary to sacrifice his life to the White Goddess when his term of service abruptly ended.

As a personification of the White Goddess, the moon and its often strange effect upon the emotion of the Dying King led naturally to an ambivalence of feeling. This was a logical continuation of the ambivalent feelings created by the White Goddess herself: those of love, fear, and awe. Hence, it is natural that his complaint or praise of his mistress would be addressed most often toward the lunar disc. The moon was not only a personification of the White Goddess, it was believed to be an actual place of dwelling in which the triple-faced muse could watch over her subjects, provide authority for her earthly queens, and stimulate the poetic impulse in all mankind. It was never forgotten however, that she was also a symbol of death (as crone) to the surrogate king and his only promise of life-after-death. The Dying King, therefore, was a firm believer in his own reincarnation after his

sacrifice, if only as fertilized crops. It may have seemed also to the king that the power of the White Goddess, linked as intimately as it was to the moon, was subject to an ebb and flow of authority just as her lunar dwelling waxed and waned in brilliance in the nocturnal skies.

I have chosen to take the crucial conflict of self-survival and sacrificial duty and represent it most often in Part Two, the poetry of the Dying King. For this conflict was not so cut and dried as may at first be seemed. It ran, in fact, through all the Dying King's dealings with his queen, his goddess, and his duty toward both. The fatal ironclad conflict toward role is the crux of the poems of the Dying King.

The summer period in the Dying King's reign held a special interest for me as a poet and a male. It was not difficult to remove a particular moment in the king's journey in the fields or in his conversations with his goddess-mistress. As his time on earth moved quickly toward its climax, this king was bound to have second thoughts on the majesty of a queen who would soon destroy him. He undoubtedly experienced thoughts of escape, but overwhelmed by his religious and cultural heritage, these thoughts, expressed ironically no doubt, were his only plaintive recourse.

It was the final days and minutes of the Dying King which stimulated me the most. Consequently, it is this final crucial period which I have chosen to represent most often in the poems of Part Two. In them, we find ourselves with the king on his final day. As he is led to a

thrice-plowed field and his greatest earthly achievement (the propagation of his peoples' food supplies), he would have become caught up in the wonder, sanctity, and fear of his solemn ending. By this time, the Dying King knows that escape has become impossible. If he had ever seriously considered it, he had waited too long to implement any escape by this time. He knew and had accepted the fact of his imminent death. These high sacrificial rites must have been charged with excruciating emotion. The king almost certainly was made intoxicated by certain herbs and honeyed wine (mead) in order to complete his grim destiny.

As his minutes (no longer days or hours) ticked quickly away, the Dying King, increasingly under the influence of mead and his own pulsating adrenelin, must have entered a trance state or even an astral plane of projection. This was to be his supreme moment. Soon, he would be an untouchable entity, alone on a razor's edge of emotion and ready to topple in the service of his goddess and her people. His frenzied final moments must culminate in an acceptance of the justness of his death. He must believe that soon, he "will be superbly changed" and enshrined safely in the annals of immortality. This was the asking price for his great sacrifice to the honor of the White Goddess.

The procession around him at this final moment, the king staggers drunkenly through the shattered remains of his former dreams and expectations. Although he is about to receive great honor, there must have been within him a nagging doubt. After all, who had ever returned from this ritual? The Dying King was the only male present. What

other Dying King had ever said that thus and such was so after the sacrificial rites? In the end, of course, it will be the Dying King's own degree of blatant faith, liberally boosted by alcohol and hallucinogens, which will help him to complete his destiny. This faith and strength of purpose has become unequalled in any contemporary society and eloquently attests to the power of the White Goddess to so move men.

At last came the final moment of the Dying King. At his end, the moon was still "a dark mystery from a bright eye." The balm of fever and drugged ecstasy pales beside his own approaching death. Once the crescent-shaped sickle has drawn across his throat, his final synaptic impulses show him that his living blood beneath the full moon glares "a surprising black."

Part Two

The Dying King

The Poems

"Queening Spring"

caught unaware,
with gilded hand poised
for swift flight.

words and time
stopped into silence
by arched eyes.

springwoman.
the moon shines yet
unfinished,
molten as the mothergod
in your unsuspecting eye.

"Moon and Me"

i

death lives there.
a bright home,
but childless.

sad figure standing
astride
her celestial door.

ii

death lives there.
a poet's home
and final wisdom.

glad figure laughing
astride
her dolphin's back.

iii

death lives there.
a golden womb.
a repetitive death.

she circles endlessly
through midnight's arc,
bitter only
as her waning eye
monthly blinks.

"Lunation"

nightdogs howl
beyond the willows.
mad-sounding screams
at the threatening moon.

your frost
is almost gone.
colder evenings
when your bright eye
stared from a bitter circle.

sadly it seems,
sprawled the summer.
and
the pale moon
(queer lonely hag)
sits a brittle backrow.

"Io"

winter.
cast my eyes
from your eyes.

i watch a new
and blistered image
form on the face of
the moon.

io.
my sun rules only
half a day,
and night is what
you have made
of me.

"Crops"

my wasted seed
sprouts a thousand
heads.
furrowed fields bought
by the bloody moon,
and dear.

my children speak
through warm rustles.
their green eyes watch
my slow decay.

they tap delicate
questions at my
knees,
and drain strange
answers from the night's
strange disease.

i go in bright robes
to hide the weight of
chains and a brisk
end.

they smile innocently.
deceived.

"Summer"

summer.
a soft voice.
a clicking tongue
as each sad day
crawls to dissolve.

the night whispers.
i cannot catch it's
soft touch beneath
my eyes.

this blessing
of summer.
this soft voice
at my last charade.

"Honor"

the lot is cast.
the thigh broken
to grow again in
hobbled service.

i am king.
(though a king
stuck upon a spit of
doomed lineage. a
long pole of history
fading in a mist of
spattered ancestors.)

i am king.
the doomed king.
a dying king.
(repeated and whispered,
whispered and sung
forever.)

such repetition flows
without difficulty.
becoming its own
soothing reward. (a
place, well-established.
filled and vacated,
over and over.)

i am alone,
and strange honor is mine.
i carry this season
on young shoulders,
and cleave
from within.
(a sad box where
my soul splinters.
where
the white moon feeds
each fragment into her
bright smile.)

a young man.
a ritual complete.
now a nameless tune
for nine strange mouths
to vomit up,
and eat.

"King's Lure"

damp eyes,
 i call you from
 that pale throne.
 you sit,
 uneasy with eternity.
 lovers selected to
 mist away,
 and
 bald marriages of
 black blood to
 thin light.

(see me.
 my own palm
 white against the
 dark land.
 wave.
 crest.
 recede.)

no wonder
 your beauty
 is madness.

no wonder
 we cry out
 so often.

this ill-timed death
 becomes the only answer
 i will see.

this vague promise we
 never see fulfilled.

this vague promise we
 never see broken.

"Corn Queen"

my death stands now
in a cold place
waiting.
razor-edged, my time
moves in the anarchy
of solitude.

beneath this autumn
equinox,
i circle my odd dreams
and listen
to a bewildering voice
scream for my possessions.

and i,
payment for the
eight-score eighteen,
carry out this deadly
tithe.

the king soon dying.
payment now complete
in full.

"Song for a Dying King"

cupped fingers
accuse the black night
and her bloody moon.
they stare,
pointblank
from a greedy sky.

i smile,
(an evil drunken
thing) through
clenched teeth.

my mistress dances
out my death with
wolfish grin.

as poet and lover
to her insanelly smiling
face,
i may dig my fingers
into her dark flesh
a painful last time.

soon,
i will be lonely as
no one else can be
and
pitched just below
madness.

mistress?
now will i be
superbly changed?

"Midnight"

rail away
caustic witch.
your lurking eye,
keen as a knife
probes the night
with red senses.

lured to the wound
like a stubborn demon,
the double axe falls
and falls,
the sinew snaps in
tough surprise.

a progressive movement
now,
to a kettle eye,
a clawing voice,
a black void,

that cries and cries.

"Last Thoughts"

autumn.
home again.
cave-wight cold.

the moon,
still a dark mystery
from a bright eye
prowls past her own
harsh light.

in blind heat,
the fever slips beyond
that crawling face

to my blood,
a surprising black.
plush.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Frazer, Sir James. The New Golden Bough, abridged. edited by Theodor H. Gaster. New York: Criterion Books, 1959.
- Graves, Robert. The Greek Myths. 2 vols. London: Penguin Books Inc., 1955.
- _____. The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth. amended and enlarged ed., New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1948.
- Graves, Robert, and Raphael Patai, Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1963
- Harrison, Jane. Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903.
- Olcott, William Tyler. Myths of the Sun. New York: Capricorn Books, 1914.
- Pomery, Sarah B. Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity. New York: Schocken Books, 1975.
- Renault, Mary. The King Must Die. New York: Random House, Inc., 1958.
- Tripp, Edward. The Meridian Handbook of Classical Mythology. New York: Meridian Books, 1974.