



Representations of the Muse in the writings of Robert Graves:  
A study of five prose texts (1944-1950)

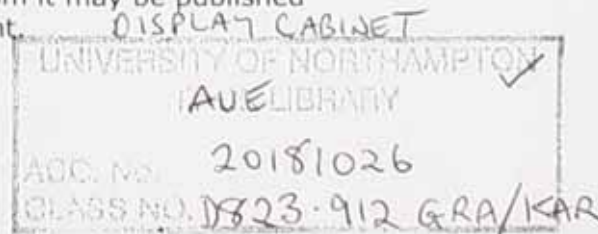
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**For**  
**Eser, my sister**  
**1972-2008**



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## Abstract

The conventional view of Robert Graves's ideas about poetic inspiration is that they are presented in their entirety in *The White Goddess – A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (1948). However, this dissertation aims to argue that Graves's four prose works, published in the 1940s and early 1950s – written at almost the same time as he was composing various drafts of the manuscript which was to become *The White Goddess* – contributed to the development of his highly contentious poetic theory concerning Goddess worship and its essential influence on the poet and muse relationship.

The thesis examines the interrelationship between *The White Goddess* and the four seminal fictional works *The Golden Fleece* (1944), *King Jesus* (1946), *The Golden Ass* (1950) and *Seven Days in New Crete* (1949). Analysis of selected poems that also shed light on the interconnections between the four texts in the context of the poet-muse relationship is integrated throughout the argument. This demonstrates that all four works are central to understanding the evolution of Graves's thought in relation to the White Goddess myth and his claims about the poet and muse. The generic complexity of *The White Goddess* – as a theory of poetic inspiration derived from his quasi-historical argument about the story of the Goddess and her demise – is intricately linked to what he perceives to be the role of the poet in the modern world. The critical examination will focus on the interplay between the various genres which make up *The White Goddess*, and Graves's manipulation of them in this and the other texts to elucidate his poetics.

The opening chapter offers an overview of the way in which Graves came to write *The White Goddess*, and it discusses his central hypothesis, the source of which is the primeval Triple Goddess incarnate in the form of a female muse. Graves's seminal text is far from straightforward because the mix of different genres – the literary theory of inspiration alongside his 'historical evidence' – blurs fact, fiction and autobiography and he uses this blurring to shape and alter other genres in order to convey his message.

The thesis will then argue that mixing of genres extends to the writing of two historical novels, *The Golden Fleece* and *King Jesus*. Moreover, along with the act of translating *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius, these texts all contribute to the argument about the origins of the muse and poetic inspiration, finally articulated in the writing and rewriting of *The White Goddess*. The thesis will also suggest that Graves's biased reinterpretation of research material for *The Golden Fleece* and *King Jesus*, presented as historical fiction, played a vital role in developing his concept of the Muse-goddess who inspires the poet to write true poetry, as articulated in *The White Goddess*.

The aim of Chapters Two to Five is to show how Graves was able to work out his poetic theory of the White Goddess by developing it as an underlying theme in these four books. Chapter Two will explore the genesis of the White Goddess herself, whose person and character began to take shape during Graves's research and actual writing of *The Golden Fleece*. This novel refers to the historical narratives of the Argonauts, which awakened Graves to 'revelations' of a Goddess who had already been pre-figured in his actual life by the impact of strong women, most notably, Laura Riding. As a direct result of these 'revelations', Graves came to believe the Goddess to be the source and inspiration of the true poet, acting through a human female muse. This assessment leads to Chapter Three and a close reading of *King Jesus* (1946), including an examination of its context and reception. It argues that the license Graves took in his radical reinterpretation of the Trinity in order to justify his thesis, makes this novel more controversial than has

previously been credited. Graves is at pains to show how Jesus was the true poet who, blind to his folly, was drawn away from his first loyalty, the Mother-goddess, whose influence was still widely recognized, and who turned instead to the Father-God, thereby transforming poetic discourse into the patriarchal discourse.

Chapter Four focuses on Graves's translation of *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius (1950). It refers to other recent translations, in order to show that his idiosyncratic alterations of the original work were made in order to affirm that the Goddess is 'central to the story'. The Chapter concludes that Graves's poetics of the muse and poet relationship greatly influenced his translation.

With *Seven Days in New Crete* (1949), there is disillusion with poetic theory and the muse's role. Graves brings to life his theory from *The White Goddess*, and creates a matriarchal dystopia. Chapter Five argues that this ideal is actually unrealizable because of its static, controlled 'perfection'. A true poet cannot thrive in such a contrived environment: rather, his place is in the imperfect, chaotic real world. *Seven Days in New Crete* is also discussed as an example of utopian/dystopian fiction of the 1940s.

In conclusion, the fictional texts examined in it have previously received scant critical analysis. This thesis focuses on the many reasons that the key texts are deserving of further scholarly attention – not just as works in their own right, but because they provide a better understanding of *The White Goddess* in its uneasy combination of different forms and genres. It is demonstrated how Graves used these prose texts not only for their avowed purposes of providing translations or reconstructing ancient myth, biblical and the historical, but also to work through his ideas on poetic inspiration by accommodating more than one genre. He weaved several together in order to tell his own particular story the more convincingly, and to reaffirm his belief in himself and his own role as a poet. The thesis traces the rise and then the fall of the White Goddess poetics that eventually leads to the Black Goddess theory, and establishes the need for a revised perception of the status of the four texts in question – a comprehensive re-evaluation of their significance for Graves's entire oeuvre in the evolution of his poetic thought.



## Acknowledgements

I have been fortunate throughout the period of research and writing of this thesis to have received constant support and encouragement from my family, friends and supervisors.

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I especially want to express my love and gratitude to my mother whose hard work in bringing her daughters up alone, and whose belief in the value of a good education, stood us in good stead. The loss of my sister three years ago has left an irreparable void in our lives, and I hope that this work, finally completed, will go a little way to giving my mother some satisfaction and joy.

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## Chapter One: *The White Goddess* (1948) - Its Genesis, Context, Reception

### Aims: A Study of *The White Goddess* in Relation to the Writing of Fictional Texts

The first draft of *The White Goddess – A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (1948)<sup>1</sup> was written by Robert Graves in a few weeks in 1944. This outburst of creativity was not spontaneous. Rather, this dissertation contends, it was the product of Graves's intellectual development. The novels he wrote during the 1940s are not merely discrete fictional texts but are also vehicles through which Graves explored, tested and validated his ideas concerning the muse as the basis of poetic inspiration. Worked out in his fiction, these ideas were then incorporated into *The White Goddess*. While the fiction was implicit in its inquiry into the Goddess as poetic muse, everything Graves wrote around and after *The White Goddess* hinged on that text and its theory. *The White Goddess* is presented both as an explicit treatise of what it means to be a 'true' poet and also – integral to his theory of poetic inspiration – as an historical argument about the story of the Goddess and her demise. The text also contains much of Robert Graves's autobiography, which frames the poetic theory and the historical argument and cannot be separated from its main message about the poet, blurring the boundaries between genres of life writing, mythology, theory and history.

This dissertation aims to examine the third edition of *The White Goddess*,<sup>2</sup> in order to explore the meaning of the muse, with reference to these key texts. The third edition is used in preference to any other, as Graves constantly strove to improve and update his

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<sup>1</sup> Most quotations from *The White Goddess* are taken from Robert Graves, *The White Goddess – A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, ed. by Grevel Lindop, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1997) (a small number, where relevant, are also taken from the first and second editions of *The White Goddess*).

<sup>2</sup> *The White Goddess* was first published in Great Britain in 1948 and was followed by two more editions in Graves's lifetime: 1952 and 1961. Graves was famous for revising his work with additions and exclusions from the original text. The second edition shows the Foreword revised, and the addition of Chapter Twenty Six: 'The Return of the Goddess'. The poem, 'In Dedication' is slightly altered. The revisions of the second edition remain in the third edition but there are further omissions and additions (Higginson and Williams, *Bibliography*, pp. 98-101).



works and it shows *The White Goddess* in its most complete and final form. Four texts that are relevant to the genesis of *The White Goddess* will be discussed in the order in which they were written: two historical novels, *The Golden Fleece* (1944) and *King Jesus* (1946), are followed by his translation of *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius (1950)<sup>1</sup> and the utopian novel *Seven Days in New Crete* (1949); they are all vital in understanding how Graves came to shape the White Goddess myth, by situating its effect in different periods of world history – including the imagined future. This dissertation will argue how the writing of these specific texts influenced *The White Goddess*.

Central to the argument of this thesis is the fact that *The Golden Fleece*, *King Jesus* and *The Golden Ass* are inextricably linked, because these are the texts on which Graves was working on at the same time as he was writing *The White Goddess* (*The White Goddess* went through five drafts between 1943 and 1945) and ideas and theories in these three texts worked their way into the latter. Together, this thesis argues, the three texts offer a key to understanding the mythopoeic nature and generic character of *The White Goddess*. *The Golden Fleece*, *King Jesus* and *The White Goddess* can be considered collectively as an unintentional pseudo trilogy as they are linked in their enterprise to tell various ‘historical’ truths: the truth about the recovery of the Golden Fleece from Colchis; the historical truth about Jesus; and then, finally, the *Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* of *The White Goddess*. Graves strives for historical ‘authenticity’ on his own terms, so defining the notion of what ‘history’ means requires a questioning of the very methods he employed in writing. Each of these three texts reveals an aspect of the historical argument as Graves saw it, creating together a whole history of ‘lost rudiments’ (*White Goddess*, p. 13) of Goddess worship and its effect on the poet. In doing so, Graves strives to rewrite history on his own terms. The methods he uses to ‘reveal’ this history are questionable and put into doubt the validity of his interpretation.

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<sup>1</sup> Although *The Golden Ass* was published in 1950, it will be argued in Chapter Four that the translation was completed by 1948.

## **Methodology**

In order to fulfil the aims of this dissertation, Chapter One will examine how Robert Graves came to write *The White Goddess*, concentrating on its context and a discussion of the theory set out in the text of poetic inspiration: the source of which is the primeval Triple Goddess incarnate in the form of a female muse. The chapter will then focus on the complexity of *The White Goddess* in its overlapping of different genres. Graves merges his theory of poetic inspiration with 'historical' argument and paradoxically casts doubt upon the integrity of his scholarship. It will be shown how his thesis of *The White Goddess* informs, shapes and alters the other genres in order to convey his message. Chapters Two to Five concentrate on how Graves was able to work out his theory of the White Goddess by using it as an underlying theme in four fictional texts.

Chapter Two will explore the genesis of the White Goddess herself, whose person and character began to take form during Graves's research and actual writing of *The Golden Fleece* (1944). This novel refers to the historical events about the Argonauts, and awakened Graves to 'revelations', evoking theories about the Goddess (who had already been pre-figured in his actual life by Laura Riding). As a direct result of these 'revelations', Graves came to believe the Goddess to be the source and inspiration of the true poet, whilst acting through the human female muse.

Chapter Three is an analysis of *King Jesus* (1946). *King Jesus* is a controversial text because of the license Graves took in departing from the conventional interpretation of the Trinity in order to justify his thesis; its intellectual, cultural and historical contexts and reception will be discussed.

Chapter Four focuses on Graves's translation from the Latin of *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius (1950). This is followed by an interpretation of the poetry and prose referring to *The Golden Ass* written by Graves prior to his translation of the text. His version is

juxtaposed with other recent translations, and his idiosyncratic alterations of the original work, made in keeping with his intention to make the Goddess a Gravesian construct, are discussed to elucidate the argument of this chapter, namely that Graves's poetic theory greatly influenced his translation.

Finally, Chapter Five is an exploration of *Seven Days in New Crete* (1949) as Graves uses the theory from *The White Goddess* to 'realize' a matriarchal utopia/dystopia. There will be a discussion on genre in relation to *Seven Days in New Crete* as utopian/dystopian fiction of the 1940s and it will be suggested that this idiosyncratic novel is very much in keeping with the fiction of the post-war period. The chapter sets out to show that this ideal is actually unrealizable because of its static, controlled 'perfection'. A true poet cannot thrive in such a contrived environment: rather, his place is in the imperfect, messy real world.

### **The White Goddess – As Text: Synopsis**

*The White Goddess* is concerned with the origins of poetic thought as Graves understood it. A major theme of *The White Goddess* is his argument that poetic inspiration is directly linked to a belief in the Goddess. One tenet of the text is the theory that the veneration of the Goddess in prehistory and early history took place within a matriarchal social and cultural framework. While goddesses have been worshipped throughout human history, the existence of singular Great Goddess worship is fiercely disputed and the existence of a prehistoric matriarchal civilization is far from proven. That goddess figures were worshipped in prehistory takes on an added dimension in Graves's writings for, as he writes in the Foreword to the third British edition of *The White Goddess*, his thesis concentrates on 'a magical language bound up with [...] religious ceremonies in honour of the Moon-goddess, or Muse' which dates back to the 'Old Stone Age' (p. 6). Graves contends that the language of these religious ceremonies was that of true poetry (p. 6).



Therefore, the belief and practice of the worshippers of the Goddess were, according to Graves's premise, concerned with the creation and reception of true poetry.

For Graves the ancient Eastern and Celtic worlds are united in their creation of a poetic alphabet which was linked to the worship of the Goddess. He strives to prove that the 'muse poets' of ancient times discovered a secret vocabulary and that it survives to this day, hidden in the name of trees as poetico-religious riddles. Graves argues that it is only with the usurpation of the Goddess's power in favour of the male gods that a patriarchal or logical reasoning took precedence over the preceding female structure, the emotion of which was then defined as irrational and chaotic (Bertholf, 'First Typescript', p. 115).

Graves bases his concept of the Goddess in *The White Goddess* on the various Goddesses worshipped in prehistory, and mirrors the theories propounded in particular by Jane Harrison in her *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1908) and James Frazer in his study, *The Golden Bough* (1922). This Goddess was said to represent unity in life and death, giving life but also receiving her worshippers into death. Graves labels this Goddess the White Goddess 'because white is her principal colour, the colour of the first member of the moon-trinity' (p. 65). Yet the Goddess is also in part an aspect of his autobiography as it was made up primarily of the 'love/hate' relationship with his strong and domineering mother who refused to accept certain choices Graves made in his private life; in his marriage to the feminist and independent Nancy Nicholson; and then in his volatile relationship with Laura Riding. These autobiographical influences paved the way to his poetic vision.

The White Goddess is not merely a metaphor for Graves but a literal, living force that is a vital part of his private mythology, as well as being, he argues, the same primeval Goddess of the Paleolithic and Neolithic ages. Through the Goddess, Graves's poetry follows a specific theme which is the concern of the poem 'To Juan at the Winter Solstice': 'There is one story and one story only / That will prove worth your telling' (ll. 1-2 (pp.

150-51)).<sup>4</sup> The theme, writes Douglas Day in *Swifter than Reason*, 'became specifically related to the love of a special man – the Poet – for a special woman – the Muse' (p. 154). For Graves, inspired poetry is actually about the relationship between poet and muse, man and woman. He reinforced this belief through a philosophical and spiritual level of creativity that strives to explain the poetic and religious continuities superimposed over the ancient drama of the Goddess.

*The Golden Fleece*, *King Jesus* and the translation of *The Golden Ass*, which were written during the same period, inform and reinforce Graves's views on poetics propounded in *The White Goddess* – that the role of poetry is to tell an authentic truth, and the guide to this truth is the female muse in the guise of the Triple Goddess. Graves's 'revelation' of the concept of a goddess who appears to the poet in her aspect of human muse is the controversial conclusion he comes to – namely that only through engagement with her can the true poet be inspired. The controversy occurs at a time when the world had been ravaged by two world wars, when there was economic and spiritual disillusionment, but simultaneously a modern civilization was emerging, defined as a new technological and scientific world. At this time, such a theory seemed to challenge the so-called advances of the modern age and hark back to a time before modern warfare, when the world was matrilineal, agricultural and sedately egalitarian and peaceful (Gimbutas, *Goddesses and Gods*, p. 9). Through the novels and *The White Goddess* Graves argues for an understanding of humanity's current demise and he strives to find answers and solutions. The novels are, therefore, crucial to an understanding of the genesis of *The White Goddess* and Gravesian poetics.

From the 1920s, Graves had been groping his way towards a poetic theory and, though the wider psychological origins of *The White Goddess* are not so simplistic, it is conjectured that it gained particular relevance and clarity with the break-up of his

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<sup>4</sup> All quotations from Graves's poetry are taken from *Complete Poems*, ed. by B. Graves and D. Ward, 3 vols (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1995-1999).

relationship with Laura Riding. Graves used his relationship with Riding and mythologized it in *The White Goddess*, transforming her into the Goddess whom the poet both reveres and fears. This theme of transformation is not new in Graves's work, but Riding's departure propelled Graves into a new and more explicit examination of the nature of his Goddess in his fiction as well in *The White Goddess* itself.

### **Graves, The Novelist**

A quarter of a century after his death, Robert Graves survives in the public consciousness first and foremost as a novelist, and mainly for the *Claudius* novels, which were successfully adapted for a BBC television production in 1976. Graves's oeuvre extends from novels to poetry, mythology, critical writings, translations from Latin and Spanish, short stories and plays. While it is evident that there is a connection between the poetry and the critical writing (many of the critical pieces are dedicated to the analysis of poetry), Graves's fictional writings continue, on the whole, to be regarded as a separate generic entity. Throughout his career, Graves looked dismissively upon his fictions which he insisted were a practical necessity, serving as a means to finance his poetry. He reluctantly admitted in a radio talk for the BBC Home Service in 1954: 'Of course, I [...] write historical novels, which is how I make a living' (Graves, *Collected Writings*, p. 240). Here, 'of course' suggests that Graves considers his fictional writing as merely a means of looking after his family in order to dedicate himself to his true vocation – writing poetry.

However, in his Introduction to *Occupation: Writer* (1951), Graves wrote tellingly that he realized 'my best way to earn a living without loss of poetic independence was by writing history disguised as novels' (p. x). A number of his novels and short stories are haunted by the compelling presence of the Goddess who determines their events. Fiction based on historical facts, which were nevertheless of dubious veracity in orthodox historical terms, proved to be a vehicle by which he could tell the 'truth' about her.



### **Relation between Fiction and Poetry**

As Monroe K. Spears writes in 'The Latest Graves: Poet and Private Eye' (1965), Graves's fictional writings are 'more intimately related to his poetry than his criticism for they are crucial to the question of his beliefs' (p. 664). 'Poetry' is not merely defined as the essence of Graves's being, but it is also implied that 'poetry' is *the* centre around which he has built his poet's persona. This chapter will focus on the influences that guided Graves as well the theoretical importance, and generic complexity of the seminal work, *The White Goddess*, a complexity which can be clarified when considered in relation to the other work he wrote at the time.

### **The White Goddess and its Generic Instability**

*The White Goddess* is an enigmatic book. Attempting to classify it can lead the reader in different directions. A glance, for example, at its location on the bookshelves of any bookshop can confuse as it consists of poetry, anthropology, Goddess studies, Irish studies, Welsh studies, even a personal mythology or autobiography. Graves himself defines it as 'an historical grammar of the language of poetic myth' (*White Goddess*, p. 5).

The debate continues as to whether *The White Goddess* should be regarded as an academic work – Harold Bloom, for example, calls it a 'personal Credo' in disguise (*Robert Graves*, p. vii) and Fran Brearton has commented in a lecture entitled 'Robert Graves and *The White Goddess*', (2004), that it is a 'difficult, erudite, and in scholarly terms, suspect book' as 'it has a toehold in many academic disciplines – anthropology, Celtic studies, literary studies – but real credibility in none of them' (p. 274). However, Graves apparently believed it should be regarded as such: he told J. M. Cohen in 1960 that the 'odd thing is that it is becoming more and more accepted by serious historians and anthropologists' (Snipes, *Robert Graves*, p. 23). Indeed, a strength of *The White Goddess* is that it cannot be placed in one specific academic discipline (Brearton, 'Robert Graves', p. 274). Despite the fact that the material for *The White Goddess* was thoroughly researched,

the emphasis Graves placed on the unearthly or magical invited mixed reviews when it was published. In addition, with its lack of footnotes, some reviewers found the text negatively absurd or fantastical. The main reason behind this is Graves's grandiose poise in *The White Goddess* as he consciously leads readers to believe that the subject of the book 'forced' itself upon him (*White Goddess*, p. 333). Graves continues his description of the synchronistic manner in which he acquired information in Chapter Nineteen: 'The Number of the Beast':

Despite my present appearance of easy familiarity with Celtic literature I could not at the time have answered a single question in the *Hanes Taliesin* puzzle [...] if I had not known most of the answers beforehand by poetic intuition. Really, all that I needed to do was to verify them textually; and though I had no more than one or two of the necessary books in my very small library the rest were soon sent, unasked for, by poet friends or tumbled down into my hands from the shelves of a second-hand sea-side bookshop (p. 333).

The mixture of poetic intuition, knowing the answers to complex riddles and then the admission that the texts simply came into his hands unasked for, all served to weaken the credibility of his argument, presenting it as anti-academic and questionable. Yet, paradoxically, it is this magical element which is an important element of the poetry inspired during the research for, and writing of, *The White Goddess* (Cohen, *Robert Graves*, p. 82). According to Graves in *The White Goddess*, poetry 'began in the matriarchal age, and derives its magic from the moon' (p. 439). Through its mysterious force, the inexplicable informs and enlightens the true poet: 'no moon, no man' (p. 281).

Grevel Lindop calls *The White Goddess* an 'extraordinary' book ('Introduction', p. vii). The reason that *The White Goddess* stands out as an audacious and daring tract on poetry is that it transcends its aim in the subtitle of being *A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*. As he writes in the Introduction to the 1997 edition of *The White Goddess*, it is

an adventure in historical detective-work, a headlong quest through the forests of half the world's mythologies, a poet's introduction to poetry, a critique of western civilization, a polemic about the relationship between man and woman, and [...] a disguised autobiography (p. vii).

In other words, the text is a medley of different genres. In the Foreword to the first edition, Graves warns his readers, no doubt with some pride, that the book is both difficult and strange (p. 5). Describing the text as 'a historical grammar of the language of poetic myth' (*White Goddess*, p. 5), he then goes on to link his own position as an historical novelist to the validity of his theory in *The White Goddess*, claiming that it is historically accurate.

The discussion of genre is unavoidable when examining and evaluating Graves's work because he never allowed himself to be confined to one particular medium or type. Rather, he uses a number of genres to lend authority to the ideas and theories in his texts. It is important to understand that the text should not be defined merely by the way the discourse is structured but by what it wishes to accomplish (Frow, *Genre*, p. 14). It is through the different genres, especially historical, mythological, anthropological, poetical and critical argument, that Graves is able to draw his conclusion that the Goddess was worshipped in prehistory and was the patron of all poets. Her downfall, therefore, means the downfall of poetic truth, to which, he maintains, the poet through his fiction holds the key. Analysing *The White Goddess*, therefore, in terms of genre serves to recognize the intention of his message and also acts as a way of identifying its relationship to other texts.

A genre can be identified easily by its subject or theme, but it is not so straightforward when it comes to formally defining it. Derrida writes in the essay 'The Law of Genre' (1980) that with the term 'genre' a 'limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind'. Yet there is always the threat of 'contamination' (Frow, *Genre*, p. 25) – which is to say that the text may be made up of more than one genre. For the purposes of this dissertation, it is necessary to view the multiple genres as genre mixing. Blurring the distinction between poetic craft, anthropology, history, myth and fictional composition, Graves's work, from the mid 1940s on, involves a mythopoeic outlook that focuses on the Goddess as a source of poetic inspiration. This takes into account that, while genres overlap, the distinctions between them still remain but they



cannot be separated from one another. Lindop explains in his essay '*The White Goddess: Sources, Contexts, Meanings*' how he attempted to summarize the argument only to realize that 'the chapters did not contain the same kind of material. In fact, they fell quite naturally into three groups [...] poetic thought, [...] historical argument for the primacy of goddess-worship and its subversion [...] and] miscellaneous information' (p. 33). It seems clear that Graves found poetic inspiration inseparable from what he believed to be goddess-worship and hypothesized that the decline of belief in the Goddess in favour of the male God led to the downfall of humanity and therefore of poetic truth. If viewed in this sense, then the different genres within the text seem logical.

In order to arrive at the conclusion that a Goddess was worshipped in prehistory and consequently revered by poets, Graves has painstakingly sifted through the historical evidence in writing *The White Goddess*. As the body of his sources is mainly to be found in literature and poetry, Graves uses literary criticism in order to decode and analyze the evidence. While the first edition provoked controversy because of his polemic and his questionable methodology, Graves in his Foreword to the second edition (1952) is more cautious, claiming 'I dare attempt only a historical statement of the problem' (p. 11), a concession which covered him as a scholar against a repetition of the backlash which occurred with the reception to the first edition. He uses the word 'attempt', making his argument seem more experimental, the author himself seeming almost humble. The reader must then ask what does Graves mean by 'historical statement' and what is its 'problem'? Graves states, in Chapter Thirteen, 'Palamedes and the Cranes':

The present age is peculiarly barbaric [...]. It is easy enough for the poet in this hopelessly muddled and inaccurate modern world to be misled into false etymology, anachronism and mathematical absurdity by trying to be what he is not. His function is truth (p. 218).

Graves was convinced of an undefined 'historical' time when the poet was regarded as a holy man or a shaman inspired by the Triple Goddess. He stressed in his Foreword that, "Nowadays" is a civilization in which the prime emblems of poetry are dishonoured', (p.

10) which means that the world has collapsed. Graves's idealized history is at an end as the world does not any longer value the poet. It is through *The White Goddess* that Graves strives to show that it is in fact the poet who holds the key and is able to right the wrongs of 'history' in terms of his interpretation of the term.

Most unexpectedly and tantalizingly, underpinning Graves's argument is the questionable method by which he develops it. While *The White Goddess* seems like a scholarly and academic study, it is not; while it appears linear and straightforward in its approach, again, it is not (Mounic, 'The White Goddess', p. 31). Graves intentionally or unintentionally revises conventions of particular genres. *The White Goddess* is a text so unexpected in both its claims and its arresting results that it is impossible for the reader to be complacent in relying on generic knowledge as a guide through the labyrinth of the text. Graves takes such preconceived notions of genre alongside the assumptions of worship and belief and presents the reader with something new.

Graves challenges the view that history should come from verifiable facts and destabilizes the expectations of genre. One particular method that Graves employs is what he calls the analeptic method (discussed further in Chapters Two and Three). Briefly, Graves uses this term to describe a trance-like state in which he could find solutions to historical, religious, moral and poetic problems where reason was insufficient to find out the truth of a particular episode in the past (Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. 58). Graves explains in *The White Goddess* that:

The proleptic or analeptic method of thought, though necessary to poets, physicians, historians and the rest, is so easily confused with mere guessing, or deduction from insufficient data, that few of them own to using it. However securely I buttress the argument of this book with quotations, citations and footnotes, the admission that I have made here of how it first came to me will debar it from consideration by orthodox scholars: though they cannot refute it, they dare not accept it (p. 339).

Graves is at pains to stress the acceptability of his unorthodox methods because first and foremost it is as a poet that he writes his books. He may be a novelist, critic, translator and

mythographer but ultimately it is his poetic intuition which leads him to arrive at the 'truth' of an enquiry.

In one sense, the text is about Graves himself and *The White Goddess* can be read as autobiography. He opens his thesis by stating: 'Since the age of fifteen, poetry has been my ruling passion and I have never intentionally undertaken any task or formed any relationship that seemed inconsistent with poetic principles' (p. 13). Throughout the text Graves refers to himself in the first person. He disarms his readers – he is frank and honest, yet there is also an aspect of self-presentation that is both humble and proud (Mounic, 'The White Goddess', p. 31). This autobiographical approach serves to engage the reader, involving him/her in a painstaking historical argument to prove that poets worshipped the Goddess and addressed their poetry to her.

The subject of *The White Goddess*, Graves tells his readers on the first page of the text, is 'about the rediscovery of the lost rudiments, and about the active principles of poetic magic that govern them' (p. 13). He goes on to say that his argument is based on the revelation of the 'ancient secrets' 'concealed' in two Welsh minstrel poems of the thirteenth century which he examines closely in his argument (p. 14). But it is clear that the quest is a personal one because what becomes most memorable about the text is the force of personality and the creation of the Graves persona: one who is a muse poet, devoted to the Goddess. He writes in the Foreword to the second edition: 'money will buy almost anything but truth, and almost anyone but the truth-possessed poet' (p. 10). By the time he came to having the second edition published, the poetic persona had assumed his own sense of identity, defined, or redefined, through his theory in which he separates himself as a poet from others. He writes:

If you are poets, you will realize that acceptance of my historical thesis commits you to a confession of disloyalty which you will be loath to make; you chose your jobs because they promised to provide you with a steady income and leisure to render the Goddess, whom you adore, valuable part-time service (pp. 10-11).



Graves defends himself by writing that he is 'nobody's servant' (p. 10) as he is a poet who asserts his right to dedicate himself wholeheartedly to the Goddess. Such autobiographical information is relevant and integral to his text as it becomes a means of defining the poetic theory as a living practice.

Yet, following his argument, and prefacing a Victorian translation of *Câd Goddeu* ('The Battle of the Trees') and his consequent rendering of it, Graves bizarrely stresses:

Here I must apologize for my temerity in writing on a subject which is not really my own. I am not a Welshman, except an honorary one through eating the leek on St. David's Day while serving with the Royal Welch Fusiliers and [...] I have no command [...] of modern Welsh; and I am not a medieval historian (pp. 25-6).

The immediate effect on the general reader may be relief at the interruption to the vague and convoluted beginning to the analysis of an obscure poem, the reason for which is not immediately convincing to the reader, with a humorous autobiographical aside that serves to break up the text. Graves shifts from one genre to another with ease and – finally with the reader in the palm of his hand – continues:

But my profession is poetry, and I agree with the Welsh minstrels that the poet's first enrichment is a knowledge and understanding of myths. One day while I was puzzling out the meaning of [...] *Câd Goddeu* [...] a drop or two of the brew of Inspiration flew out of the cauldron and I suddenly felt confident that if I turned again to Gwion's riddle, which I had not read since I was a schoolboy, I could make sense of it (p. 29).

The reader cannot doubt Graves: for, like an expert salesman, he has elicited trust, by mentioning that he was once, like the reader, a schoolchild. But having attempted to win the reader's confidence, he then presents himself as an authority, a shaman, a poet, who, because of his calling, can unravel secrets unknown to those who are outside the magic ring. He thus elevates himself above the same reader. Obviously his contention and the means by which he proceeds is audacious at best, but dubious at worst. The more serious minded scholar would be astounded by the unscientific claims and would be ready to criticize the text's methodological shortcomings.

### **Theme of Transformation: Human to Muse, Mythologizing Muse into Goddess**

Graves states in the Foreword to *The White Goddess* that the 'function of poetry is religious invocation of the Muse' (p. 10). The choice of words 'religious invocation' elevates that source of inspiration from something corporeal into something *other*, something worthy of worship: a deity who must be paid due homage. The woman of earth is sacrificed: she is no longer recognized as being corporeal but has been transformed into or reinvented as the Goddess, a being both ethereal and concrete, personifying the cycle of life and death.

The idea of transformation is evoked in the 1926 poem by Graves entitled 'Pygmalion to Galatea': 'Pygmalion, as you woke me from the stone, / So shall I you from bonds of sullen flesh' (l. 32-33 (pp. 312-13)). This poem deals with the literal transformation of the statue to ideal woman and then to goddess figure. Galatea, the woman figure, has been created to fulfil a need, and in doing so a price must be paid. This price is the alteration of the status of Pygmalion, her creator, as he transforms from Galatea's master to her servant. While the poem is concerned with the metamorphosis of a statue into an admired woman, the acolyte's role has changed, making him responsive to any creative influence from the Muse-goddess figure. As Graves puts it in one of his Clark Lectures given in Cambridge (1954-55) entitled 'The Crowning Privilege', the 'privilege' implies the 'individual responsibility' of the poet to own 'the desire to deserve well of the Muse' (*Collected Writings*, p. 134). Dante's acknowledgement of this role impelled him to write of his first encounter with Beatrice, 'Ecce deus forior me, qui veniens dominabitur mihi' in *La Vita Nuova* (Rossetti, *Collected Writings*, p. 79). The poet recognizes the Divine in female form. His knowledge that he is in the presence of something holy has the effect of subduing him as follower/poet, and he writes that one look from the 'divine' Beatrice could cause his power to be 'vanquished' (Eliot, *Selected Essays*, p. 266). In the essay, 'Juana de Asbaje', Graves writes that man humbles 'himself before an incarnate

Muse and seek[s] instruction from her' (*Collected Writings*, p. 119). By acknowledging the muse, the poet is offered the gift to create true verse, which is why his love for her is more than merely human. For Graves, the poetry created is the result of a relationship representing love, worship and awe of the Goddess or muse figure.

Graves believed that poetry should move the reader emotionally and physically. He asks at the opening of *The White Goddess*, 'Who has ever been able to explain what [...] is poetic and what is unpoetic, except by the effect that it has on the reader?' (p. 14). Graves's premise is that what constitutes the poetic is 'truth'. Poetic truth, he argues, is not meant as factual truth, nor is it produced by reason or literary conceit, but rather as a result of direct 'inspiration' that conveys emotional meaning and value over and above any received, automatic response. Graves focuses his thesis about poetic theory on the source of inspiration, his belief in a muse figure who is an incarnation of the Triple Goddess. According to Graves, the Goddess herself, who is the source of inspiration, is a recreation of the ancient Goddess who was worshipped throughout Europe and the Middle East until she was overthrown by patriarchy.

It is through a lengthy and detailed analysis of ancient myths and medieval Celtic poems that Graves strives to prove his argument. By 'unravelling' the 'close religious secrets' (p. 13) of poetic inspiration, Graves concludes that poets have always worshipped the Goddess and thus been inspired by her. In particular, Graves was intrigued by the ancient Welsh poem, *Cād Goddeu*, 'Battle of the Trees'. It was ostensibly about a battle fought in pre-historic Britain (p. 479) which he found in a collection of thirteenth-century obscure Welsh minstrel romances, known as *Mabinogion*, in the *Book of Taliesin* (p. 26) of which some were seemingly written by the sixth-century Welsh poet called Taliesin (Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. 19). *The White Goddess* is crammed with references, many obscure, and cross references presented in a scholarly style which seems at first glance to be in keeping with serious academic research.



### Graves and the Sources of *The White Goddess*

One important text for Graves was the Reverend Edward Davies's *Celtic Researches* (1809). Graves first accepts Davies's interpretation that *Câd Goddeu* is in fact about a battle of 'letters', 'trees' meaning 'letters' in all Celtic languages. He explains that it was 'not a frivolous battle, or a battle physically fought, but a battle fought intellectually' (*White Goddess*, p. 33). Yet, in a characteristically Gravesian manner, he says, 'Davies was on the right track [...but] he soon went astray because, not realizing that the poems were piced, he mistranslated them' (pp. 33-35). Frequently throughout Graves's work, as will be shown in the following chapters, Graves was at pains to show that he is 'right' where others are 'wrong,' or that his reading is the definitive one. Graves extrapolated his own interpretation from a Victorian English translation of *Câd Goddeu* by D. W. Nash. As any translation of a text differs lexicographically from another so inevitably this has an effect on its interpretation (Constantine, 'The Battle', p. 43). Problematic here is that Nash's translation is in itself one 'reading' which Graves transforms by painstakingly interpreting the poem in the most meticulous detail 'learning' that the Celtic 'tree-alphabet' was both an alphabet and a 'sacred calendar' (p. 491). Graves 'reconstructs' a questionable translation and invents an alphabet to fit in with his own hypothesis of the muse-poet in relation to the Goddess. Graves was then 'inspired' (p. 490) when he found that there was a link between the 'Celtic tree-alphabet [which] could [...] be regarded as a Celtic counterpart of the eighteen-letter Greek Orphic alphabet' (p. 491). The connection between these two sacred alphabets encouraged the theory of a link between Caridwen from the *Romance of Taliesin* and the original concept of the Triple Moon-goddess. Graves expands this connection to include the various goddesses worshipped in prehistory:

[Her] counterpart in Wales was the powerful Ninefold Muse-goddess Caridwen, could be identified the Triple (or Ninefold) Muse-goddess of Greece; and again with the Italian Goddess Carmenta [...]; and with the Nine Scandinavian Norns [...]. All these cults seemed to have been basically the same (p. 491).

Thus Graves unites the ancient goddesses of Ireland, Scotland and Wales with the goddesses of Greece, Italy and Scandinavia and therefore the goddess of the Pelasgians of *The Golden Fleece*, in the ancient Celtic and British goddess-cults (pp. 57, 62-65). The result of these 'findings' was his conclusion that life in 'matriarchal' times was superior in quality and intellectual discourse, because, among other reasons, these poems suggest that the religious ceremonies in honour of the Goddess were the true language of poetry (p. 6). The poet, therefore, had a sacred role in matriarchal times. Overtaken by patriarchy (pp. 51, 57), the poet then lost his high status and resorted to worship of the Goddess in secret. The poem, like *Hanes Taliesin*, is, according to Graves, a 'riddling poem', written by the poet, Gwion, (Taliesin's true name) and is evidence of an underground Goddess cult which was 'blasphemous' according to the early medieval Church (p. 70). Graves goes on to reinterpret other supposed riddles of the *Romance of Taliesin* and the *Mabinogion*, strengthening his argument that years of research by other scholars had failed to decipher the secret which only the true poet could decode and understand. For Graves, this was the most enticing of several possible interpretations, as it suited his evolving thesis and allowed him to place himself at the centre: a true poet with the secret of poetic inspiration.

Graves takes the reader on a step by step account of how he arrives at his conclusion. At the beginning of Chapter Six: 'A Visit to the Spiral Castle', Graves admits, on the subject of his 'suggested answers to the riddles of the *Hanes Taliesin*', that this 'was as far as I could go without adopting the method of the cross-word puzzler' (p. 93). Graves interweaves autobiography and poetry, the synthesis being a part of the whole process and serving here to authenticate his discoveries by involving the reader as an accomplice in what he calls the 'secret'.

### **True and False Poetry: the Dionysian and Apollonian**

One of Graves's major tenets in the fictional works under consideration is that, with the decline of goddess worship, images and intuition were replaced by classicism and intellect.

The connection between the moon and the romanticization of the Muse-goddess and the effect of both on the true poet are in opposition to the influence of the male sun with its link to classicism. In *The White Goddess*, Graves distinguished between moon poetry – that which is romantic, muse-inspired – and sun poetry, which he claimed was merely technically competent and consciously applied. The former, argues Graves, is Dionysian, the latter is Apollonian. He begins his argument in the first chapter of *The White Goddess*, ‘Poets and Gleemen’, with the claim that classical poetry – that is, Apollonian poetry – ‘never makes the hair rise and the heart leap [...] and this is because of the difference between the attitude of the Classical poet, and of the true poet, to the White Goddess’ (p. 21).

Although there is no specific evidence, Graves may be responding to Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*,<sup>5</sup> which describes the Dionysian as all that is real and true, where no boundaries exist, and the Apollonian, with its clear, set boundaries, as illusory. The justification of such a suggestion is that Nietzsche, like Graves, concentrates his study on the Apolline which is concerned with appearance and the Dionysiac which pertains to reality. One of the strands of Graves’s poetic ideology was the concept that Dionysian poetry was inspired by the Goddess and therefore true, whereas the Apollonian poets were false, because their link with the Goddess had been broken, and their poetry was therefore uninspired. This binarism is characteristic of his way of manipulating material to prove his own theories.

In his essay ‘*The White Goddess: A Proselytizing Text*’, Paul O’Prey writes that while Graves distinguishes between the Apolline and Dionysian, he finds that ‘the sense of conflict between the two, the idea that they are somehow in competition and enemies to each other, is uniquely Gravesian’ (p. 130). For Graves the link between poetry and the

<sup>5</sup> While there is no concrete evidence to suggest that Graves was influenced by *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), he was, nevertheless familiar with Nietzsche’s works. Graves had previously published an essay on the philosopher’s final works in *Epilogue* (1935-1937), choosing to have it republished in 1949 in *The Common Asphodel, Collected Essays on Poetry*, leading to the conclusion that he would have known of Nietzsche’s controversial ideas endorsed in *The Birth of Tragedy*.



Goddess is clear. The downfall of poetry originates in the rising influence of the war-like Apollonian and the masculine in the time of Virgil. In *The White Goddess* Graves states that 'since the source of poetry's creative power is not scientific intelligence, but inspiration [...] one may [...] attribute inspiration to the Lunar Muse' (p. 481). It is the power of the feminine which inspires and ultimately controls all true poetry, and Graves concludes 'poets can be well judged by the accuracy of their portrayal of the White Goddess' (p. 417). As a critique of poetry and its connection to the Muse-goddess as the vehicle of poetic inspiration, *The White Goddess* is central to understanding his own attitude to his poetry. It is, then, according to Graves's argument, the true poet's duty to depict honestly his relationship with the White Goddess. In addition to Graves's above statements, John B. Vickery has observed in *Robert Graves and The White Goddess*, that 'separation from the muse is a parting from the original, and essential language of poetry' (p. ix). Through the muse, profound truths concerning the origins of humankind are answered: the muse as Goddess is the connection to prehistory.

In Graves's view, the poets Milton and Wordsworth clearly illustrate the difference between the Apollonian and Dionysian approaches. The contrast between these two styles is clear in Graves's poem 'The Naked and the Nude' from *5 Pens in Hand* (1958). The poem begins with a statement which illustrates the speaker's views on true and false art: 'For me, the naked and the nude / [...] stand as wide apart / As love lies, or truth from art' (ll. 1-6 (pp. 242-43)). Love and truth are held to be indivisible while 'The nude are bold, the nude are sly' (7) in their 'showman's' guise (15). Traditionally, the nude is seen as Apollonian high art in which the body is reformed, that is, the body no longer resembles a fallible, naked human, but is transformed into something perfect and ideal. Eugene Hollahan argues in an essay entitled 'Sir Kenneth Clark's *The Nude*: Catalyst for Graves's "The Naked and the Nude"?' that Graves was prompted to write the poem from a reading of Clark's work (p. 443). Indeed the text does provide the reader with an understanding of

the poem, because Clark writes, 'the nude is not the subject of art but a form of art we wish to perfect' (*The Nude*, p. 9). Clark elevates the nude not because it is a depiction of a person, but as an idea which is something greater and more impersonal than the human form. Nudity has been altered and transformed into Apollonian artifice, a sterile idealization removed from truth. There is a difference between the work of art that is inspired by a muse figure demanding truth and one which is an idealization. According to Graves there is a 'difference between the attitudes of the Classical Poet, and of the true poet to the White Goddess' (*White Goddess*, p. 21). He argues that Apollonian Classicism replaced muse-inspired poetry; and with the loss of inspiration, poetry was damaged, emerging the poorer.

However, Hollahan argues that Graves's poem 'with its strict meter, couplet verses, tight logic, and modest but firmly asserted idea, is itself like the simple, clear idea that Clark concludes to be the essence of the Greek aim in nude art' ('Catalyst', p. 450). It is true that Graves consistently drew attention to the importance of verse-craft in poetry and was acknowledged by critics such as D. J. Enright, J. M. Cohen and Robin Skelton as a most accomplished craftsman (Skelton, 'Craft', p. 37). Yet there is a tension between the style and content of Graves's work. While Graves endorsed the Dionysian as all that was true and beautiful, the succinct style in which the poems are written is closer to the Apollonian. For Graves, fine verse-craftsmanship was as important as the content or the inspiration behind a poem, and he constantly revised his work in an effort to perfect it. As Skelton writes in his essay 'Craft and Ceremony': 'Many of Graves's revisions of already published poems reveal a desire to improve the verbal music of the lines which is quite as intense as the desire to clarify the message' (p. 45). The successful balance between the form and content of a poem creates a unity which strengthens the poem's message of poetic truth.

Graves noted in his first lecture as Professor of the Oxford Chair of Poetry in 1964:

Real poems have a rhythmic pattern: the variation of emotional intensity from line to line, or stanza to stanza, can be drawn in the air with one's finger. The end usually provides the climax; though sometimes the climax comes earlier (*Poetic Craft*, p. 8).

So the perfection of the patterns of verse does not necessarily restrict a poem to being Apollonian. False verse, Graves continues, draws attention only to the ““beauties” of verse, meaning incidental phrases [...written to] catch the eye, than in the patterns’ (p. 9). False verse is that which may be classical in its construction and in its music but it is also otherwise empty, devoid of poetic truth. The craft of writing poetry, that is, the balancing of form and content was, for Graves, a moral issue (Skelton, ‘Craft’, p. 48). Both the form and meaning of a poem, for Graves, are considered to be of equal weight and their successful union brings about poetic truth.

In the poem, ‘The Face in the Mirror’, also from *5 Pens in Hand*, Graves describes the physical imperfections of the speaker’s physiognomy: ‘Crookedly broken nose – low tackling caused it; / Cheeks, furrowed; coarse grey hair, flying frenetic’ (ll. 6-7 (p. 237)). However, the final two lines of the poem serve to startle the reader, for the speaker is observing the ‘naked’ figure reflected in the mirror, ‘He still stands ready, with a boy’s presumption, / To court the queen in her high silk pavilion’ (13-15). The speaker is transformed from an example of a weak and fallible specimen of manhood into a youth ready to court the Goddess and finally die for love of her. Commenting on ‘The Face in the Mirror’, Devindra Kohli writes that the ‘asymmetry seems to be also projected as a measure not only of his individuality but of the uniqueness of a “true” poet, and of the nature of “true” poetry’ (‘Casualness’, p. 67). The asymmetry can never be ideal: it is the naked self that is fallible and vulnerable and therefore ‘naked’. Yet the outcome is never certain as the poet may not succeed. The Goddess may not grant him access to poetic truth; he may not die as proof of her love for him. The tension between success – marking the approval of the Goddess’s love – and failure signifying rejection, terror and annihilation is



unbearable, and yet the 'naked' poet is compelled always to play his own role, to be ready to sacrifice himself for his art.

In his first 1965 lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry, Graves maintained that false poetry – that is, Apollonian poetry – 'is an arrangement of reasonable opinions in a memorizable verse form, with carefully chosen semi-archaic diction lending them authority: in fact, a form of rhetoric, which meets society's demand for the god of rational enlightenment' (*Poetic Craft*, p. 97). Graves builds a defence of his perception of the poet's role for his own self elevation by arguing that the poetry might seem effective; it is in fact shallow, empty. According to Graves then, it is the poet's faith in and love for his art that makes the difference. His imagination, intensity, breadth and depth (Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 1) expose his 'nakedness' of spirit and mind and are the distinguishing qualities which set him apart. Graves says earlier in his first 1964 Oxford lecture:

Poetry is the profession of private truth, supported by craftsmanship in the use of words; I prefer not to call it an art, because the art of Classical Verse from the time of Virgil onwards allied itself to the art of Rhetoric [...]. From the first century B.C. onwards, the art of verse became the art of cozenage, not of truth (*Poetic Craft*, p. 26).

The rediscovery of what it is to write a true poem is to rediscover the belief in that mysterious force which governs poetic inspiration: the ancient Moon-goddess. The disappearance of the Goddess from history urged Graves to seek the reasons for her banishment from the western world. He wanted to recover her powers in order to build up an alternative understanding about writing poetry, one which differed from that of the Modernists like Eliot and Pound. Graves refused to be bound by schools or movements, rejecting them and their followers. There is something idealistic in Graves's desire to reclaim what he argues has been lost in literature and within the poet in particular. Yet, paradoxically Graves exploits a position of narrative authority: there is a defiant and self-righteous voice that suggests that he believed and was convinced that he is right where others are wrong, that his own poetry and a selected few poets are true where others are

false and misguided. It seems, then, that Graves tried to prick the balloon of the western canon which he viewed, as Patrick McGuinness writes in 'Robert Graves, Modernism and the "Poetic Body"', as 'an unholy alliance between the academic and poet' (p. 47) in order to create an alternative poetics which was Donald Davie writes, 'unashamedly and even belligerently, "Romantic"' (McGuinness, 'Modernism', p. 58).

### **The Goddess as the Source of Inspiration**

While part of *The White Goddess* consists of an historical argument to prove the existence of Goddess worship and its overthrow by patriarchy, an argument made through the solving of various riddles, according to Robert Bertholf's analysis of the first typescript of *The White Goddess*, it was in fact:

concerned mainly with the analysis of the "Song Of Taliesin" and the uncovering of the secret language and solving riddles which makes the poem understandable. The idea of the dominance of the male society comes into the discussion as does the appearance of the Triple Goddess, but they were secondary considerations and not primary one of the Goddess herself ('First Transcript', p. 119).

It can be argued, therefore, that the ideas and theories developed in *The Golden Fleece*, along with *King Jesus* and then *The Golden Ass* did much to shift the emphasis of *The White Goddess*, in that it was later altered and enlarged to include chapters concerning the nature of poetic thought and its connection to the Goddess in classical times. Graves refined his argument in *The White Goddess* concerning poetic inspiration by now specifying that it had *always* been associated with a muse figure. He claims that: 'The function of poetry is religious invocation of the Muse' (p. 10). The true poet is dedicated to the Goddess and, though times have changed, the concept remains constant: 'Function and use remain the same', he argues, 'only the application has changed' (p. 10). It seems, then, that for Graves, the poet's role is to record his experience with the muse. His theory holds that it is through the poet's devotion to the Goddess that he can produce true poetry, or as he argues in Chapter Twenty Five, 'War in Heaven', true poetry can be written only if the

poet is 'obsessed' with the White Goddess (pp. 445-46). He reiterates this later in his first lecture in 1965 as Professor of Poetry: 'In Muse Poetry, the "because" of a poem must be the poet's personal obsession with the Muse' (*Poetic Craft*, p. 97). '[T]he Triple Goddess [...] was a personification of primitive woman – woman the creatress and destructress' (*White Goddess*, pp. 376-78). According to this description, the muse – embodied in a living woman – is one who is ungovernable by society or by man (*Poetic Craft*, p. 97). For Graves, the muse is a metaphor for the Triple Goddess worshipped by poets in ancient times: 'As the New Moon or Spring she was a girl; as the Full Moon or Summer she was a woman; as the Old Moon or Winter she was hag' (*White Goddess* p. 378).

### **The Muse and Woman: Laura Riding Transformed**

The poet and muse relationship, rather than being interpreted biographically, is best understood as one of 'mythical' proportions. However, as mentioned earlier, the thirteen years Graves spent in a creative and tempestuous relationship with Riding, from whom he parted in dramatic circumstances in 1939, was hugely influential in his conception of the Goddess. Graves met Beryl Hodge in 1936 (Seymour, *Robert Graves*, p. 254), and they later married. However deeply Graves may have felt about Beryl Hodge, Riding's abrupt departure resonated as powerfully with him as the First World War had done some twenty years earlier. Despite Beryl's reassuring influence after the relationship with Riding had ended, Graves relapsed into a recurrence of neurasthenia or shell shock – a condition which had never completely left him since the Great War (Graves, *Goodbye*, pp. 279-80; Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, pp. xviii, 71-72). It can be argued that the Goddess took the shape that she did because of Riding's indisputable influence over his creative thinking and output. Although the Goddess had been constantly present in some form or another in much of Graves's work before *The White Goddess*, the view that Graves's idea of the Goddess is based on Riding is now widely accepted by critics, as it was by friends such as T. S. Matthews. The first critic to put forward this view was the



American poet, Randall Jarrell, who in 1956 in an essay entitled 'Robert Graves and the White Goddess', wrote that Graves viewed the White Goddess as being real, that the Goddess was manifested in Riding and that this representation of the Goddess had a direct bearing on his work (p. 470). Jarrell goes on to write:

I believe that it is simplest to think of [...Riding] as [...] the White Goddess incarnate, The Mother-Muse in contemporary flesh [...] it was only after Graves was no longer in a position to be dominated by her in specific practice that he worked out his general theory of the necessary dominance of the White Goddess, the Mother-Muse, over all men, all poets (pp. 473-74).

According to Jarrell's argument, then, Graves's quest for the truth tells 'one story only' (II. 1 (p. 150)) which is that of the true poet's relationship with the Muse-goddess, and on a personal level, the story of his adoration for Riding and the numerous women/muses who followed in her suit.

It would be simplistic to suggest that the Goddess is merely a product of personal experience, but as Patrick J. Keane writes in *A Wild Civility*, the Goddess experience is mythologized, and the myth is made personal (p. 64). While it is tempting to interpret or read the 'Goddess' in biographical terms, Graves was irritated and defensive with such definitions and often complained that critics were mistaken in calling the Goddess 'Mr. Graves's White Goddess'; rather, he is, he claimed, in an interview in 1956, her 'interpreter' (Haller, 'Conversations', p. 44), for she is the universal figure of the Muse-goddess, and religious invocation of her is the true function of poetry (Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves*, p. 14). Graves writes of the White Goddess and her many incarnations that she will gladly give her love to the true poet and 'the poet knows that it must be so' (p. 438). The Goddess is idolized and worshipped in myth and legend yet Graves's White Goddess is domineering, cruel and capricious, characteristics against which the poet can prove his mettle. In his essay 'Graves and the White Goddess – Part II', Jarrell states that Graves concentrated within the Goddess figure 'love and sexuality [...] intermingled with

fear and violence, destruction' (p. 474). The poet adores and desires the Goddess and yet seeks full knowledge of her seemingly negative qualities: which are to be both feared and revered. By proving his courage, the poet wins her love. Indeed, for all her resemblance to the vague deity figure who may or may not have been worshipped in prehistory, the Goddess is also a peculiarly masochistic Gravesian construct which embodies the less attractive features of the influential women of Graves's life, writ large and uncompromisingly. If she resembles Riding, she does so only in part and exaggeratedly, as there are also similarly elements that can be attributed to his mother, Amy Graves, his first wife, the feminist Nancy Nicholson and Beryl Graves. She is a fusion of his experience of these actual women, their qualities elevated and made extreme, and the mythological goddesses such as Hera and Isis: strong, ruthless, withholding, generous, forgiving. Those qualities always eluded him: they had to be won after a sacrifice. It is this invented feminine 'ideal' which holds him in thrall, whose sole purpose is to inspire him to write 'true poetry', that he called the White Goddess.

The concept of the muse as actual woman – or the paradigm which is used to understand the meaning of women in Graves's life after they parted – is not straightforward, unless she is viewed as the subjective archetype of the Great Goddess. Yet while scholars have found it difficult to agree whether Graves understands the Goddess as metaphor or reality – for example, Andrew Painter in 'On Metaphor in the Early Poetry of Robert Graves' argues that 'it is difficult to separate biography from his poetry because of the importance of certain figures in his life, notably Riding' (p. 11) – it is not a question of proving or disproving the existence of the Goddess. Graves says in the above-mentioned lecture given in 1957 that this is actually an 'improper question' (*White Goddess*, p. 501). However, Graves often dealt with this conundrum by pointing out, as he does in the 1963 interview with the film actress, Gina Lollobrigida for *Redbook* Magazine, that 'the word "muse" has been abused down the centuries, but it has a very important connotation – the

idea of a relationship between a man and a woman which cuts across all societal boundaries of class or religion or even matrimony' ('A *Redbook* Dialogue', p. 61). Of importance here is what the poet believes to be the source of inspiration and, in the light of this, his perception of the poems themselves. Graves believed poetry and experience to be linked. He insisted on a 'philosophy of composition' (Hoffman, *Barbarous Knowledge*, p. 158) which placed the events of his own life on the same level of importance as the text he was writing. In other words, the means are as important as the end product. Graves's domineering mother as well as the relationship with Riding and various other muse figures – women he both feared and revered – served to influence the content of his poetry. As Seymour-Smith writes in his study of the poet, the main theme of his mature poetry is 'unhappy love' or 'romantic love' (*Robert Graves*, pp. 8-9). Poetry is inseparable from experience. A poet inspired by a woman will elevate her to an ideal status, and it is this ideal which he aspires to serve as an unswerving devotee, rather than the real woman.

Graves wrote that it is impossible to separate the act of writing poetry from the state of being in love. For him, the loved other is filled with a strength bordering on the divine; the poet adores, worships and is bound to his muse. She is the muse who acts as the Goddess for a time in her human form: the Goddess serves 'as a non-historical archetype or a poetic metaphor' in Graves's work (Wood, 'Concept', p. 10). Yet to be happy is not to be in love. Domesticity and inspiration do not go 'hand in hand'. As Graves writes in 'The Personal Muse', the White Goddess is 'anti-domestic'; she is the perpetual other woman' (*Collected Writings*, p. 340). She, the Muse-goddess, is mysterious in her elusiveness; she cannot or will not conform to the stereotype of what is expected and accepted by society. While patriarchal societies are filled with 'other women' these women are, like the true poet, outsiders, misfits, disempowered. It is, for Graves, the union of the 'other woman' and the 'true poet' which has the potential to empower them both in a creative partnership. In this context the woman has to rise to the title so that the poet must be worthy of his muse.



Paradoxically, the poet's elevation of the woman, while transforming her into the Muse-goddess, at the same time alienates her as a human for she becomes an idealization: her human qualities are irrelevant; only her goddess qualities have value. Thus the woman is objectified for the cause of true poetry, the poet never learns, nor is he even interested in learning about who she is.

The muse in her human and goddess aspect needs to be reconciled to her worshipper, yet the paradoxical semi-divine nature of the worshipped brings both confusion and revelation. While the muse may be based on a person known to the poet, she may also simultaneously be a creature of fantasy. A modern example which beautifully explores the intricacies of the ambiguous identity of the Muse-goddess can be seen in the 1962 French New Wave film, *Jules et Jim*, directed by François Truffaut. The friends of the film's title look at slides of various statues. They are struck by one in particular: a beautiful face with a disdainful smile. So taken are Jules and Jim by the strange, ancient statue, that they travel to an island in the Adriatic where the statue has recently been excavated. 'Had they ever met that smile before? Never! What would they do if they met it one day? They would follow it' (Truffaut, *Truffaut by Truffaut*, p. 19). When the two friends meet Catherine, they are amazed to see that she has the same smile: all was beginning to 'unfold like a dream' (p. 25). The dream-like quality endows Catherine with mythical qualities which are not necessarily present in the woman but creatively perceived to be so by the two friends. While it can be argued that bourgeois society with its patriarchal values has paradoxically diminished the stature of man (Wilson, *Poetry and Mysticism*, p. 14), Jules and Jim have found the solution to their spiritual decay in the guise of Catherine, in whom they see a woman of mythic dimensions. The ménage-a-trois works for all three protagonists because the love between them is pure (Truffaut, *Truffaut by Truffaut*, p. 75), in that it is innocent and without jealousy. *Jules et Jim* is a cinematic example of a mortal woman endowed by her admirers with mythical qualities, and

consequently transformed by their love into an incarnation of the Goddess. Although the framework of *Jules et Jim* is patriarchal, the focus of the film is Catherine, for she acts with an amoral freedom. The film also addresses a distinction, which is the key to much of Graves's muse-inspired poetry, between the type of muse who inspires the artist – the muse who is a fantasy figure – and the muse who is corporeal. Like the Goddess, Catherine, for Jules and Jim, is an enigmatic symbol who is never understood, as the opening lines of the film make clear: '[off screen] Catherine: "You said to me: I love you. I said to you: wait. I was going to say: take me. You said to me: go away"' (p. 11). Because Jules and Jim never quite recognise who Catherine is, they abuse the Muse-goddess figure. As they are not ready to play their role in the ancient story, Catherine makes the profound statement of killing both Jim, whom she loved in a way unlike her love for Jules, and herself. Her choice of Jim as the Sacred King is also significant: his death is an affirmation of the Goddess's love. Jules, like Graves, is not always interested in the mortal woman. He is therefore unable to distinguish between the Goddess and the woman, and even Catherine's death, for Jules takes on a mythical significance. It is Sabine, Jules and Catherine's daughter, who appears as a continuation of the Muse-goddess. The Goddess now embodied in Sabine, whose aspect is symbolized by the new moon, lives on. Jules, like the poet-persona established by Graves, is locked into a mythological world where he strives to win the Goddess's love but which is denied him because of his rejection of Woman.

### **Key Poems: 'In Dedication' / 'The White Goddess'**

Opening the first edition of *The White Goddess* is the powerful poem 'In Dedication'. In *Poems and Satires* (1951), it appears again, but with significant revisions and a new name: 'The White Goddess'. Later the poem is slightly altered in the 1952 republication of *The White Goddess*, again entitled 'In Dedication' (this version was also replicated in the third edition). The two poems 'In Dedication' (1948) and 'The White Goddess' appear at first

glance to be the same in that their message is identical: the hostile Goddess reigns supreme. However, they are quite different. Graves's White Goddess of the original 'In Dedication', although addressed to the 'powerful Nine-fold Muse-goddess' (*White Goddess*, p. 491), Cerridwin, is closer to his Medea of *The Golden Fleece* and Mary of *King Jesus* than the later versions of the poem. In the first edition of *The White Goddess*, the shorter poem of two stanzas of ten lines each (compared to what was to become a poem of three stanzas of twenty-two lines each), the White Goddess is depicted as a bloodthirsty deity with eyes coloured specifically 'flax-flowered blue' (2 (p. 5)) (the Mediterranean flax flower, from which Graves probably took his example, is a purple blue; blue tinged with red) whilst in the later poem, her eyes are merely blue. She has 'blood red' lips (2) in the earlier version, compared to 'rowan-berry lips' (ll. 13 (p. 179)) in the later one. While in the former poem the description implies a thirst for violence, the later poem has been revised to make the Goddess seem gentler and more attractive to the reader (perhaps because such a hostile deity has no place in a world post-*Seven Days in New Crete*). The poem reflects a sense of transition in the changing nature of the poetic persona with regard to the theory – there is nothing romantic about the Goddess of the 1948 'In Dedication': she is cruel, exacting, ruthless, feared. Graves's spiritual journey between these two poems is hinted at in the later version. The concept of the Goddess for Graves, as will be shown in a discussion of *Seven Days in New Crete* in Chapter Five, changes with the writing of this text. The Goddess of 'In Dedication' (1948), who rises in November to be 'so cruelly new a vision' (7), is adored by the muse-poet who strives to win her love. This is a very personal poem and is about Graves's love for the Goddess and his own mythical role in the theme as he forgets 'violence and long betrayal, / Careless of where the next bright bolt may fall' (9-10). In his quest for poetic truth the poet-lover knows that he will be cruelly treated but is ready to die for the Goddess. However, the poem about the White Goddess indicates an evolution in Graves's understanding of the relationship between the poet and



the muse while he remains true to his central tenet (Kersnowski, *Early Poetry*, p. 161). The Goddess is no longer personal as the replacement of 'I' and 'my' with 'we' and 'our' expresses a cruelty and lack of mercy which encompasses the poet-questors for poetic truth.

### **The Muse-Poet / the Role of the Poet**

In *The White Goddess* Graves writes that the 'poet is in love with the White Goddess, with Truth: his heart breaks with longing and love for her' (p. 439). The Muse-goddess is equated with truth, implying that the writing of inspired verse comes from adoration and violent self-sacrifice, for no 'poet can hope to understand the nature of poetry unless he has had a vision of the Naked King crucified' (p. 439). What is striking is that the impetus of truth for Graves comes not from within but has been externalized into a projection onto a muse who demands the enactment of a fetishistic ritual of self annihilation. According to Graves, the true poet finally allows himself to be destroyed by the one he loves because his 'inner communion with the White Goddess [...] is regarded as the source of truth' (*White Goddess*, p. 439). The true poet is himself the Naked King betrayed by the Goddess. Paradoxically, betrayal and sacrifice are the only means of creating true poetry. The elements of the true poet's self-sacrifice and his betrayal by the Goddess are observed in the 1953 poem 'Dethronement'. The Goddess requires 'true anguish' (II. 7 (pp. 210-11)) rather than empty hymns 'to her beauty or to her mercy' (6).

In keeping with the egocentric autobiographical aspect of *The White Goddess*, Graves idealizes himself by adopting the mythical persona of the muse-poet, suitor and lover, and 'Sacred King' who is dedicated to serve and ultimately sacrifice himself for the Goddess. The King's symbolic death is, for the muse-poet, an affirmation of the Goddess's love, and it brings him closer to poetic truth. Poetic truth is equated with love of the Goddess which is returned through the symbolic enactment of the ancient theme. Graves describes the meaning of life in *The White Goddess* as:

the antique story [of the] birth, life, death and resurrection of the God of the Waxing Year; the central chapters concern the God's losing battle with the God of the Waning Year for the love of the capricious and all-powerful Threefold Goddess, their mother, bride and layer-out. The poet identifies himself with the God of the Waxing Year and his Muse with the Goddess; the rival is his blood-brother, his other self, his weird. All true poetry [...] celebrates some incident or scene in this very ancient story, and the three main characters are so much a part of our racial inheritance that they not only assert themselves in poetry but recur on occasions of emotional stress in the form of dreams, paranoiac visions and delusions (p. 20).

The story of the relations between man and woman also involves the 'blood-brother' or the 'weird' who competes with the archetypal identity of the poet, defining the division of the self or the poet's inner conflict which inspires the dramatization (Hoffman, *Barbarous Knowledge*, p. 147). Graves uses these stories in an attempt to right the world's wrongs by reinstating the place of true poetry. As James Mehoke writes, 'the personal and impersonal combine in a mythic vision' (*Peace Weaver*, p. 35); poetic truth is sought through the mythic relations between Goddess and poet.

However, there are flaws in Graves's argument. Graves argues that a false poet may have technical skill but, without a belief in the Goddess, he will lack the power to 'move' the reader. Poetic truth emerges out of direct 'inspiration' and conveys emotional meaning and value over and above any received, automatic response. By focusing his account of poetic theory on a belief in a muse figure who is an incarnation of the Triple Goddess, he carries it further to categorize poets into true and false. He claims, for example, that certain poets such as John Skelton, Ben Jonson and William Blake (pp. 450-51) are muse poets and condemns others such as Milton. (In a letter to Alun Lewis, dated 15 November 1941, Graves wrote 'I do not like synthetic work, from Virgil on through the centuries – including Milton' (*Broken Images*, p. 308)). Such differentiation becomes a deliberate continuity in his fiction, for example, in Graves's novel, *Wife to Mr Milton* (1943), which tells the story of Marie Powell who was married to John Milton. The novel, sympathetic to Milton's wife, is told from Powell's viewpoint. Graves used the novel to

debase Milton, imposing his view that he was a false poet. In *The White Goddess* Graves justifies the decisions he made in the novel by saying, in Chapter Thirteen: 'Palamedes and the Cranes', 'Recent researches that I have made into [...] the private life of Milton, [a] dangerous [topic, have] astonished me. How calculatedly misleading the textbooks are' (pp. 235-36). It can be seen that Graves frequently seems to disprove all established academic research with his 'accurate' hypothesis on any given subject. Given the autobiographical nature of *The White Goddess*, such conclusions are hardly reliable, based as they are on Graves's subjective views. As a result, he paradoxically undermines his claim to be a critical and balanced authority.

### **Genesis of *The White Goddess***

The starting point of this discussion of *The White Goddess* is to give a reverse chronology, because it deals not with the text itself but rather with how the writing of it was remembered or misremembered years later by the author. The main reason is the intrusive presence of Graves, who dominates the reader's response when reading the book. Graves gave several accounts of how *The White Goddess* was developed and written, but most notably his account in a lecture given at the YMHA Centre in New York on 9 February 1957 – later published in two collections of essays, *Steps* (Doubleday & Company: US publication) (1958) followed by *5 Pens in Hand* (Cassell: a UK publication) (1958) has become as famous as the text itself. Graves told his enraptured audience that he 'remembered' the moment of inspiration: 'a sudden overwhelming obsession interrupted me. It took the form of an unsolicited enlightenment on a subject which had meant little enough to me' (p. 479). He goes on to qualify this statement and adds to the sense of mystery and uncanny happenings by saying:

I am no mystic: I avoid participation in witchcraft, spiritualism, yoga, fortune-telling, automatic writing, and the like. I live a simple, normal, rustic life with my family and a wide circle of sane and intelligent friends. I belong to no religious cult, no secret society, no philosophical



sect; nor do I trust my historical intuition any further than it can be factually checked (p. 479).

It is through the tactic of denying any impulse to believe in the supernatural that Graves tacitly invites a more authoritative interpretation of how the writing of the text of *The White Goddess* came about, seducing the reader into a world where myth and actuality are seamlessly blended. This explanation of the genesis of *The White Goddess* becomes part of the book itself, and serves as a way into it. It can be argued that the reader is impelled to accept something illogical as factual and therefore prepares himself or herself to accept Graves's theory of the Goddess as the only true theory of poetic inspiration.

Much of the context in which the first edition of the text came to be written and published is discussed in the following chapters of this thesis, as it is also relevant to the texts discussed subsequently, namely *The Golden Fleece*, *King Jesus* and Graves's translation of *The Golden Ass*. Graves has led readers to imagine that *The White Goddess* came about almost against his will, through supernatural forces, forced from him by a magical impulse suddenly and unexpectedly. However, the facts as Graves outlines them, communicate a sense of mystery that seems more than mere coincidence and may be the result of his determination to see connections between legend and the present day. Thus, the links are somewhat contrived, and he uses the aura of mystery to conceal this. Moreover, another important determining factor is the psychological motivation to create a rationale for the nature of his relationships with women. In 1944 after his separation from Riding, Graves was living happily with Beryl Hodge, in Glampton in Devonshire, 'working against time' (*White Goddess*, p. 479) on *The Golden Fleece*. Yet Graves still carried emotional scars formed out of his relationship with his mother and compounded by his experience of war and still more by his separation from Riding and his consequent relations with younger women. It was part of his perverse and masochistic nature to seek relationships in which the experiences were reinterpreted and elevated into the epic of the poet and muse relationship.

The air of mystery and 'magic' surrounding the inspiration and writing of *The White Goddess* continued as Graves specified the source of the 'enlightenment' which took place when:

I was reading Lady Charlotte Guest's translation of *The Mabinogion*, a book of Welsh legends, and came across a hitherto despised minstrel poem called *The Song of Taliesin*. I suddenly knew [...] that the lines of the poem, which has always been dismissed as deliberate nonsense, formed a series of early mediaeval riddles, and I knew the answer to them all (p. 490).

Graves laced his account with 'don't ask me how', which adds to the sense of an occult influence. The conclusion of this enlightening episode is that Graves somehow knew that the riddles were composed by a court bard dating back to the sixth century who 'deliberately transposed' the lines 'for security reasons' (*White Goddess*, p. 490). The answer to the riddle, Graves argued, was connected with *Cad Goddeu* ('Battle of Trees') and the ancient Welsh poetic tradition:

I knew also [...] that the answer must in some way be linked with an ancient Welsh poetic tradition of a "Battle of Trees" – mentioned in Lady Charlotte Guest's notes to *The Mabinogion* – which was occasioned by a lapwing, a dog, and a white roebuck from the other world, and won by a certain god who guessed the name of his divine opposition to be Vron, or "Alder" (p. 490).

Graves, undeterred by the lack of any academic basis to his conclusions, linked the conflict between matriarchal and patriarchal religions with *Cad Goddeu* and *The Song of Taliesin*, a conflict which he would use as the basis for *The White Goddess*. In a letter to *The Listener*, dated 23 September 1948, responding to a review of the first edition of *The White Goddess*, he confidently wrote: 'Though I do not claim to have got the story right in every detail, I have everywhere respected historical facts' (p. 488). He continued in his talk for the YMHA that he was, in fact, rather more fascinated by the awakening of mysterious secrets than by writing an academic book in scholarly language. He writes: 'My conclusions have not been condemned at universities; but then neither have they been approved' (p. 491). He justifies himself by adding: 'Poets neither compete with

professional scholars, nor do they solicit sympathy from them' (p. 491). There is instability within the text as there is no evidence to substantiate such claims of 'truth' except as Graves's word.

### **The White Goddess and Intellectual and Literary Contexts**

What is not mentioned in the miraculous birth of *The White Goddess* is that prior to writing it, Graves had begun a brief friendship 'by correspondence' (O'Prey, *Broken Images*, p. 304) with the Welsh poet Alun Lewis in November 1941. Lewis, who was a second lieutenant in the South Wales Borderers, provided Graves with a stimulus to his thinking about poetic inspiration and its connection to an all-powerful goddess figure. During their correspondence, they discussed the nature of poetic inspiration and the true poet. Lewis declared in his second letter to Graves that the true poet was one who stood humbled, as without humility the poet could do no good. In his reply to Lewis, dated 15 November 1941, Graves wrote, 'I think it is important to make the humility something that one puts between oneself and one's impossibly high standards, not between oneself and others [...]. It is [...] the best possible criterion – I mean humility of self before standard – for judging the presumption of others' (*Broken Images*, pp. 306-07). *The White Goddess* is an attempt to define the origins of this humility. Yet it is ultimately part of Graves's poetic persona – as a conduit of the inspiration received from the Goddess – which supposedly influenced him to write about what governs a true poet and guides him towards poetic truth. He justifies the originality and unconventionality of his text against the fact that nobody had ever before explained what was poetic and what was unpoetic (p. 17).

This was not quite an accurate claim, for preceding *The White Goddess* was, of course, Aristotle's *Poetics* and then, later, the Romantic poets wrote their own views on the subject. Most notably, Coleridge, in *Biographica Literaria* (1817) wrote about what he considered to be genius, by concentrating on the influences and inspirations of writers. Integral to his argument, Coleridge distinguished between original writing – the source of



which was the imagination – and ‘fancy’, which he considered more mechanical and lacking in inspiration. Interestingly, in the same year, John Keats, writing on 21 December to his brothers George and Thomas, used the phrase ‘negative capability’ for the first time, when stipulating that in order to write inspired verse the intellect must be subdued (*Letters of John Keats*, p. 43). While Graves acknowledges them and the wider Romantic tradition, he goes on rather pompously to claim in the Foreword to the first edition of *The White Goddess* that a ‘historical grammar of the language of poetic myth’ ‘has never previously been attempted, and to write it conscientiously I have had to face such puzzling questions, though not beyond all conjecture’ (p. 5). What makes Graves’s text different from the others is that the theory was worked out in his fiction. The writers who preceded him in setting out their ideas of poetic truth and its origins aimed, like Graves, to reveal what constituted true poetry. However, Graves believed he had gone further as he constructs a poetic theory which embraces all aspects of human life and which he then used his fiction to explore and develop. Indeed, he became totally immersed in invoking all aspects of his psyche in this highly individual ‘construction’.

Other literary ‘sources’ for the White Goddess theme found in Graves’s earlier work have been identified by critics. Sydney Musgrove in his article ‘The Ancestry of the “White Goddess”’ (1962), and more recently, Frank Kersnowski in *The Early Poetry of Robert Graves* (2002), have both observed that Graves’s poetry, the novel *My Head! My Head!* (1925), and stories such as ‘The Shout’ (1929), were already permeated with intimations of the Goddess. It may be inferred that his relationship with the Goddess – albeit dimly perceived as such – began earlier than the actual writing of *The White Goddess*, with the presence of Riding in the writing of ‘The Shout’. In the republishing of various essays (many of which were written in collaboration with Riding), entitled *The Common Asphodel: Collected Essays on Poetry – 1922-1949*, Graves explains in the Introduction that they serve as a link to *The White Goddess*. He writes, ‘my contention is

that poets must know exactly what they are writing about in the most practical sense, if they are not to be mistaken as fools or for rhetoricians' (p. x). Graves is here informing the reader that the Muse-goddess has been a continual and persistent presence in his work. The statement is not dissimilar to those made after the writing of *The White Goddess*. What changes after his separation from Riding is Graves's singular focus that the poet writes specifically about the Goddess and his relations with her.

The origins of *The White Goddess* are also logically derived from Graves's extensive reading and his immense knowledge of anthropological, mythological and historical subjects – to name but three – for which he was already famous. Graves had been keenly interested in mythological and anthropological subjects from an early age, and he was, for example, familiar with the writings of James Frazer and Jane Harrison (Seymour-Smith, *His Life and Work*, p. 374). Under the influence of his father, Alfred Perceval Graves (1846-1931), a well-known poet and popular songwriter, Graves experimented with poetry, and his juvenilia display illustrations of complex Welsh metres and rhyme schemes such as the Welsh 'englyn' form of assonance (p. 7). Lindop has noted the influence of Robert Graves's grandfather, Charles Graves (1812-99), Bishop of Limerick, who had been an important Irish antiquarian and a 'pioneer in the decipherment of Ogham inscriptions' ('Introduction', p. xii). Influenced by Celtic literary movements and with an inherited knowledge of Celtic literature and mythology, Graves was familiar with the symbols and wisdom of ancient myth. He eventually evolved a private myth and symbol system in order to search for meaning in his own life. Vickery writes that 'if we understand what his myth consists of and how it is deployed, we are placed in a fair way to grasping the main features of his thought and art' (*Robert Graves*, p. ix). Myth provided a key for Graves to understand himself and the world, and it strongly affected the way he lived. In the interrelationship of *The Golden Fleece* and *King Jesus* and the translation of *The Golden Ass*, written during the same period as *The White Goddess*, Graves managed to fuse



the 'historical' and the mythopoeic into a coherent 'true' history of the world, and discovered his poetic voice to gradually formulate a theory of poetry.

Lindop has speculated in, '*The White Goddess: Sources, Contexts, Meanings*', that Graves may have carried out assiduous research in order to find 'clues to the nature of poetic thinking' (p. 26) and suggests various books that he may have read. Two books of investigative literary criticism in particular which, although admittedly unproven, it is logical to assume Graves would have read, are *Road to Xanadu* (1927) by John Livingston Lowes and *Rejoice in the Lamb: A Song from Bedlam* by W.F. Stead, written between 1759 and 1763 and republished in 1939. The former text is concerned with tracing the source of Coleridge's poetics and is similar to *The White Goddess* insofar – as Lindop argues – 'it involves the reader in a process of investigation whose end seems not to be known in advance, so that the author and reader appear to share the same suspense and the same excitement as one connection after another is revealed' (p. 26). Like Lowes, Graves bases his argument about the Goddess and her powers on myth, dream and obscure literature (p. 26). *The White Goddess* resembles Stead's text, which deals with the eighteenth-century enigmatic religious poem *Jubilate Agno* by Christopher Smart, as it too traces every reference in the poem back to the Biblical, Greek and Roman mythology and other obscure sources (pp. 26-27). It is likely that Lindop is correct in his assumption that Graves had read these two texts as well as others related to poetry since he was an extensive reader. What these two examples show, in particular, is that *The White Goddess* was a product of its time. Graves, like the two earlier authors, assimilated the methods and focus of other books about poetry and poetics, such as those referred to above, following the trend in investigative techniques.

In early 1941, Graves began collaborating with Alan Hodge on 'A handbook for writers of English Prose' (O'Prey, *Broken Images* p. 296) which was completed in July 1942, entitled *The Reader Over Your Shoulder*. The dating is significant as *The Reader*



*Over Your Shoulder* was written before *The White Goddess* and the four texts under discussion in this thesis. In other words, it was after writing this handbook that Graves began a process of articulating a theory of poetic truth.

Writing the handbook compelled him to think more deeply about the elements of writing. Writing to Basil Liddell Hart on 16 July 1941, Graves pointed out: 'I am very dubious [...] about a publisher but don't care: I have learned so much in the writing' (*Broken Images*, p. 302). The handbook was concerned with an analysis of style in English prose, and Graves elucidated not only what constituted good writing but also writing which is more than merely good, because it is inspired. Upon completion of *The Reader Over Your Shoulder* the next inevitable step was to collaborate again with Hodge in writing a book about poetry. Graves wrote an important letter to Hodge on 31 July 1942 about the nature of the proposed book and it is clear that his same theory concerning the 'aura or halo, or whatever, that clings to the name "poet"' (*Broken Images*, p. 313) was the catalyst for writing *The White Goddess*. The analysis was beginning to emerge from embryonic form to assume a definition:

How this shows the dim popular awareness of the supernatural power in poetry: a poem being the magic circle in which poets by their strange dealings with familiar things enclose a living power. The existence of charlatan poets who try to reproduce a genuine poetic phenomenon by literary means [...] is an indirect indication that the real thing exists (*Broken Images*, p. 313).

While there is no mention yet of the Goddess who was vital to Graves's poetic theory, there is, even at this time for him, a vivid magical power involved in the making of a poem. In the same letter, Graves goes on to explain how he himself writes a poem and he removes himself from the 'charlatan poets' by the process through which he is led: in the real poem 'which is wholly natural, necessary and unpreconceived [...] one has all the cords cut which tie one to ordinary thought' (*Broken Images*, p. 313). In other words, he claims that the poet (i.e. Graves) has no control over what he is writing. He later attributes the force that produces the poem to the Goddess as a means of explaining the mysterious

phenomenon which he believed governs the writing of a poem, concluding in a later letter to Hodge, dated 13 July 1943, that poems 'in the romantic style are all intricately concerned with primitive moon-worship' (*Broken Images*, pp. 315-16). His tentative theory, first voiced in these letters to Hodge, was to be developed and 'justified' through the use of various literary sources.

### **Conclusion**

*The White Goddess* is more than a treatise on poetry. What makes it an invaluable text (not only for poets) is that it encapsulates the ennui of the mid-twentieth century and attempts to answer how and why this has become the state of the world. Along with his theory of poetic truth, Graves's fictional prose is also an attempt to elucidate the truth, according to his own terms. Graves's translation of *The Golden Ass* is, for example, marketed as the 'definitive' translation of the text, and he claims also that the tale of the Golden Fleece had hitherto been misunderstood and misinterpreted. He sets out to 'set the record straight'. Later, Graves's *King Jesus* is a compelling and provocative reading of (for example) the Nativity, which Graves believed contained the truth about Christianity. What is important is not so much that Graves was mistaken or 'wrong' but that these texts all give substance to *The White Goddess* and his world view. The prose texts were not, in fact, mere money spinners as he tried to convince his public, but the synthesis of his theory of poetic truth. In order for fictional texts to excel, the writer must be able to 'think poetically' (p. 217), Graves writes, on 'several simultaneous levels of thought into a multiple sense' (p. 217). The use of figurative language, the play on words which leads to ambiguity and richness – all this is the language of poetry and its employment within his fictional texts lends subtlety and weight. Yet he uses poetic technique in order to deal with historical or mythological prose which require different methods of authentication. The idiosyncratic and questionable use of this technique has been largely overlooked by critics who have mainly concentrated on the poetry. This does not mean that his fictional prose has no

meaning outside poetry, that it is inferior. On the contrary, it is just as valid and authentic and deserving of critical attention. The following chapters will show that rather than being lesser entities than the poetry, or *The White Goddess* itself, his novels are invaluable in understanding *The White Goddess*, as well as standing as important works of British-post World War II literature in their own right.



## Chapter Two: *The Golden Fleece* (1944) - Conflict between Matriarchy and Patriarchy: Origins of the Goddess's Downfall

"I never lived until I died in honour of the sister of my master's servant;  
now I go piously with my master in search of my glorious ancestor"  
(Graves, *Fleece*, p. 125).<sup>6</sup>

In Robert Graves's novel *The Golden Fleece* (1944), Admetus, one of the Argonauts, recounting the recovery of the Golden Fleece by Jason and his Argonauts, asks his companions, whilst journeying to Colchis, to solve a seemingly unfathomable ancient Greek riddle. This forms the epigraph to this chapter. The riddle asks the hearer to identify what or who travels and why so 'piously'. Within the dynamics of the challenge is an enigma: While the answer may be the cap that Admetus wears as he travels to the ends of the world, this is only half of the answer. The cap's significance is that it was made from lamb pelts 'cast by the pregnant ewes sacrificed by him to [the Great Goddess] Artemis' (*Fleece*, p. 125). Therefore going 'piously' is Admetus, a follower of the Goddess, who wears the cap. The answer provides a clue to the direction of Graves's narrative.

Both Robert Graves and Admetus and the Argonauts are united in their quest to recover the stolen Golden Fleece and to reinstate the Goddess in her rightful place: as the 'only Triple Goddess, supreme, omnipotent and changeless' (p. 150). The Argonauts go in search of the Fleece and the truth of their search is inextricably bound up with Graves's search for the White Goddess. It is a further example of the intertextuality within his work, in which he includes the complex genre of riddles, which are, in effect, a language game built on question and implied answer, as well as other intertexts such as poetry, myth, legend and much more besides. Rather than being simple and easily answered, both here and in *The White Goddess* the riddle is in fact an elaborate intellectual game and the poet holds the key to poetic secrets. Like Graves's rendering of Taliesin's riddles in *The White*

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<sup>6</sup> All quotations from *The Golden Fleece* by Robert Graves are taken from *The Golden Fleece* (Edinburgh: Cassell and Company Ltd., 1944).

*Goddess*, his answers are closely tied to the Goddess and her connection to poetic inspiration (Frow, *Genre*, p. 29). The muse and poet/Goddess and Sacred King relationship, along with the riddles in these works, serve Graves as a challenge and response – in the form of a question and answer, which encodes the structure of a ritual (Frow, *Genre*, p. 35).

For Graves, Jason's adventures were complicated by a discovery that transformed *The Golden Fleece* from an account of the voyage of the Argo to recover the Fleece into something more significant. The anthropological and mythological aspects of the tale revealed to Graves a relationship between poetic art and ancient religious ritual. In his research for *The Golden Fleece*, Graves delved into the religious beliefs of prehistory and ancient history (Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. 50). He was convinced that aspects of the tale such as the matriarchy and the worship of female deities had been suppressed and hidden from the patriarchal world; this tied into a poetic theory which surfaced, in his words, 'suddenly' as he was working on the maps to accompany the novel.

This chapter aims to show the close connection between *The Golden Fleece* and *The White Goddess* in terms of both text and concept and argues that the proximity between the two demonstrates the evolution of Graves's poetic theory. While Graves's early poetry and prose foreshadow the appearance of the Goddess as a powerful poetic force, it was not until 1943 that he came to develop the idea of the Goddess as muse. It has already been mentioned that Graves habitually worked on several books at once, which adds to a sense of confusion when discussing the composition of the texts written during the writing and rewriting of *The White Goddess*. However an outline of the chronology and a more or less accurate dating of periods of composition will reveal how *The Golden Fleece*, *King Jesus*, *The Golden Ass* and *The White Goddess* are part of an intertextual web. It was whilst working on *The Golden Fleece* in 1943 that Graves was suddenly impelled to write the first draft of *The White Goddess*. Graves later recalled in 1957 that his 'mind



worked at such a furious rate all night, as well as the next day, that [...his] pen found it difficult to keep pace with the flow of thought' (*White Goddess*, p. 489).

Also discussed in this chapter is how Graves uses the rewriting of the myth of the recovery of the Golden Fleece by Jason and the Argonauts to tell another story. Transforming the myth and narrating it as fiction he writes at the same time his own personal myth of the true poet's relationship with the Goddess. He uses the persona of Orpheus (and Riding becomes the archetypal Goddess whom the Argonauts worshipped) to tell the story of the downfall of the Goddess in prehistory – themes which become equally important in *The White Goddess*. Overlaid in the novel is Graves's reaction to the departure of Riding, as well as a way of working out his reactions to war. Yet also to be evidenced is what Bloom calls a 'powerfully reductive tendency to historicize and literalize every manifestation of the Goddess he could discover, whether in life or literature' (*Robert Graves*, p. 2). It will be seen that, while Graves's great achievement was to formulate a poetic theory based on a goddess figure who is the basis of poetic inspiration, in the minds of some commentators he was held to be deluding himself in his interpretations of myths, as if something emotional and wilful in his readings was communicated and articulated in his work.

### **Writing and Publishing *The Golden Fleece***

For the first time in his creative literary career, in the autumn of 1941, Graves began to work on a purely mythological text.<sup>7</sup> *The Golden Fleece* is not a translation of a specific classical text, but rather an imaginative interpretation and free rendering: it is both fiction

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<sup>7</sup> The only other fictional text, previous to *The Golden Fleece*, to have matriarchal concerns is *My Head! My Head!* (1925). *My Head! My Head!* is a biblical narrative concerning the resurrection from the dead of the Shunammite's son by Moses and Elisha, which contains much that favours a matriarchal society. Graves was influenced in his thinking about matriarchy by the psychiatrist W. H. R. Rivers who was also keenly interested in matriarchal powers. Miranda Seymour writes of the 'conversations in 1920 and 1921 with Rivers', whom he met whilst convalescing during the First World War, which 'opened his eyes to the possibility of a primitive world in which women had ruled their tribes and been placed by men above the gods' (*Life on the Edge*, pp. 415-416). It was probably Rivers who introduced Graves to *Mutterrecht* (*Mother-Right: An Investigation of the Religions and Juridical Character of Matriarchy in the Ancient World*) (1861), a study by the Swiss anthropologist and sociologist, Johann Jakob Bachofen (1815-1887). Among the first to argue the existence of a matriarchal society in prehistory, Bachofen, in his Introduction to *Mother-Right*, presented his 'central idea' of 'the relationship between the primacy of women and the pre-Hellenic culture and religion' (p. 90).



and myth, history and religion – in other words, a hybrid of several genres. Graves was apparently aiming to write an historical novel about the ancient Greek hero, Jason and his Argonauts, which he soon called *The Golden Fleece*. However, he suddenly postponed the idea, explaining in a letter to Alan Hodge: 'I have decided not to do the *Golden Fleece* story, for I had a sudden inspiration that I know all about Milton and his wife' (*Broken Images* (15 November 1941), p. 309). The idea of 'inspiration', or being 'inspired', is characteristic of Graves's work of this period. Graves describes a magical force as the impetus that seems to dictate his work. However (as is shown in Chapter One) this explanation habitually disguises a combination of discourse from friends, miscellaneous reading and the influence of texts, the psychology of the moment, as well as an abiding interest in the theory of the matriarchy.

The 'inspiration' lies then in the combination of factors. It was only in 1943 that Graves articulated the combined source of this motivation as being 'the Goddess'. With the completion of *Wife to Mr Milton*, he returned to the writing of *The Golden Fleece* at the end of 1942 (Seymour-Smith, *Life and Work*, p. 374) and by June 1943 the first draft was completed (Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. 68). A year later, the novel remained unpublished in England and in America. In a letter to Hodge, Graves writes of his frustration that the novel had not yet been published: 'Hurry Cassell indeed about *The Golden Fleece*! The book has been in proof since last September or so, but the printers can give no date for publication because they are overworked, snowed under' (*Broken Images* (16 July 1944), p. 325). Owing undoubtedly to the paper shortage, as well as the lack of manual labour, delays in publication were common during the Second World War. The book was finally published by Cassell in October 1944 (O'Prey, *Broken Images*, p. 326). On 16 July 1944, Graves also wrote an urgent letter to Colin MacFadyean: 'Could you let me know when you will have finished with the Fleece – [...] because it is the copy for the U.S., and when it arrives there, they send me dollars' (Oxford, St John's College, MS The

Robert Graves Trust). In the USA, the novel was renamed, against Graves's wishes, as *Hercules, My Shipmate*, and published by Creative Age Press in September 1945 (Seymour-Smith, *Life and Work*, p. 374). The book did very well, both commercially and critically, and Graves excitedly wrote to Hodge in December 1944: '*Golden Fleece* has sold out ten days ago – 9000 copies and I am having the best reviews of any book I've ever published' (*Broken Images*, p. 327).

It was whilst engaged on *The Golden Fleece*, Graves later recollected, that he suddenly found himself interrupted by an 'overwhelming obsession' (*White Goddess*, p. 489). The obsession came from a number of factors, but the catalyst, it can be confidently argued, was the writing of *The Golden Fleece* itself, which suddenly impelled Graves to write the first draft of *The White Goddess*. He writes in the first edition of *The White Goddess*: 'In September 1943 [a month before *The Golden Fleece* was published], I could not stop my mind from running all day and all night in chase of the Roebuck, so rapidly that my pen could not keep up with it' (p. 335). The consequences of this discovery in relation to the writing of *The White Goddess* will be discussed later in this chapter.

Chronologically it is *The Golden Fleece*, along with *King Jesus* and *The Golden Ass* (rather than *The White Goddess*) which marks the beginning of the formation of a 'poetic ideology' concerning the Goddess in Graves's writings. It is therefore surprising that to a great extent *The Golden Fleece* has been overlooked in studies of the Graves canon (it is, for example, notably absent from Sydney Musgrove's critical study of 'The Ancestry of "The White Goddess"' (1962)). While it has been argued by Vickery and others that *The Golden Fleece* is significant only in so far as Graves was made aware of the 'ubiquity of the White Goddess' (p. 27), scholars have mostly ignored an important aspect of the novel – the presence within it of Graves's belief in a matriarchal society in which the Goddess was worshipped and the poet played a key role in her service until both were finally driven underground by the coming of patriarchy. This reinterpretation of historical

events evidenced in the novel points to the genesis of the Goddess as a source of poetic inspiration, laying the foundations for Graves's wider theory of poetic truth.

### **Myth and Poetic Inspiration**

Graves's research and actual writing of a novel about the Argonauts awakened him to 'revelations' of the historical existence of a matriarchal society eventually destroyed by the conflict between the matriarchal and patriarchal religions in the pattern of Jason's adventures. In writing *The Golden Fleece*, Graves is therefore able to transform the myth into an historiographic metafiction in order to manipulate the result of these 'revelations'. Graves was convinced that myths were to some extent literal. This viewpoint is borne out in a letter to Hodge in which he writes, 'I find that all such myths are based on some honest-to-God fact' (*Broken Images* (12 June 1944), p. 323). Graves interpreted the myth of the recovery of the Golden Fleece as an historical problem, which he then goes on to solve. He therefore employs the genre of the historical novel to relate the mythic story of *The Golden Fleece* for these wider imaginative purposes. More importantly, within the framework of the recovery of the Fleece from King Aeetes at Colchis, Graves discerned the original concept of the Triple Moon-goddess and her many manifestations. (He later expounded this in *The White Goddess*, reinterpreting the origins of the decline of ancient civilization by foregrounding the supercession of the Goddess by patriarchal warrior theologies.)

Graves's oeuvre displays a preoccupation with myth, so it was not unusual for him to dedicate his time to the novelization of a famous legend. Myth, in some form, is inherent in almost all that Graves wrote – varying from expository and literary prose, through to poetry. Myth is the most potent source of his theory of the White Goddess and the role of the true poet because it allowed him to appropriate and develop his own version, it being less straightforward than other genres. Graves only claimed that the text of *The White Goddess* was based on 'fact' in order to support his view that the myth contained the truth



about poetic inspiration, linked to the Goddess, and supported by the differentiation between muse poetry and Apollonian poetry. He goes on to say that it was the replacement of Goddess worship by patriarchy which brought about false Apollonian verse that has contributed to the present degeneration of civilization. Not only does Graves manipulate the facts, but also the mythology itself.

Graves's knowledge of mythology and interest in its contemporary study also inevitably influenced his research for *The Golden Fleece*. His awareness and learning of mythology would have been deeply established from an early age because the British public school education system in which he was educated, encouraged the study of the classical languages and the ancient world, approached through myth and history. Myth is not recognized as a discipline in itself such as history or literature; rather, it is incorporated into the various subjects of Classical Studies. It is significant that rather than presenting the story of the Argonauts' recovery of the Golden Fleece from Colchis as a myth, as he does later in *The Greek Myths* (1955), Graves rewrites it as an historical novel. The historical fictional text for him functions to provide the missing information between known historical events set in the classical past and the present. It is those gaps between events which attract speculation, since what happened there can be neither substantiated nor disproved (de Groot, *Historical Novel*, p. 3), presenting infinite imaginative possibilities. Graves's rationale in treating the myth as a mode of historical fiction was to posit the existence of a matriarchy with the Goddess as its symbolic head – as Laurance Coupe writes in *Myth*, 'a narrative vision of desire frustrated and fulfilled' (p. 169). Graves would not have thought of Jason and Hercules necessarily as historical figures, even if he did believe that such a voyage actually took place (nor, presumably, did he believe that the ram flew across the Hellespont). However, Graves viewed the voyage as a symbolic representation of a genuine turning point in history and the eclipse of one order of civilization by another.

Seymour-Smith writes in his critical study of Graves, 'Graves is not interested in ordinary human behaviour for its own sake, but only in human behaviour when it conforms to, or illustrates, some poetic or pre-determined pattern' (*Robert Graves*, p. 9). In the retelling of the Argos myth, Graves's style and approach become as important as the story itself. The relevance of the ancient Greek story and its link to Graves's poetic ideology become comprehensible when it is remembered that the literal translation of *poêtês* means 'maker': thus poetry and myth are finally *made* to unite into an imaginative agenda (*Myth*, p. 171). The poet is the maker in every sense of the word.

Graves did not view the Argo story as one of mere entertainment. In the Introduction to *The Golden Fleece*, he argues that the word 'myth' for the ancient Greeks 'had no connotation of untruth, as the adjective "mythical" has in modern English' (p. 11). It can be argued that Graves viewed literature as existing in the service of myth, and that writing fiction was a means of extending and reinterpreting mythology towards a new understanding of life – the 'mythopoeic' becoming central to this new interpretation of his world (*Myth*, p. 4). Graves therefore interprets the story of the Golden Fleece to represent a crucial truth, hidden between the known historical facts, which he viewed as his duty to tell.

### **The Myth of the Golden Fleece**

Graves faced many obstacles during his research for *The Golden Fleece*. In a letter, dated February 1943, to the fourteen-year-old Martin Seymour-Smith, whom he had just met, he complained, 'I am having a terrible time with a book about the Argonauts' (Seymour-Smith, *His Life and Work*, p. 363). The challenge in writing the novel was due to the lack of consistent accounts of the Argo's voyage. E. V. Rieu writes in the Introduction to his translation of *The Voyage of Argo: The Argonautica* by Apollonius of Rhodes (1959) (a translation which was written and published after *The Golden Fleece*), that the only full account of Jason's quest of the Golden Fleece is by Apollonius. Indeed, Graves writes in

the Introduction to *The Golden Fleece* that he found Apollonius 'not only the most useful of the main authorities but the most pleasant to read (p. 9). It is significant therefore, that Graves refers to Apollonius's version as a trusted source and authority, while his mouthpiece Lucius Sergius Paulus in Chapter Twenty of *The White Goddess*, 'A Conversation at Paphos – 43 AD', claims 'his ancient history is as reliable as anyone's' (p. 343). Although the historical tale is almost on a par with the Trojan War in its legendary scope, the story of the Golden Fleece is little known and had been almost forgotten by the time Graves began translating it. He writes in his Introduction to *The Golden Fleece* that 'the *Argonautica* of Apollonius does not figure in the ordinary Classical curriculum' (p. 10) (although there was a very popular version of the story available in Charles Kingsley's *The Heroes* (1856)), and Rieu adds that when he was at school his

Greek masters [...] found it a convenient source of passages to give [...] the students] as "unseens," knowing well that we would never have come across them. And even had they wished to take the [...] step of suggesting an English version [...] to read], there was none they could [...] commend (p. 9).

Why were the adventures of the Argonauts and the Golden Fleece so obscured by history? After all, myths – and the Argonaut myth is no exception – have an important bearing upon life (Davies, 'Raising the Issues', p. 1). Perhaps the contemporary male reading public would have been more familiar with the story if the Argo voyage had earned the definition of a straightforward 'epic', which Fiedler, in *Love and Death in the American Novel*, describes as 'a world of war, and its recurring [...] relationship is the loyalty of comrades in arms' (p. 25), referring to narratives aimed specifically at men with subjects such as adventure and warfare where a set of masculine models are presented in a patriarchal discourse (de Groot, *Historical Novel*, p. 79).

The word 'myth' is derived from the ancient Greek word 'muthos' meaning 'utterance', to 'tell a story'. While myths describe an aspect of the 'true' nature of humankind, distinctions between the 'fact' and 'truth' and 'history' become clouded in the



context of mythology. In the case of *The Golden Fleece*, Graves used his imagination to combine the myth with events and actions which actually took place and had a physical reality in the world ( 'Raising the Issues', p. 2), creating his own subjective version of this period of history. It is within the framework of the recovery of the Fleece that the argument of *The White Goddess* and the solving of riddles such as the 'Battle of the Trees' as a secret language become understandable.

### **The Privileging of History in *The Golden Fleece***

Juxtaposed to Graves the mythographer is the image of himself as Graves the historian: he writes in the novel's Introduction: 'The form into which I have cast the story of the Argonauts is the historical novel' (p. 26). He has woven the mythological dimension into the historical genre in order to present his message that the victory of patriarchy over matriarchy signalled the end of a peaceful world. A myth can be defined as being in opposition to reality and the rational, in that it is necessarily both 'fiction' and 'absurd' (Vernant, *Myth*, p. 186). Unlike the retelling of a myth, the historical novel as a genre, along with most novels, uses the narrative conventions of realism, such as development of character, and usually strives to be believable or authentic. Although Graves casts the myth in the form of an historical novel, he is deliberately ambivalent about endorsing the view that the wrongful displacement of the Goddess is an historical fact.

Graves's essential motive in telling the story of the Golden Fleece was to have the Goddess *reinstated in her rightful place*. The mythological genre was appealing because it set Graves's poetic ideology in its original context. The historical genre was attractive for other reasons, as it differs from a novel set in the contemporary world. As Jerome de Groot in *The Historical Novel* (2010) writes, it 'entails an engagement on the part of the reader (possibly unconsciously) with a set of tropes, settings and ideas that are particular, alien and strange' (p. 4). The reader has to apply a certain knowledge and experience of the world when engaging with such a text. There is distance created between author, text and

reader in its alien and artificial construction because it is not based on the present, familiar world.

Graves attributed to those Zeus-worshipping authors whose versions of the story remain at least a partial responsibility for the obscurity of this particular myth, for he claims that only Apollonius had sympathies with the Goddess religion. In the Introduction to *The Golden Fleece*, he writes that Apollonius 'had been too frank in his epic about the humiliation of Zeus by the Moon Goddess, and thus displeased their Zeus-worshipping husbands' (p. 21). It is apparent from the very few interpretations – or reinterpretations – of the myth that the Argonaut tale is far from straightforward. In a letter to Colin MacFadyean, undated but probably written early in 1943, Graves wrote excitedly: 'Primitive man pulls his punches – He tries to be on the side of as many Gods as possible' (MS RGT, Oxford). Man, according to Graves's mythologizing of events, has undermined the Goddess and by doing so has become instrumental in the replacement of matriarchy by patriarchy. Graves purposely reinterprets and readapts the tale leaving his readers under no illusions as to what *The Golden Fleece* is about. He explains in the same Introduction:

It is not difficult to see why the original meaning of the Golden Fleece has become a mystery to Greeks of the Classical age, granted that the seizure of the Fleece was an episode in a religious conflict between the supporters of the matriarchal moon Goddess [...] and those of the patriarchal Thunder God of the Greeks (p. 20).

Later, in *The White Goddess*, Graves reiterates the same point but goes further. He explains how the patriarchal invasions took place, starting from the Syrian invasion of Greece leading to the confederacy of tribes moving North towards Britain (which Graves even dates to 1472 BC adding, 'for what that is worth'! (p. 45)). However, the historical dimension is based on questionable sources and the accuracy of the dating, which he assures us is based on an 'archaeologically plausible Irish tradition in the *Book of Invasions*' (*White Goddess*, p. 45), is suspiciously vague. Nevertheless, this link between

the two texts demonstrates how Graves used a mythical story, subjected it to an historical interpretation, and later presented it in *The White Goddess*.

The synthesizing methods employed in *The Golden Fleece* have relevance to a consideration of Graves's processes in developing an all-embracing legend as the foundation of *The White Goddess*. In his Introduction to the novel, Graves directly addresses his audience, using the first person, as he wanted his readers to be involved in the discovery of the 'real' story. While a very rare device in the act of novel writing, it is common practice to include an explanatory note to accompany an historical novel in order for the reader to understand events which are peculiar to that time, thus explaining and rationalizing its original context and setting. There is an educational pedagogic aspect here as the reader approaches the text to learn something unknown or unfamiliar.<sup>8</sup> Along with the Introduction are additional tropes distinctive of the historical novel genre: such 'external scholarly apparatus' may include footnotes, additions, acknowledgements, bibliographies and maps (de Groot, *Historical Novel*, p. 7, p. 63). So *The Golden Fleece* seems to be an historical novel although it is not in fact, because the genre's 'pseudo-historic' stance clouds the areas between fact and fiction. Is the reader then a passive recipient of all kinds of untruths, as Jonathan Nield argues in *Guide to the Best Historical Novels and Tales* (1902)? Or is the reader more aware and accepting of the author's interpretation or rendering of events? (de Groot, *Historical Novel*, pp. 6-7). The reader is left either unknowingly accepting Graves's interpretation or consciously and knowingly accepting it. While there is very little difference between these two positions, a third option (a more likely one for contemporary readers) is that the reader should reject Graves's 'history' as false.

Argued in Chapter One is that Graves seemed to hold the genre of the novel in contempt, and regarded the writing of historical fiction solely as a means of financing his

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<sup>8</sup>Such an introduction first appeared in *Waverley* (1814) by Sir Walter Scott, it being considered the first historical novel in English (de Groot, *Historical Novel*, p. 7).



poetry. Part of the reason for this lies in the way the historical fiction genre had fallen out of fashion at the beginning of the twentieth century. While it had been a popular form from Scott onwards, it was increasingly overshadowed by the contemporary Modernist novel during the 1920s, and was finally marginalized into a sub-genre. This was partly due to the effects of the First World War, which were a 'fragmenting and fracturing' (de Groot, *Historical Novel*, p. 45) of identities, and this splintering of reality was reflected in the literature of the period. The historical novel, with its emphasis on past events, clashed with the Modernist preoccupation with the individualization of experience including the representation of a psychological dimension (*Historical Novel*, p. 42). Stylistically, also, the two forms are opposed: compared to the painstaking attention to historical detail required for the successful historical novel, the Modernist text was defined by the breaking of conventions, a focus on subjectivity, stream of consciousness, as well as frequently non linear narrative.

Another important reason for the demotion of the status of the historical novel into a sub-genre was its traditional educational focus. As such, the aesthetic elements of the novel were often overlooked in favour of the educational, the accuracy dominating the art: 'literary fiction became divorced from the historical' (*Historical Novel*, p. 45). De Groot writes that the historical novel was considered to have 'a purpose which is distinct and different to that of the more mainstream novel' (p. 47). The historical fiction genre, in other words, would have attracted a more specific readership and as such their aesthetic form and contents may have partly been responding to the needs or interests of the public.<sup>9</sup> What distinguishes Graves from his contemporaries is that he wrote historical fiction with personal aesthetic preoccupations that proved successful in the mainstream as well as being sophisticated examples of the genre.

Graves believed there was a historical basis to accounts of certain epics. He writes in his Introduction to *The Golden Fleece*:

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<sup>9</sup> It was only after the Second World War that the genre began to regain popularity as an aesthetic form.

The voyage was a good deal nearer in time for Homer and Hesiod than Columbus's discovery of America is for us [...No] Greek, so far as I know, ever ventured to deny that *Argo* was a real ship which sailed from Thessalian Iolcos to Aea on the Colchian river Phasis – and back again (p. 11).

While Graves may have undertaken thorough research on all the literature about the *Argo* voyage to enforce the view that *The Golden Fleece* was an *historical* narrative, he went further than the research allowed and invented a great deal. In the Introduction, Graves provides a critical commentary on the sources used in his rewriting of the Argonaut myth and lists the various writers of the myth through history and their contradictory versions. Graves notes that the two earliest writers were Homer and Hesiod (p. 9). Later writers include Eumelus ('eighth century BC') (p. 9) Mimnermus, Simonides, Hecataeus, Herodorus, and Acusilaüs (seventh and sixth centuries BC) (p. 9). Fifth-century BC sources include Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. Others included in Graves's list are Apollonius, Diodorus, Hecateus, Herodotus, Pausanias, Pindar, Rhodius, Siculus, and Strabo (p. 9). As a result of his thorough investigation of the available historical sources, Graves was able to describe events with a certain 'accuracy', lending credibility to the voyage of the *Argo*. Like Homer, he adds the biographies of each Argonaut. Also, euhemerism,<sup>10</sup> allows him to emphasize the *actuality* of the myth to convince readers of the truth of his argument. One example is where he changes extraordinary entities such as the centaurs into men adorned with horse manes who totemically *represent* horses being a substitution for the fantastical half-man, half-horse creatures of the narrative. Graves attempts to reconstruct the story of the recovery of the Golden Fleece by fusing myth and reality.

While the tale is retold with convincing historical depth and insight, Graves makes a further effort to reinforce its authenticity, with the inclusion, for example, of detailed maps of the outward and homeward journeys of the *Argo* voyage. While he was able to

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<sup>10</sup> Euhemerism was a strategy often employed by Graves (see Jesus's miracles), whereby real, human heroes have been exaggerated and made into gods and goddesses or endowed with the fantastical elements of myth. Then they are reverted back into humans again in his myth-made-historical narrative.

extemporize upon Jason and the other characters, giving them a realistic rendering – a Homeric device – the Goddess is endowed with an awesome and ambiguous mystery which contrasts effectively with the anthropological detail given throughout the novel of the other worshipped female deities. In contrast to the historical focus of the novel, there is a lack of realism in his depiction of the Goddess. In *The Golden Fleece*, the Goddess communicates her orders and her displeasure through dreams and song and is personified through her many priestesses. While the characters of *The Golden Fleece* do not doubt the Goddess's existence, the readers must suspend their disbelief and accept the fantastical elements of the Goddess's power. Through this ambiguity, Graves perplexes and confounds the historical dimension of his narrative, and this leaves readers unsure of how to interpret what appears to be a personal, subjective focus rather than an objective historical one.

Graves was convinced that he was writing an historical narrative rather than a mythological one. He bases his authority on personal opinion, namely, that there is no reason to doubt the authenticity of the voyage since the Greeks were a 'level-headed people' who 'regarded the voyage as an historical event which took place about two generations before the fall of Troy – to which they assigned the reasonable date of 1184 BC' (p. 11). The confidence of this absurd over-generalisation verges on the comical as there is no factual basis for such a statement. Then, in contrast, Graves continues in the Introduction to *The Golden Fleece* carefully to attempt to prove the 'accuracy' of his novel by noting the historical sources used to write the text. The obvious conclusion is that Graves wished to gain the trust of his prospective readers by demonstrating the external evidence and signs of historical writing, indicating that *The Golden Fleece* was the definitive text about Jason and the Argonauts.

Yet there is much that is in keeping with the form of historical fiction, established by Walter Scott, who is clearly an influence upon Graves's handling of the historical genre.



Both writers establish an historical environment which is realistic and 'authentic' in that the characters move, interact and respond realistically to their surroundings: the settings and periodisation are as much a part of the development of the narrative as the plot. Like Scott, Graves presents fictional characters who interact with historical ones. Most importantly, the characters of these texts are determined by and read as products of their historical environment (Sanders, *Oxford History*, p. 376).

Like Scott in *Waverley*, Graves, in his Introduction, strives to demonstrate that his work is educational, written from knowledge of historical events which emphasizes its authority, and that it may be regarded as a serious text (de Groot, *Historical Novel*, p. 7). In doing so, he fulfils the reader's expectations as it could be argued that the historical novel's 'pseudo-historic security' (*Historical Novel*, p. 6) affects them so that they accept Graves's narrative as fact. This point is further reinforced by the novel being told in the third person. The omniscience, though, is an intrusive narration serving to strengthen his claims to truth. Graves's techniques induce the reader to accept untruths, or at the very least, certain contentious propositions which might be less digestible in a non-fiction text. Graves, however, is not totally honest with his readers for, unlike Scott, he has another motive in writing: there is a gap between what Graves says in his Introduction and what it seems he is trying to do in the novel itself.

### **Graves and Theorised Reconstruction**

Graves takes the basic myth and reshapes the material in such a way that the actual story is barely recognizable. He places the events of the novel before the final overthrow of the matriarchal system and they depict the religious conflict between the gods and goddesses and their respective worshippers. Indeed, according to Graves, the entire trip made by the Argo had been engineered by the Goddess. Even though at the beginning of the narrative Graves shows how the Goddess has been completely diminished in status and is now known as Hera, 'consort to Zeus' (p. 56-7), she, rather than her husband or son, still

contrives to control events. The Goddess says: 'I intend to take my revenge on every one of my [...] human enemies in turn [...] and upon my husband Zeus too. I am a very long-lived, patient Goddess, and it pleases me to take my time and keep my temper' (p. 71). This Goddess, like the 'capricious and all-powerful Threefold Goddess' as defined in *The White Goddess* (p. 20), is one who is superior, powerful and destructive, and she has no qualms about annihilating those who stand in her way.

### **The White Goddess as Deity**

The powerful concept of the White Goddess as a deity to be worshipped in concrete form first appears in *The Golden Fleece*, and she is the motivating force behind the action of the novel. She is introduced to the reader as Rhea, Hera, Athena, and others. It is her physical appearance as the chief priestess Medea, however, that strikingly resembles Graves's later description of the Goddess in the poem 'In Dedication', the prototype for other representations of the Goddess in Graves's work (this was written after *The Golden Fleece* (as it is not included in the first typescript of *The White Goddess* (Bertholf, 'First Typescript', p. 119) but later accompanies the first edition of *The White Goddess*). Medea, in *The Golden Fleece*, is described as white with 'yellow ringlets of hair [...], voluptuous lips, amber-coloured eyes, and a slightly hooked nose' (p. 232). This description corresponds almost exactly with the Goddess in the later poem: 'Your broad, high brow is whiter than a leper's / Your eyes are flax-flower blue, blood-red your lips, / Your hair curls honey-coloured to white hips' (*White Goddess* (first edition), 1-3 (p. 5)). Medea is the first iconic foreshadower of Graves's White Goddess. Even their characters are similar as both are described as cold and ruthless, yet are adored without question. Medea is, as Graves writes in *The White Goddess*, the 'personification of primitive woman – woman the creatress and destructress' (pp. 377-78). The similarity between the White Goddess and the Goddess of *The Golden Fleece* serves to demonstrate that the deities are actually the same, a point which further underlines that the texts of *The Golden Fleece* and *The White*

*Goddess* are intricately bound. That Graves had the Goddess of *The Golden Fleece* in mind when he came to write *The White Goddess* is noted by Patrick Quinn in his Introduction to *The Golden Fleece*: she represents the 'victory of matriarchal tendencies over patriarchal ones; the victory of the moon over the sun, of intuition over reason, of agriculture over technology, of sexuality over denial' (p. x). This description could also be extended to the White Goddess herself.

### **Graves's Rationale 1: The Right to Alter**

Graves chose to open the text with a quotation taken from *Book IV*, 44: 5, 6 by Diodorus Siculus: first in the ancient Greek, then beneath it, in an English translation:

(But as a rule the ancient myths are not found to yield a simple and consistent story, so that nobody need wonder if details of my recension cannot be reconciled with those given by every poet and historian) (p. 5).<sup>11</sup>

It seems that Graves's tongue is in his cheek, as the choice of quotation to head his text tells the reader that he has the 'right' to be fanciful in his interpretation. According to Diodorus Siculus, then, owing to the very nature of a myth, the author is allowed free licence to do as he deems fit in order tell the story truthfully. The inclusion of this quotation actually reveals a great deal about the methods used in Graves's retelling of the myth. Graves's reinterpretation of the Goddess and the motivation behind the Argo voyage is rationalized in the Introduction:

[The] diversity of detail [...] typical of the whole corpus of Argonautic legend [...] justifies me in choosing for my own account whatever version of any incident makes the best sense, and even occasionally in improvising where a gap cannot be bridged by existent materials (p. 10).

Rather than allowing the reader to discover how the story develops through reading the narrative of *The Golden Fleece*, he stipulates his intentions in the Introduction, pointing him/her in the direction he requires. The Introduction is also written to prepare the reader for the controversial political and gender issues that Graves addresses in his translation of

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<sup>11</sup> Coincidentally, Diodorus Siculus is thought, by some historians, to be the son of Apollonius.



the narrative, which might cause offence to those expecting a 'pure' rendering of the Jason and the Argonauts myth. In his reinterpretation of the story of the Fleece, within its various contexts of myth, history and religion, Graves works towards a theory that was subsequently to shape his thinking about poetry and ultimately lead to the writing of *The White Goddess* – but which contradicts his claims to be writing history.

### **Graves's Rationale 2: Myth as a Version of Historical 'Fact'**

Graves's adherence to either the myth or a derivative version of the sources – as far as they are known – is in the view of many critics questionable. Recorded versions of the Argonaut story vary, as one source rests on a partial account which differs from others. In answer to this 'dilemma', it must be noted that Apollonius (whom Graves found 'the most useful' (*Fleece*, p. 9)) wrote with the intention of creating a work of imagination (Rieu, *Voyage*, p. 27). Although, like Graves, Apollonius used sources such as Xenophon and Herodotus to enhance his narrative, he himself is not wholly 'accurate', as he readily admits (p. 20, p. 25), and the authenticity of the narrative becomes questionable when myth and history are confused. Of course, Graves would have been aware of this confusion precipitated by the enmeshing of myth; an act of imagination merging with a version of historical events. He even exploits this confusion in his own interpretation. Both myth and the communication of historical acts depend upon the telling – either passed down by word of mouth or narrated by a skilled storyteller who links the event to the human condition. An historical event or person can therefore be transformed into myth to suit a particular need and serve a purpose for contemporary society, becoming 'mythopoeic' – as happened to Robin Hood, for example. John Smeds demonstrates in *Statement and Story* that Graves's attitude to myth-making is 'to pick up a historical idea, subject it to his mythological method, and present the final result as literary prose – as a novel' (p. 254). *The Golden Fleece* is an example of Smeds's contention. Similarly, Shelley in *Prometheus Unbound* reinterpreted the myth of Prometheus by rewriting it as a visionary but unperformable poetic drama.

Shelley justified his chosen mode of expression by writing in the preface that he had done more than 'restore the lost drama of Aeschylus' (*Complete Works*, p. 205). The poet is the re-creator, for he re-interprets a familiar story for his age. Shelley goes on to write that poetical rewritings of well known stories are original:

not because [...] they [...] had no previous existence in the mind of man [...], but because the whole produced by their combination has some intelligible and beautiful analogy with those sources of emotion and thought and with the contemporary condition of them (p. 206).

By the same token, Graves has rewritten a myth and created an original text, using the historical genre as a means of extending mythology into the current times (Coupe, *Myth*, p. 4). In the Introduction to *The Golden Fleece*, he chooses to depict the action not later than 146 BC, 'in an age which still believed' (p. 26) in the Goddess, in order that his reinterpretation of the myth may lead to a new understanding of the world in its current misery. His interpretation differs from the above examples because he places the known story of the recovery of the Fleece in a period (the dating, though confidently given, is suspect) which he assuredly claims was matriarchal.

*The Golden Fleece* works on two levels of discourse. The first retells an ancient myth and transforms it into an historical text. The second is the highly questionable ulterior motive of Graves, who concentrates on the matriarchal religious aspects of *The Golden Fleece* rather than on the actual voyage. However important Graves considered extensive research, he was convinced that the truth could only be reached through the application of what he termed analeptic thought. In the 'Historical Commentary' accompanying *King Jesus*, Graves explains: 'To write a historical novel by the analeptic method – the intuitive recovery of forgotten events by a deliberate suspension of time – one must train oneself to think in wholly contemporary terms' (p. 421). In other words, Graves did not believe that reason was sufficient to find solutions to historical, religious, moral, and poetic problems (Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. 57). In *The Golden Fleece*, *King Jesus* and *The White Goddess* he used a mixture of recorded historical facts, combined with



intuition, in order to recover events that were not factually known so that he could reach his controversial conclusions. He provides an example of analeptic thinking to successful effect in an interview with Huw P. Wheldon in 1959:

When I was writing *Claudius* there was an account of a battle he fought in Colchester with the local British king and very little information could be got from the source books, so I had to invent and I invented. I plotted the whole battle just as I fancied it would have happened. Afterwards, I was complimented [...] on having read a book which I didn't even know existed (Wheldon, 'Robert Graves', p. 52).

It seems that while original histories are necessary as research sources for a writer, it helps to have a talent for empathic intuition, which may bring the particulars of history to life, and also the capacity to invent. Graves mentally identifies himself with the chosen myth or historical event and from it he develops an interpretation which he believes to be a fundamental truth. Ultimately, this is intelligent guesswork, based on knowledge of myth or history in combination with the imagination, the outcome of which is then interpreted as fact. *The Golden Fleece*, then, constructs binary oppositions between past and present, historical and mythical: the use of the analeptic method dissolves time and space, transforming the Argo myth into Robert Graves's myth of himself as Lover/King and the Goddess incarnate in a muse.

### **Matriarchy versus Patriarchy**

Graves perceives a struggle for supremacy between the gods and goddesses. However, in the triumphant victory of patriarchy, the real story of the Golden Fleece – the one that Graves wanted to rescue, not necessarily matching the historical facts – was obscured. It is that of the tragic defeat of matriarchy, with all its implications for the future of the world. In the Introduction to the novel, Graves writes that the original meaning of the Golden Fleece was not known by the Greeks, because the actual 'seizure of the Fleece was an episode in a religious conflict between the supporters of the matriarchal Moon- goddess of the "Pelasgians" [part of Greece was then known as Pelasgia (p. 38)] and those of the



patriarchal Thunder God of the Greeks' (p. 20). Similarly, in Chapter Four (pp. 56-62) of *The White Goddess*, Graves writes of the quarrels between the separate patriarchal sects and the Goddess-worshipping peoples, and he specifically links the Argonauts to the White Goddess: 'we are justified in connecting the hundred-armed with the White Goddess' (p. 62). Graves makes a link between the Aegean and the Celtic, as the Goddess-worshipping tribes move north. The chapter also reads uncannily as an extension of Graves's Introduction to *The Golden Fleece*, where he places the loss of the Fleece into an 'historical' context. Simply put, *The White Goddess* extends and explains the background of *The Golden Fleece*. In the novel, the Goddess's sacred shrine at Pelion is replaced by that of Zeus and covered by his holy relic, the Fleece. Out of revenge, the Goddess has the Fleece stolen and her shrine reinstated. Yet, as the Goddess explains, she has had 'to contrive a tortuous plot and pretend compliance with [...the new] religious innovations' (p. 71). *The Golden Fleece* charts the beginning of Zeus's supremacy. By focusing on this, Graves emphasises the catastrophic implications of the religious and political conflict on a domestic level. According to Graves, even the institution of marriage and fatherhood was imposed upon the peaceful matriarchal framework during ancient times. The world became transformed into one of patriarchal dominance resulting in a reversal of values and a consequent degradation of the social order.

### **Graves and Majorca**

Following the Prologue of *The Golden Fleece*, Graves significantly sets the scene of matriarchal harmony on the island of Majorca. The choice of this island indicates his identification with the Goddess-worshipping lyric poet whose home stands apart from patriarchy.<sup>12</sup> Chapter One of the novel describes the forced marriage between the Goddess-worshipping Pelasgians, and their invaders, the Minyans, worshippers of Zeus. The

<sup>12</sup> Majorca had been Graves's home from the late 1920s onwards, until the start of the Spanish Civil War in the summer of 1936, when he was forced to live temporarily in England. He returned to Majorca ten years later in 1946 where he died in 1985 (Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. xx).

Minyan King Athamas induces Ino, Chief Priestess of the college at Iolcos (pp. 39-40) to marry him, and her nymphs to marry his chieftains. It is clear from the outset that the narrator favours the worshippers of the Goddess, for he describes Athamas as 'haughty' (p. 39), a man who declares the Goddess to be powerless and who states: 'The Moon is cold and dead: she has no creative virtue at all' (p. 42). As Athamas sees no need to respect the Goddess, he has her shrine replaced by one to Zeus, the Ram-God, placing upon the statue the magical ram's fleece. Thus, Graves chooses to depict, within the domestic rivalry of Ino and Athamas, the religious struggle between the gods and goddesses that informs man and woman, patriarchy and matriarchy, and the present arrangement of gender power which continues to the present day.

### **Graves's Depiction of the Goddess**

The Goddess of prehistory makes her presence felt in various ancient figures worshipped under different names, ranging from the Cretan and Mycenaean Gaia and Rhea, the Cyprian Aphrodite, the Indian Kali, to the Egyptian Isis. It is important to note that in this literature 'we can give the goddess no proper name. We call her rightly the Great Mother and the "Lady of the Wild Things"' (Harrison, *Prolegomena*, p. 266). The idea of Graves's Goddess is extremely controversial, for he synthesized the goddess figures of antiquity by manipulating the prehistorical image of the deity and invested her with the characteristics, for example, depicted by Harrison's *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (pp. 256-321), in order to suit an idea which was relevant to his own poetic needs.

Graves writes that the 'Greeks complained that [...the Goddess was merely] a jealous wife and a cruel stepmother' (p. 57). The Goddess herself confirms this in the text, smugly admitting that she has accepted the role of Zeus's wife primarily to cause him misery:

Now it has suited my humour to enter the Olympian family as Zeus's wife, rather than to remain outside as his enemy; I can lead him an insufferable life by my nagging and spying and mischief-making [...].

And my self-multiplication into his divine sisters and daughters increases his difficulties (pp. 71-2).

Graves characterises the Goddess as one who is supreme, cunning, and above all, ruthless. In her attempt to regain power over Zeus, the Goddess has 'blasted the barley-fields and made them barren' (p. 49).

The Goddess, through the Delphic Oracle, ordains that the children of Ino and Athamas, Helle and Phrixus, be sacrificed to Zeus to bring rain and save the harvest. Then the Goddess's own voice tells the two children in their sleep that if they do her bidding, they will be saved: they must steal the sacred Fleece from the Ram's shrine, and take it to Colchis. The 'committing of the Golden Fleece of Zeus to the charge of the Cretan Prometheus was a further sign of the White Goddess's implacable mood' (p. 52). The Goddess explains: 'I am offended by the intrusion of my son Zeus into my ancient sanctuary on Mount Pelion, and the removal of my mare-headed image' (p. 49). She admits that it is she who 'inspired' (p. 49) the death sentence, but 'with the intention of bringing ruin upon [...their] father [...not upon themselves]' (p. 49). The statue of the Ram is turned upside-down as a taunting insult to Zeus and a reminder that the Goddess is dominant over him. The Goddess then designs an even more thorough revenge on Zeus by selecting Jason and his Argonauts to recover the stolen holy Fleece of the Laphystian Ram from Colchis near the south east coast of the Black Sea.

The Argonauts' journey is undertaken in the Goddess's name to return the Fleece – and it is integral to Graves's interpretation that he viewed Jason as incidental to the plot of *The Golden Fleece*, rather than as the traditional swashbuckling hero. The world that Graves depicts is a matriarchal world, emphasizing that it is the female figures, both mortal woman and deity, who are the strong and dominating characters who move the narrative forward, rather than the men. According to the Goddess, Jason is 'a wild and witless young man' (p. 72) who unsuspectingly becomes involved in her schemes to humiliate Zeus. In a letter to his friend, T. S. Matthews, written on 27 October 1942, Graves claims that he



viewed Jason as simply a 'handsome cad, I think: permanently a coward and *not* a born leader of men. It was people like [...] Orpheus [...] who kept things together' ((27 October 1942), MS RGT, Oxford). The Goddess worshippers save the day. Apart from Orpheus, the Argonauts are far from heroic, virtuous and unified, rather they are argumentative and rebellious. As a consequence, the novel reads essentially as Graves's thesis: a historical-mythological document about the rise and consequent decline of the Goddess, rather than a study of the development of the characters. If this myth is based on 'historical fact', Graves cannot escape the fact that the Fleece is a holy relic of Zeus. Yet the Goddess's wish to have it returned, in order to remind Zeus of his inferior state, brings about chaos in the ancient world, affirming her own supremacy. It is the changes then made to the story of *The Golden Fleece* which illuminate his critical view and serve to elucidate Graves's thinking as he developed the process of formulating a radical theory concerning true poetry inspired by the Muse-goddess.

### **Development of the White Goddess Theory**

It may be conjectured that the 'transformation' of Graves's thoughts about a poetic theory, which he claimed occurred whilst he was writing *The Golden Fleece*, would not have come as a surprise to those who knew him. T. S. Matthews, a long-standing friend, recorded his friendship with the poet in his memoirs, entitled *Under the Influence* (1979) (American title, *Jacks or Better*). With reference to Graves's return to Majorca with Beryl Hodge in 1946, Matthews comments:

The process of Robert's self-delusion (as I thought it) was a gradual one; but I saw it coming [...] I couldn't help noticing that whenever he got on the subject of Mediterranean mythology he showed himself violently hostile to the gods of Olympus, whom he characterized as usurpers, and was an equally violent partisan of the Mother Goddess, the head and front of "the old religion," the true faith [...] which] had been driven underground by the Greek Gods (pp. 250-1).

'Self-delusion' and 'violently hostile' are very strong criticism from someone who greatly respected Graves as an artist. Suggested in these comments is a man who was not totally

rational in his views; someone who had taken myth/fiction a step too far by recreating a world in which the believers of the Goddess fought the patriarchs for liberty and truth and, believing them to be literal, saw himself as one of those being driven underground, or suppressed and misunderstood in his own lifetime. For Graves, the poet's place within this context of 'the old religion' is clear. It can also be argued that Graves's living in Majorca takes on another dimension in this context, because it amounted to a rejection of the British establishment and the western canon. His work following *The White Goddess* is his attempt to create an alternative canon based on the female principle. Graves argues in an essay published in *Oxford Addresses on Poetry* (1962), entitled 'The Personal Muse', that the poet is wholeheartedly 'against the patriarchal system' (*Collected Writings*, p. 340). He objected that the feminine principle had been overshadowed and undermined by a celestial divine hierarchy with a sun god as its centre. Matriarchal values, which preceded patriarchal dominance, consisted of living in harmony and co-operation without competition. So, even though the narrator's tone in *The Golden Fleece* appears light-heartedly detached, Graves's sympathy with the peaceful worshippers of the Triple Goddess who live in a world without wars cannot be hidden. Suggested here is Graves's own ideological stance in which the anti-war sentiments are expressed in the binary opposition between matriarchy, which is peaceful, and patriarchy, which is violent. One example of the narrator's approval of the Goddess-worshippers is shown with the entrance of the Achaean people who, having invaded the settled parts of Greece, observe an unfamiliar way of life:

The gracious and well-decorated houses, the strongly walled cities, the swift and commodious ships [...] dried figs, barley-bread, sea-food, and olive oil [...] They were astonished and scandalized to find that their cousins [...] [the...] Greeks [...] were not only wearing womanish clothing and jewelry [sic], but seemed to regard women as the holier and more authoritative sex. Almost all the priestly functions were engrossed by women, and even the Greek tribal gods had acknowledged themselves sons and dependents of the Triple Goddess (p. 55).



However, the Achaeans triumph because 'their chariots and iron weapons gave them supremacy in battle. In Greece, only bronze weapons had been known hitherto, and the horse, a sacred animal, was little used in warfare' (p. 55). Thus the peace-loving Goddess-worshipping peoples are defeated by the greater brute strength of the armed male warrior, and matriarchy is supplanted by patriarchy. Viewing this as fact, Graves sincerely believed that the replacement of matriarchy by patriarchy had caused the destruction of the world through chaos and war. What is evident from Matthews's appraisal of Graves's convictions is that he considered them eccentric and somewhat unbalanced. When Matthews writes that he 'saw it coming', he means that the 'change' in Graves was not, with hindsight, unexpected. He clarifies his meaning by adding the following: 'His mystical and reverent attitude towards the Mother Goddess was only explicable, I thought, in the light of his long thralldom to Laura and a worship whose effects on him were permanent' (*Under the Influence*, p. 251). It almost seems, then, that Graves has reinterpreted the Greek myth as a means of self-healing from this rupture out of which the White Goddess emerges. The White Goddess does not simply appear as a new phenomenon he has dreamed up; rather, as well as her historical basis, as he saw it, she had already been prefigured: in his relationship with his strong mother; in his marriage to the feminist, Nancy Nicholson; and then in his relationship with the domineering Riding.<sup>13</sup> The poems that most clearly foreshadow the White Goddess are those describing the tortuous relationship with Riding. These autobiographical influences all contributed to the creation of his poetic vision. If he cannot think of the Goddess as 'real', then he and the poems collapse. The Goddess becomes a tool, a device, for his personal survival as a hero in the modern world. While Graves the novelist is moved to recreate Riding into the all powerful Goddess as articulated in the theory of the White Goddess, he has yet to reinvent himself as an adequate counterpart to her transformation.

<sup>13</sup> Writing about Riding in *Under the Influence*, Matthews observes: 'I saw that the price of admission to Laura's circle was the same for everyone: fealty to her as the acknowledged and absolute monarch of her little kingdom ("Queendom" it should be)' (p. 130).



### **Laura Riding: Goddess as Muse**

It has been argued that, to a certain extent, Riding personified the Goddess for Graves and the writing of *The Golden Fleece* served as a medium allowing him to explore the nature of his relationship with this dominating woman under a tolerable and positive guise.<sup>14</sup> Seymour-Smith writes, 'it is obvious that Graves's picture of the Muse at the time he wrote *The White Goddess* is almost exclusively based on his personal experiences with and attitudes towards women' (*Robert Graves*, p. 15). In one sense, Graves used the research and writing of the novel to examine the wounds Riding had inflicted. Riding, in her physical aspect, is elevated into a wise yet implacable, omniscient being whom Graves used to work out his developing theories about the Goddess. His writings about the Goddess, whose power and cruelty the lover-poet eagerly accepts to the point of his annihilation, are permeated with elements of sadomasochism and degradation, characteristics that unfailingly coloured Graves's relationships with strong women. However, it was only after Riding had left him that Graves was able to articulate these ideas. As Richard Perceval Graves writes in the third part of his Graves biography:

In his spiritual life he was reaching out for some new revelation, and he began feeling things [concerning the nature of the Goddess as muse] with the heightened intensity of the period in 1926 when he had fallen in love with Laura Riding (p. 50).

While Graves's ideas seemed to be a revelation to him, they can also be viewed as evidence of a disturbance in his psychology, in actual fact, being a means of projecting that pain as art. Graves exhibits the paradoxical nature of the Goddess and, as he continues in *The White Goddess*, 'the necessary ambivalence of poetic meaning [...] thus maintained: it is an axiom that the White Goddess is both lovely and cruel, ugly and kind' (p. 241). In a letter to Gertrude Stein, written after the fifth and final draft of *The White Goddess* was completed (*Broken Images*, p. 337), he writes of Riding: 'She was possessed for a great

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<sup>14</sup> Matthews, says that Riding treated Graves 'like a dog', and willingly subservient, he accepted 'her contemptuous bearing toward him' (*Under the Influence*, pp. 130-31).

many years by a very cruel and beautiful Muse with which she identified herself' (*Broken Images* (28 January 1946), p. 337).<sup>15</sup> In Graves's reconstruction of his relationship with Riding, she is transformed into the Goddess, the 'Queen of Heaven' who 'claims the moon, the snake, the fetich cross, the blue garment, the stars, the lilies, and the Divine Child as Her attributes' (p. 27). The Muse-goddess figure is similarly described in *The Golden Fleece* as hostile and ruthless, yet supreme. Few of the Argonauts who worship her die natural or happy deaths.

### **Poet and War: Violent Death and the Goddess's Love**

Just as the Argonauts meet strangely brutal deaths, so the true poet, who is Orpheus in the novel, should also be ready to die violently, ending his life in pursuit of the 'grand defile' rendering him to 'rags' (*Fleece*, p. 211). The 'grand defile' is, for Graves, the brutal death of the true poet which every true poet craves as the symbolic affirmation of the Goddess's power, and her love for her poet-king. Graves writes that the Goddess 'will gladly give [the poet] her love but at only one price: his life. She will exact payment punctually and bloodily' (*White Goddess*, pp. 438-39). He also writes, in Chapter Six of *The White Goddess*, that it was the 'Moon-goddess, not the Sun-god, who originally inspired Orpheus' (p. 95). Orpheus, indeed, 'was a sacred victim of her fury. He was torn in pieces by a pack of delirious women intoxicated by ivy and also [...] toadstool' (p. 95) Orpheus's death exemplifies his own stature as a true poet in the Goddess's eyes. It is only those who are loved by the Goddess who are worthy of such an end. Portrayed earlier in *The Golden Fleece*, in terms similar to the above, Orpheus's end is depicted at the conclusion of the novel:

Orpheus [...] died a violent death. The Ciconian women one night tore him to pieces during their autumnal orgies in honour of the Triple Goddess. Nor was this to be wondered at: the Goddess has always rewarded with dismemberment those who love her best (p. 371).

<sup>15</sup> Bizarrely, Riding on special occasions, during her relationship with Graves, 'was crowned by a tiara of gold that spelled LAURA' (Matthews, *Under the Influence*, p. 128).

This excerpt resonates with elementally terrifying images borrowed from Graves's war experiences, and overlaid by his reaction to the departure of Riding. A French Jesuit, Paul Dubrille, serving in the infantry during the First World War, wrote that 'to die from a bullet seems to be nothing; but to be dismembered, torn to pieces, reduced to a pulp, this is a fear that flesh cannot support [...] the most solid nerves cannot resist for long' (Holden, *Shell Shock*, p. 11). Graves was no stranger to the conditions of war. Although he had served with courage as an infantry officer at the Battle of Loos and had been seriously injured at the Somme, the guilt of survival, at not having joined his comrades in dying heroically, remained with him beneath the core of his writing. As Quinn comments in *The Great War and the Missing Muse*, 'the numerous volumes of poetry [...] produced after the war failed to exorcise the memory of the Great War from [...] Graves's mind]' (p. 9). Graves admitted, in his Foreword to the *Collected Poems* (1938), that he had 'a frank fear of physical death' (p. 34) which was mirrored in his early poetry.

Graves likens the soldier on the field of battle to the role of the poet in his first lecture of 1965 as the Oxford Chair of Poetry:

The pride of "bearing it out even on the edge of doom" that sustains a soldier in the field, governs a poet's service to the Muse. It is not masochism, or even stupidity, but a determination that the story shall end gloriously: a willingness to risk all wounds and hardships, to die weapon in hand. For a poet this defiance is, of course, metaphorical: death means giving in to dead forces, dead routines of actions and thought. The Muse represents eternal life and the sudden lightening flash of wisdom (*Poetic Craft*, p. 109).

There is a reverence for the soldier who lives in the knowledge that he will be killed in battle. His readiness to die is comparable to that of the poet who sacrifices himself for the love of the Goddess who grants him the gift of poetic truth. However, the soldier is part of a larger body, while the poet stands alone. And the soldier's death is real, whilst for the poet it is psychological or obliteration of the self, leading to a rebirth. Graves was particularly moved by the death of the Second-World War soldier-poet, Alun Lewis. While the First World War produced many poets of merit, according to Graves, the only poet of



consequence to emerge during the Second World War was Lewis, who died before seeing action in 1944. Although the two never met, they corresponded regularly from November 1941, and Graves championed Lewis's work. In his Foreword to Lewis's *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets* (published posthumously in 1945), Graves wrote that from the very start of their correspondence he was aware that 'the younger poet's power lay in his poetic integrity' (p. 8). For Graves, the following lines, written in a letter by Lewis to his wife, defined the importance of the poet in a world without value. As Graves writes, the proof of the true poet lies in his consciousness of the possibility of failure:

I'm more engrossed with the *single* poetic theme of Life and Death, for there doesn't seem to be any question more directly relevant than this one, of what survives of the beloved [...]. Acceptance seems so spiritless, protest so vain. In between the two I live (p. 12).

Graves begins *The White Goddess* by stating that Lewis understood that 'there is no choice' for the true poet for, as Lewis recognized, there is only one 'single theme' (p. 17). Lewis's readiness to die for the Cause that measured his dedication to poetry had an immense impact on Graves's thinking about the muse who acts as the Goddess for the true poet. For Graves, Lewis's death was endowed with symbolic significance. Lewis not only died a soldier's death (it is clear, though irrelevant, that he did not die on the battlefield), but a poet's, which Graves interpreted as reward for his service to the muse, his dedication of his life to art. Lewis writes in his second letter to Graves, dated 15 November 1941:

the course from which my writing comes [...is] *Humility* [...]. It is the source of all my long struggles, for it brings me into conflict with self-pity and the world, with authority and presumption on the part of those who are not humble, with intolerance and cruelty, and with submission [...]. And that is why I know where I stand in politics and in love [...]  
(*Broken Images*, pp. 306-7).

It is only with the hindsight following Lewis's death that the power of the young poet's voice is understood: 'the power,' Graves writes in the Foreword to *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets* 'that [...] lay in his poetic integrity', for 'love is the orientation of every true poet' (p. 8). Because Graves understood poetic truth as being a consequence of humility

towards the Goddess, it can be surmised that he was convinced that Lewis's poetry was addressed indirectly to the Goddess. One example is seen in the Lewis poem, 'To Edward Thomas', a homage to the poet killed during the First World War, whom Lewis admired. In recognition of the power of the Goddess, the final stanza begins:

Divining this, I knew the voice that called you  
Was soft and neutral as the sky  
Breathing on the grey horizon, stronger  
Than night's immediate grasp, the limbs of mercy  
Oblivious as the blood; and growing clearer  
(IV. 42-46 (*Selected poetry*, p. 76)).

This stanza may be interpreted as a spirit of the departed beloved, but for Graves (who may be imposing his own views on Lewis) it could be read as the Goddess summoning the poet towards a violent death, inviting him to the 'hinted land' (*White Goddess*, p. 26), where the poet will be rewarded for his devotion to her, a land where there is no hatred, only love. Using Lewis's concept of the poetic theme, Graves writes eloquently of 'the single grand theme of poetry' (*White Goddess*, p. 413) (quoted in Chapter One). As in the death of Orpheus, death is glorified as an acknowledgement of the Goddess's love for the muse-poet. Graves writes, in Chapter Six of *The White Goddess*, 'in primitive European belief it was only kings, chieftains and poets, or magicians, who were privileged to be reborn' (p. 94). Lewis had become immortalized – along with Graves's eldest son, David Graves, who was killed shortly afterwards – as the eternal son and lover forever favoured by the Goddess. It seems that on a psychological level, Graves was justifying the untimely and tragic deaths of Lewis and his own son in a Goddess context: elevating the experience and transforming it into the myth of the White Goddess.

Graves considered the unnecessary cruelty and waste of human life caused by war as a symptom of the end of civilization, the process of which had been set in motion by the 'murder' of matriarchy by the usurping Thunder-god, Zeus. Perhaps the key to understanding *The Golden Fleece*, therefore, lies at the end of the novel, with the violent deaths of the Argonauts. It is to be found in the almost joyful tone, for 'the Goddess always

rewarded with dismemberment those who love her best' (p. 371). Bloodshed becomes a metaphor for poetic inspiration, since it is through sacrifice of the ego that the poet finds true expression. Thus, the deaths of Alun Lewis and David Graves were perceived by Graves as sacrifice, as proof – in a mythological context – of their allegiance to the Triple Goddess.

In using mythology to deal with reality in this way, Graves creates his personal reality. An early foreshadowing of this tendency can be seen in the 1916 poem 'Escape', written after he was seriously wounded and mistakenly reported dead in 1916. The experience heightened his awareness of 'Life-in-Death' and 'Death-in-Life' (*White Goddess*, p. 94) and exacerbated his guilt at surviving. This poem was excluded from his oeuvre, perhaps because it was too personal and painful. It finally appeared in *Poems (1914-1926)* (1927) (Kersnowski, *Early Poetry*, p. 41). By way of explanation to the reader, Graves added in italics and in parenthesis beneath the title: '*August 6<sup>th</sup>, 1916. – Officer previously reported died of wounds, now reported wounded. Graves, Captain R., Royal Welch Fusiliers*' (l. (p. 31)). The stark realism of the subheading is in complete contrast to the poem that follows, where Graves mythologizes his own death, including waking up by Lethe 'as an old Greek signpost showed' (4). The ancient Greek environment in the dream-poem, while not an historically accurate one, is a mythological and magical place where 'Dear Lady Proserpine, who saw me wake / And, stooping over me [...] / cleared my poor buzzing head and sent me back' (11-13). Lady Proserpine can be viewed as prefiguring the powerful Triple Goddess who controls events in Graves's works. For a shell-shocked Graves, the only bearable course to take for not following the fate of the majority who fought in the First World War – as well as for experiencing his own seeming death and resurrection – is to mythologize the event in such a way that his punishment for surviving will be perpetual, to be used in the service of his art. So Graves endows the experience with a grandiose significance. "“Damned if I’ll die for anyone!” I



said', yet 'Cerberus stands and grins above me now' (18-19). Although Cerberus wishes the soldier-poet to remain among the dead, Graves is cleverer than the characters in the mythological world he portrays. He escapes into 'life' by feeding the three-headed Cerberus an 'army biscuit smeared with ration jam' (28) anointed with 'some morphia that I bought on leave' (26).

Graves places his painful experience of war in a mythological context in an attempt to give it some meaning. Quinn notes, in *The Great War and the Missing Muse*, that critics have viewed 'Escape' as simply an escape from reality but this is a misreading based on the title. Frank Kersnowski writes in *The Early Poetry of Robert Graves* that Graves imposes 'the language and experience of his present reality as a soldier on Greek myth' (p. 42). While he includes contemporary language – 'bombs', 'Tickler's jam' and 'leave' – Graves was unable to write realistic verse, so he 'turned the incident of his being missing in action into a lighthearted myth' (pp. 42, 48). Yet the subject of 'Escape' is hardly 'lighthearted'. Graves has chosen to depict features of a particular myth, and the poem illustrates an escape into a world where the boundaries of life and death, good and evil, and right and wrong are made acceptable and bearable to a shell-shocked mind. In his attempt, however, to make sense of his survival, Graves realizes that he has yet to win the favour of the Goddess, to become the hero of his own myth – with the Goddess as patron and he her lover in the role of the dying and reviving god (Frazer, *Golden Bough*, p. 464) as later retold in *The White Goddess*. *The White Goddess* represents the dialectic between Graves's past and the future possibility of the reinvention of his persona as the muse-poet and the Goddess's consort.

### **Orpheus as Model for the Poet Persona**

Of all the Argonauts in *The Golden Fleece*, Orpheus, singer, musician and poet, fits most neatly into the idealized persona Graves craved for himself, described in *The White Goddess*: that of the muse-poet who is ready to die for the Goddess. Yet, strangely, he is

not a character from the Argonauts myth. Rather, Graves has taken this mythological character from another myth, inserted him into the historical narrative and subjected him to his own imaginative and ideological interpretation of events.

There is a similarity of conduct between Orpheus, who kept the Argonauts together, and Graves during the First World War when he was Captain in the Royal Welch Fusiliers. But there is an added dimension to the resemblance Graves sought between himself and Orpheus. Graves writes in *The Greek Myths* that Orpheus was 'the most famous poet and musician who ever lived' (p. 111). Orpheus could sing with such purity and grace that men could be steered from destruction and wild beasts would follow him (Grimal, *Classical Mythology*, p. 315). Scattered among the pages of *The Golden Fleece* are delightful verses attributed to Orpheus. Through the peace-loving, goddess-worshipping Orpheus and his lyre, the Argonauts and readers are calmed and enchanted by beautiful lyrics. Moreover, the *Argo* and the crew are held together through song/poetry and peace reigns. For example:

She tells her love while fast asleep,  
In the dark hours,  
With half-words whispered low:  
As Earth stirs in her winter sleep  
And puts out grass and flowers  
Despite the snow,  
Despite the falling snow (1-7 (p. 126)).

The above poem is Orpheus's sweet lament about his dead wife, Eurydice, which he sings for Little Ancaeus, who alone is awake, steering the *Argo* towards Colchis. Forever afterwards at night Little Ancaeus, so moved by the song, would recall its words and melody (p. 126). The background setting to the poem is unnecessary for the poem is successful in itself. The poem's beauty lies in its simplicity. The verbal parallelism of the amphora and epistrophic form enhances a quality of eternity, of life, and of love beyond death. 'Escape' and Orpheus's poem are both ways in which Graves is mythologizing life and death.

*The Golden Fleece* is a condemnation of war in mythical terms. Through the myth of the Argonauts, Graves conveys his belief in the view that the downfall of mankind began when patriarchal religions supplanted earlier matriarchal structures. Orpheus stands alone in being the unifier, the pacifier, with his songs and poems, as Graves stands alone, a single poet-survivor of the First World War. Orpheus presented a solution for Graves, with his violent death at the hands of the Goddess, and thus he superimposed his tentative private myth, which he placed in the context of matriarchy versus patriarchy, good versus evil. Graves chose to include the singer's verses in *The Golden Fleece* in a subsequent publication of a book of poems entitled *Poems 1938-1945* (1945), suggesting that Orpheus and Graves are one and the same poet, Orpheus being Graves's ideal persona. It is in *The Golden Fleece* and then in *Poems 1938-1945* that the Goddess makes her first appearance. The source of inspiration for Orpheus in the novel is the Goddess for whom the poems were written. Graves emphasizes the special relationship Orpheus has with the Goddess: Orpheus was able to move even inanimate objects by his songs inspired by the Goddess – his judge. With this interpretation in mind, in the Introduction to *The Golden Fleece* Graves justifies the inclusion of Orpheus into the text by arguing that while 'I am doubtful whether Orpheus ought to be included among the Argonauts [...] the quarrelsome Argonauts needed a musician to keep the peace for them almost as much as a helmsman' (p. 25). Though a minor character in Apollonius's tale, Graves's decision to make Orpheus a major character of the story, as an Argonaut who serves to keep the sailors from trouble is, at least for Graves, justifiable. But more importantly, this decision is a key to understanding *The White Goddess*, as it is Graves's evidence of the relationship between the poet and the Goddess. He goes on to argue that Orpheus's lyre was a 'dance of letters' and connects this to the 'battle of letters' of *Cād Goddeu*, adding that this interpretation 'makes good historical and poetic sense' (p. 136). Thus, Orpheus plays a didactic role within the historical narrative informing the Argonauts of the Goddess's supremacy.



In Chapter Seventeen of *The Golden Fleece*, the Argonauts steer off course and accidentally travel to the island of the Goddess before the beginning of history (p. 150). As they steer off course, so Graves departs from the narrative and has all but three of the Argonauts initiated into the great mysteries of Samothrace. It is at this point of departure from the original plot that Graves directs the narrative towards a matriarchal interpretation of the myth which he later elaborates and enlarges upon in *The White Goddess*. He claims, for example, that 'the successor to the kingship inherited the favours of the Goddess Mother's priestesses [...and] the victim became immortal, [...] his oracular remains were removed for burial to some sacred island – such as Samothrace' (p. 61). In the novel, where prose is an inadequate or inappropriate form of expression in this matriarchal interpretation, Graves employs poetry which serves also as an enhancement to heighten the mood of the narrative.

An example of this is the song, a poem of eight stanzas, which Orpheus sings, instructing the Argonauts how to behave when they are dead (p. 153). It is only by recalling the pain and suffering caused by the Goddess that the dead will be welcomed. Addressing the Goddess, Orpheus sings that to be accepted when dead, one will first 'Have made full quittance for my deeds of blood' (34 (p. 154)), having journeyed 'Out of the weary wheel, the circling years, / To that still, spokeless wheel' (41-42). Rest can only come when the wheel of life ceases with death and significantly, befitting an initiate and one who is loved by the Goddess, the novel ends with a description of Orpheus's own violent and bloody ritualistic death. As Graves writes in *The Greek Myths*, a 'sacred king necessarily suffered dismemberment' (p. 115).

On the subject of life and death, Orpheus says:

'We are all caught on a wheel, from which there is no release but by grace of the Mother. We are whirled up into life, the light of day, and carried down again into death, the darkness of night; but then another day dawns red and we reappear, we are reborn [...]. Death is no release from the wheel [...] unless the Mother should intervene' (*Fleece*, p. 127).

Acceptance of his fate is an essential aspect of the Graves persona as projected in the figure of Orpheus. An example of this is in the penultimate stanza of the poem written much later 'Ibycus in Samos' from *New Poems 1962*: 'Who can blame me if I alone am poet / If none has dared to accept the fate / Of death and again death in the Muse's house?' (III. 16-18 (p. 49)).

### **Majorca as Part of Gravesian Autobiography**

Even in a story so far removed from the author in time and place, Graves, as in *The White Goddess*, manages to interweave the autobiographical into the narrative of the novel. As in the intertextual expression of mythology in *The White Goddess*, so also in *The Golden Fleece*, Graves jumps from an Introduction describing the background of the Argo myth to a Prologue that takes place in the unexpected location of Majorca many years after the Argo's journey. Miranda Seymour writes in her biography of Graves that he opens *The Golden Fleece* in Deyá 'affectionately and with a touch of homesickness' (*Robert Graves*, p. 308). Yet it is no coincidence that his chosen home was Majorca – rather than ancient Greece – for it was a land which, Graves insisted, still believed in the Goddess, despite the fact that Francoist Majorca was a place of conflict, anti-Catalan oppression and political murder in the 1940s: 'Maiden, Nymph, and Mother are the eternal royal Trinity of the island, and the Goddess, who is worshipped there in each of these aspects, as New Moon, Full Moon, and Old Moon, is the sovereign Deity' (*Fleece*, p. 31). Graves also felt the need to live in a place where he could enact (and situate himself more strategically) his newfound theories, because he was convinced this was an ancient site of their origins. Graves was specific about his chosen place of residence: 'There are some sacred places made so by the radiation created by magnetic ores. My village [...] is a kind of natural amphitheatre enclosed by mountains containing iron ore, which makes a magnetic field' (McKinley, 'Playboy', p. 152). Setting the opening scene in his beloved Deyá, where he

had lived for seven years (Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. 58), Graves pays homage to his adopted home when the Chief Priestess's daughter, the Orange Nymph exclaims: 'Ours is the island of innocence and of calm' (*Fleece*, p. 33). Graves embellishes the Argonaut story with this autobiographical detail, and places himself as a poet, a mythological character, and his one time home, a place infused with holy qualities, into his historical text.

### **Chronology of Events Toward the Writing of *The White Goddess***

In a letter to Lynette Roberts in December 1945, Graves wrote that '*The Golden Fleece* is a popular introduction, very much half-way, to the real understanding of myth and poetic thought which I have tried to convey in the enlarged Roebuck' (*Broken Images*, p. 334). This statement links the two texts in Graves's mind, suggesting the essential role of *The Golden Fleece* in working out the elaborate theory of poetic inspiration, expanded and further explored in *King Jesus*, which is then fully explained in *The White Goddess*. The connection between *The Golden Fleece* and *The White Goddess* is further reinforced by the physical act of writing which later Graves related in a talk for the YMHA Centre on 9 February 1957. There is no doubt that a mischievous Graves is at work elevating his own authorial role by consciously mythologizing his actions in writing *The White Goddess*: Graves is not merely the poet-author of *The White Goddess* but according to his own terms, he is a true poet. In various essays, most notably the above mentioned talk, added as the 1960 postscript to his revision of *The White Goddess* ('Appendix B', *White Goddess*), Graves writes how he came to be 'visited by the Goddess' during the writing of *The Golden Fleece* and was 'inspired' to write *The White Goddess*. The differing stories about the writing of *The White Goddess* originate from Graves's own contradictory versions of events. On recalling the writing of *The White Goddess*, Graves repeatedly and, consciously, mis-remembered the times when he began writing and completing both texts, owing to 'the uncanny excitement that held [...him] throughout those critical weeks' (p.



490). More telling though, is his own tampering with the time frame. In the first edition of *The White Goddess*, Graves writes in Chapter Nineteen: 'I drafted this whole volume at about two-thirds of its present length, in six weeks, then returned to *King Jesus*; but spent three years polishing the draft' (p. 299). Later, in the second (and third edition), there are significant changes: 'I drafted this whole volume at about one-half of its present length, in six weeks, then returned to the other book [i.e. *King Jesus*]; but spent six years polishing the draft' (p. 375).<sup>16</sup> Not only has he changed the amount of text completed within a certain specified period, he has actually changed the length of time spent 'polishing' the draft. While it is uncertain as to which version is 'true', Graves's motivation in 'changing the facts' is intriguing and highly contentious. Shortening the text but extending the time spent 'polishing' suggests great thought and deliberation which, in essence, should make for a more 'authoritative' text. Also implied is the impact the text has had on Graves's life: it represents an obsessive endeavour to convey the 'truth'. Additionally, the replacement of *King Jesus* by the vague term, 'other book' suggests that Graves no longer regards *The White Goddess* as connected to the novel he was working on at that time but as a separate and elevated entity (this is discussed further in Chapter Three).

Graves completed the writing of *The Golden Fleece* in July 1943 (Seymour-Smith, *His Life and Work*, p. 374), and in the first edition of *The White Goddess*, he claimed he began thinking critically about the Goddess in September 1943 (p. 335). Graves himself recalls the chronology in ways that are inaccurate, which suggests some confusion about the process of developing his theories. Yet two months earlier, in a letter to Alan Hodge, Graves expresses a sense of fearful excitement elicited by his discovery, as well as anxiety about how to extract a more convincing story from his sources. There is an awareness of his own tendencies to impose 'dogmatic' interpretations in response to his own unconscious and emotional 'psychological' needs:

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<sup>16</sup> It is assumed that the second British edition (1952) and the second American edition (1958), the latter of which has been quoted from here, are the same in content.

I have been worried by thinking about poetry and finding that all the poems that one thinks of as most poetic in the romantic style are all intricately concerned with primitive moon-worship. This sounds crazy, and I fear for my sanity, but it *is* so. The old English ballads [...] are all composed with a sort of neurosis - compulsion for arranging things in 3s [...] which is the chief characteristic of the Moon Goddess – Triple Goddess – ritual [...]. This may lead me anywhere and I am so anxious not to get dogmatic or psychological (*Broken Images* (July 13 1943), pp. 315-16).

Through writing *The Golden Fleece*, Graves finally comprehended and articulated his thoughts and theory on poetic inspiration, which he connected consciously for the first time with the idea of the Goddess (Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. 71). This point is proven by a revealing letter to Seymour-Smith, dated August 1943, in which Graves told him about a book on which he was engaged on the subject of poetry, and which was destined to become *The White Goddess*: 'It's going to be exciting to write because of the discoveries I have already made, in the course of *Golden Fleece* researches, about Apollo and the Muse and the tenancy of Mount Parnassus' (Seymour-Smith, *His Life and Work*, p. 375).

Graves completed five drafts of *The White Goddess* before it was ready to be published by Faber on 21 May 1948 (Higginson and Williams, *Bibliography*, p. 98). The writing of the first draft of *The White Goddess*, then called *The Roebuck in the Thicket*, coincides with both *The Golden Fleece* and *King Jesus*. These three texts reveal much about Graves's thought process during this period. Although he had completed writing *The Golden Fleece*, publication was delayed due to the maps accompanying the text being deemed inadequate in late March or early April 1944 (Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. 79). In the same letter to Seymour-Smith in August 1943, Graves wrote he had been working on 'four very difficult and very full maps [...] of the Argo's voyage' (*His Life and Work*, p. 375). Interestingly, also, whilst working on the maps, Graves no doubt found himself thinking about Lewis, and his notions of humility and truth as a poet

could be said to be incorporated into the development of his poetic theory (*Broken Images* (1941), pp. 305-08).

Graves's mis-recollection of the timing of *The White Goddess* conveys the sense of urgency and excitement he was feeling, which made time dissolve into the dimensions of myth and legend. But it also seems he is predisposed to be inaccurate about the influences of sources of 'inspiration'. Graves, echoing Lisa La Frenière, said in an interview with Bruno Friedman in 1969, 'that all real thinking is done on a plane where there is no such thing as time' ('Flawed Science', p. 83), though he might have added 'writing prose'. Time becomes trivial when discoveries merge past and present, reality/fact and fiction/mythology.

An air of mystery and magic pervades Graves's first accounts of the Goddess (perhaps partly because he himself is not clear which he covers up in mystique), and he tried to dispel it by adding a postscript in the republication of *The White Goddess* in 1960, where he stresses his own conventional lifestyle (p. 478). So what is to be made of Graves's attempt to tell his readers that while he lives an ordinary life, extraordinary things happen? An answer that matches what Graves wants to believe and his explanation of things, but that arguably lacks rigour or scholarly analysis as it is a kind of defence against criticism can be found as early as 1925. Graves writes in the essay 'The Illogical Element in Poetry' (*Poetic Unreason*): 'In Poetry [...] magic is supreme and [...] therefore things happen which realistically minded strangers find it difficult to understand' (*Speculations*, p. 54). Just as the dead and resurrected soldier-poet of 'Escape' found himself in the mythological landscape of ancient Greece, so with the writing of *The Golden Fleece* Graves had metaphorically entered a magical land where anything is possible and believable. While researching and writing *The Golden Fleece*, Graves had on his desk several brass objects bought from an antique dealer. He later discovered these objects had a connection with the Moon-goddess and in a tone of mocking irony, he tells his readers in



the postscript to *The White Goddess* to 'put it down to coincidence' (p. 480). Graves goes on to write that among the brass objects on his desk

was a humpback playing a flute. I also had a small brass-box, with a lid, intended [...] to contain gold dust. I kept the humpback seated on the box [...]. I learned [later] that the humpback was a herald in the service of the Queen-mother of some Akan State; and that every Akan Queen-mother [...] claims to be an incarnation of the Triple Moon-goddess Ngame [...]. These gold weights and the box [...] made by craftsmen subservient to the Goddess [...] are regarded as highly magical (pp. 479-80).

There is something almost superstitious about Graves's writing about this at the end of such a serious work. It also exposes his predisposition to attribute high significance to an aesthetic in art which privileged the arcane. Yet it is not difficult to imagine that whilst Graves was contemplating the Argonaut myth, an unconscious but influential dialogue was taking place with these desk objects, enhancing thoughts *already* present in his unconscious. For Graves the presence of the objects on his desk seemed to act as catalysts bringing about *The White Goddess* at the same time as he was researching and writing *The Golden Fleece*.

### **Conclusion**

*The Golden Fleece* is the retelling of a familiar story which became the catalyst for *The White Goddess*. This chapter has pointed out intertextual resonances between *The Golden Fleece* and *The White Goddess* in that the former set the scene of Graves's poetic ideology in its 'mythological-historical' context. However, intractably linked are Graves's poetic self-dramatisation and its contradictions of violence as the Sacred King. Only in this fictional text, in the form of Orpheus, is Graves's persona rewarded by the Goddess through sacrificial death. Apart from in *The Golden Fleece*, his poetic persona is fraught with ambiguity. While it has been argued that there are influences in terms of war and his relationships with women, it can be further suggested that it was the actual break up with Riding that brought out the sadomasochistic aspect of the relationship between Graves's

concept of the poet and muse. The transferral of Riding's affection to Schuyler Jackson in 1939 brought about a minor nervous breakdown in Graves. As it is dramatically retold in T. S. Matthews's memoirs and by Graves's biographers, Riding emerged after spending two days with Jackson, to announce to Graves with blatant cruelty: 'Schuyler and I do' (Graves, *Years with Laura*, p. 308). After so many years of Riding's condemnation and forbidding of sexual intercourse, of her maintaining that their relationship was solely an intellectual collaboration, the shock and degradation to Graves at being replaced or superseded in such a manner can only be guessed at. As in Graves's depiction of Medea and the White Goddess herself, Riding is 'the creatress and destructress' (*White Goddess*, p. 378) of their relationship, both sexually and intellectually. In his imagination, Riding became transformed into a demanding, implacable, and omniscient being whom Graves used to work out his developing theories about the Goddess, and to a certain extent to work through his own neurosis. His writings about the Goddess, whose supreme yet ruthless power and cruelty the lover-poet eagerly accepts to the point of his own annihilation, are permeated with elements of sadomasochism. Graves's personal rejection and humiliation are thus ultimately elevated into that of the Sacred King. Never accepted by the Goddess, in his poetic persona, Graves relives this humiliation and rejection again and again through his fiction and poetry. The nervous breakdown Graves suffered becomes a symbolic death and rebirth, a vehicle through which he can reinvent himself as the muse-poet. Graves's vision of himself as the Sacred King with the Goddess by his side vacillates between being loved and tortured, each deemed a privilege bestowed by the Goddess. His repressed desire thwarted into sadomasochism – the feeling that he deserves to be punished or even humiliated – either because he survived the war or never quite satisfied Riding as a lover, lead to tantalising readings of how *The White Goddess* came to be written.

*The White Goddess*, for Graves, is rooted within various complex strands that fuse the personal, mythological and the historical. In itself, *The Golden Fleece* is not a

straightforward myth – Graves's story of the Fleece is a single myth made up of many. The Golden Fleece itself is that elusive symbol of true poetry that Graves introduces to save him from Apollonian destruction. Thus the journey to restore the Fleece signifies the poet's search for the muse. *The Golden Fleece* points to Graves's conception of the Goddess for the first time and the text reveals the beginning of an attempt to consider the theories later advanced and refined in *The White Goddess*. Through *The Golden Fleece* Graves clarified, for himself, the idea and rationale for the Goddess as the source of poetic inspiration.



### Chapter Three: *King Jesus* (1946) - How the Goddess was Finally Vanquished and the Muse was Lost

*The Golden Fleece* is a popular introduction, very much half-way to the real understanding of myth and poetic thought which I have tried to convey in the enlarged *Roebuck*. This also is a necessary prologue to my book about Jesus. Jesus is simply un-understandable unless you relate the Hebrew and Greek & Syrian myths [...] I think I have it fairly straight now. My point is that I can't bear muddles in poetic or religious thought [...] for heaven's sake let us get it straight as poets (Lloyd (ed), 'Correspondence' (c. 18-20 December 1944), p. 85).

As the above letter to Lynette Roberts implies, Robert Graves viewed *The Golden Fleece* as an introduction to *The White Goddess* and a prologue to *King Jesus*.<sup>17</sup> The three texts of *The Golden Fleece*, *King Jesus* and *The White Goddess* are separate but similar entities: each explores aspects of the same story: the demise of the Goddess and the effect this had on humanity. Providing a 'history' of past Goddess worship and Goddess influence is an integral aspect of these three texts. *The White Goddess*, moreover, though delving back into the archaic past, also looks to the modern poet, chronicling Graves's own creative development of a poetics concerned with the nature of poetry and the relationship of poet and muse. This thesis argues that that through *The Golden Fleece* and *King Jesus* and the argument of *The White Goddess*, Graves arrives at a theory to suit his own position as a poet. In an unfinished letter to Graves written in December 1944, perhaps as a response to the above, Roberts tells him that having read *The Golden Fleece* she finds it is easy to 'follow' *The White Goddess* thesis (still known at that point as *Dog, Lapwing & Roebuck*): 'It enables me to see the world pattern of mythology with a slight modification in each country' ('Correspondence' (18 December 1944), p. 84). The beginning of the rise of patriarchal domination, as stated in Chapter Two, is narrated in *The Golden Fleece*: the legend concerning Jason's adventures actually tells another story of the conflict between

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<sup>17</sup> All quotations from *King Jesus* by Robert Graves are taken from *King Jesus* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2000).

the matriarchal and patriarchal religions which, according to Graves, led to the demise of Goddess worship and its replacement by patriarchy in prehistory.

The previous chapter examines the central role of the Goddess in Graves's interpretation of the classical myth of Jason's voyage to recover the Golden Fleece. It also demonstrates how, whilst engaged in the research for and writing of this text, Graves began composing *The White Goddess*, which succeeded in anchoring him – as George Steiner notes – to 'a central vision, a unified image of reality and poetic experience' ('Genius', p. 343). Chapter Two also refers to the prolonged impact of trauma in Graves's life, arising principally from his experience as a soldier-poet in World War One and then from his subsequent relationship with Laura Riding. The writing of *The Golden Fleece* and *The White Goddess* show that Graves's life and art nourished each other, and cannot be separated. It is the Goddess figure that binds Graves's different works and, in turn, elevates his life from mere 'stones to a mosaic' ('Genius', p. 343). This present chapter continues to hypothesize that the fictional prose written by Graves during the early 1940s provided the means for him to clarify a theory of poetry through his conception of the Goddess as muse – most especially to explain what he believed to be the continuation of the overthrow of the Goddess from her elevated status in prehistory and antiquity by the patriarchal God. He also aimed to trace the effects this historical shift had on the figure of the poet.

*King Jesus* continues Graves's narrative to depict the underlying 'truth' of the final consolidation of patriarchal domination: a fictional-historical-biographical rendering of Jesus's life to show the final overthrow of matriarchy. This chapter will therefore also investigate how the themes and preoccupations of *The White Goddess* are manifested with particular emphasis on *King Jesus* (1946). That is, it will show how the same materials, ideas and arguments are intertwined to form a crucial part of Graves's philosophical theory (Davis, 'Introduction', p. xix). This chapter builds on the insights of the previous chapter concerning the ways in which *The Golden Fleece* contributed to the development of *The*

*White Goddess*, and it provides an analysis of *King Jesus* in the belief that through a close study of the circumstances and methods of its composition, a clearer understanding of this vital process of cross textual infusion can be reached. This assessment will be achieved through dating the writing and rewriting of texts for the key purpose of tracing the development of Graves's poetic theory. Like *The Golden Fleece*, *King Jesus* is an historical fiction, but it is also a *religious* text concerned with the nature of poetry. There is in consequence a blurring of genres, in that historical document, poetic craft and fictional and non-fictional composition come together, in order further to develop Graves's signature theory of poetry.

### **Origins of *King Jesus***

In early 1944, with *The Golden Fleece* completed, and having finished the first 70,000 word draft of *Dog, Lapwing & Roebuck*, now renamed *The Roebuck in the Thicket*, Graves tried to have his new work published by Dent. But the manuscript was returned (Seymour-Smith, *His Life and Work*, p. 385). Seymour-Smith writes, 'his mind was on the Goddess theme; the subject of Jesus Christ bore so directly upon it, for him, that he had to get it out of the way – by writing *King Jesus* – before he could revise and finish *The White Goddess*' (p. 375), which he began expanding in early 1945 (*His Life and Work*, p. 384). In November 1943, Graves began research for a novel about Jesus, which he first called *The Angry Shepherd* (Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. 74). With the help of Joshua Podro (and his library of Hebraica) whom Graves met whilst working on *King Jesus* in 1943 (Seymour, *Robert Graves*, p. 289), Graves was able to delve deeply in his research for the novel. He became convinced that certain documents such as 'the Apocryphal Gospels & Acts & "Sayings of Christ" [...] & Egyptian and Talmudic tradition, and of Josephus, etc' ('Correspondence' (4 December 1944), p. 53) contained the hidden key to Christianity. He concluded that there was a connection between the Celtic, Greek, Roman and Hebrew religions and the Goddess which had a bearing on the birth of



Christianity. Revealed in these documents was the apparent 'fact' that Jesus had a claim to the throne of Israel, a title passed on through the maternal line, according to Jewish and Roman law (Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. 76), and which indicated that his birth and life were directly connected with a belief in the Mother-goddess and matriarchy.

### **The First Typescript of *The White Goddess***

Even though, at this early stage, the first typescript of *The White Goddess* contains no mention of *King Jesus* or Graves's findings connected with the novel, there are carbon copies of the 'Foreword' and pages from *King Jesus* on some of the sheets which connect the two texts in terms of dating (Bertholf, 'First Typescript', p. 115)<sup>18</sup> If, therefore, Graves began the first draft of *The White Goddess* in August 1943, while he was working on the maps for *The Golden Fleece*, he would have started *King Jesus* when he had almost completed *The White Goddess*. The first, and possibly the second, typescript of the latter were mainly concerned with the origins of poetic thought and the argument posited a secret vocabulary of poetry to be found in the names of trees (Bertholf, 'First Typescript', p. 115). However, this would leave a gap between his completion of the 70,000 word draft that he sent off to Dent in early 1944<sup>19</sup> and Robert J. Bertholf's dating of December 1944 (p. 116). It seems more likely that Bertholf's informative and illuminating article, 'The First Typescript of *The White Goddess*' is actually concerned *not* with the first typescript, but with the second. (So Bertholf's dating of December 1944 may be corrected to June 1944 and between this date and December 1946 Graves produced five separate revisions of the manuscript.) This conclusion shows the crucial influence of both texts – *The Golden*

<sup>18</sup> Graves mentions, in a letter to Alan Hodge, that *The Roebuck in the Thicket* 'goes into some of the oddest corners of thought e.g. the mythical connection of Jesus with the holly-tree' (*Broken Images* (12 June 1944), p. 323).

<sup>19</sup> In the above mentioned letter to Hodge, dated 12 June 1944, Graves writes, 'Today I sent off the book which began with the Taliesin business and ended all over the place: called *The Roebuck in the Thicket* and quite long. If Cape publishes it I'll get some spare sets of proof for sending around' (*Broken Images*, p. 323).

*Fleece* and *King Jesus* – on Graves's thought process as he worked on *King Jesus* while revising *The White Goddess*.

Also significant is Graves's admission which opens Chapter Nineteen of the 1948 edition of *The White Goddess*: 'Little Gwion forced himself on me pleasantly but importunately, as children do, at a time when I was too busy with my *King Jesus* to think of anything else' ((first edition), p. 299). 'My *King Jesus*' is very personal, 'my' giving a sense of proud possession as well as familiarity as he had been working on the text intensely. Moreover, in this quotation, Graves accords *King Jesus* an equal importance with *The White Goddess* text. A subtle, though significant, change takes place in the second edition of *The White Goddess*, thus: 'Little Gwion forced himself on me pleasantly but importunately, as children do, at a time when I was too busy with another book to think of anything else' (p. 375). There is no mention of *King Jesus* this time, and the connection between the texts appears to have been erased. One probable reason is that the fame of *The White Goddess* had superseded *King Jesus* and, more crucially, by the time of the second British edition in 1952, Graves was immersed in a project with Joshua Podro inspired by the fact that they were convinced they had recovered the truth about the historical Jesus. This was to be published as *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* in 1953. Therefore some of the argument of *King Jesus* had been 'disproved' and contradicted by *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* and a disassociation of *The White Goddess* from *King Jesus* would have seemed appropriate and justifiable.

### **Celtic Researches by Edward Davies and the Tree Alphabet**

At around the same time, Lynette Roberts sent Graves a copy of *Celtic Researches* by Edward Davies, the importance of which is discussed in Chapter One. Replying on 4 December, Graves wrote:

The debt I owe you is greater than you realize, because that Edward Davies book you lent me, though crazy in parts, contains the key [...] to Celtic religion: a key which unlocks a succession of doors in Roman



and Greek religion, and (because the Jewish religion was a Semite one engrafted on a Celtic stock) also unlocks the most obstinate door of all – the story of the Nativity & Crucifixion [...]. I can now make out a good historical case for the more improbable Gospel elements and have been able to confirm my thesis, which was based wholly on Welsh-Irish-Greek-Roman-Gallic religious tradition, by a study of early Christian literature. ('Correspondence', p.53).

With its intricate and complicated argument, *King Jesus* presents a daring re-interpretation of the Bible's version of Jesus's beliefs and motivations, arising from the revelation contained in the sacred tree-alphabet.<sup>20</sup> In the novel, Graves's use of Davies's *Celtic Researches* is integral to the discourse between Jesus and his temporary companion, a master-poet from the tribe of Gadelians who has rejected the Goddess (Presley, 'King Jesus', p. 166). Together, Jesus and his companion solve the mysteries of the sacred tree-alphabets (*King Jesus*, pp. 219-23). Hidden within the tree-alphabet is the sacred name *JIEVOAĀ*, known only to the master-poets, and the Gadelian discloses the name to Jesus. The name, which is not the same as 'Jehovah', reveals to Jesus a secret:

Without the first and seventh letters of the Name [...Man] has no escape from the Cosmic wheel which the Female turns: he has no beginning and no end. But the doubled *Iod* and the doubled *Aleph* will together give him immortality [...]. When the five days of the Female are lengthened to a week, then on the first day he celebrates his true origin and on the seventh he makes a perfect end: he is at one with God whose name has been linked with his in the sacred wheel (p. 223).

Graves places his own belief in Jesus's mouth, the latter continuing that, as it is Woman who has estranged Man from God, she, along with Death, can only be conquered by the Messiah, 'whose emblem is *Aleph*', so that he can then make humanity one with God (p. 223). In other words, in Graves's interpretation, Jesus views himself in the role of destroyer of the Female, and therefore as the saviour of Man and a patriarchal God. The argument is repeated in *The White Goddess*, Chapter Nine: 'Gwion's Heresy', where Graves sets out to show that the riddle of Gwion's *Hans Taliesin* contains the Boibel-Loth alphabet, which he argues was derived from a 'Canopic Greek calendar-formula taken over

<sup>20</sup> John Woodrow Presley suggests in the article 'Robert Graves's Other Obsession' that Graves may have first used the tree-alphabet text in *King Jesus*, rather than *The White Goddess* (p. 166).



by Greek-speaking Jews in Egypt, who disguised it with the names of Scriptural characters and places' (*White Goddess*, p. 145). The relevance here is that Graves had made the argument earlier: he writes 'in my *King Jesus* [...] it is likely that in Essene usage each letter became a Power Attendant on the Son of Man' (*White Goddess*, p. 145). Graves here does two things: he manipulates the reader into accepting the narrative about Jesus as an historical document, through the use of seemingly authoritative citations and uses *King Jesus* itself as a source of reference (contradicting his conscious exclusion of *King Jesus* as the text he was working on when he began *The White Goddess*). The result is the generic instability of *King Jesus* as it does not fit comfortably into the category of historical fiction, but rather is a hybrid of genres.

### **A Man Between Two Kettle-Drums**

Writing to T. S. Eliot in 1945, Graves explained the connection between the two texts in metaphorical terms:

I have written the book like a man between two kettle-drums – the *Roebuck* is the left-hand drum and the right-hand one is a historical book for Cassell's about Jesus, whom I find, to my great surprise, to have been completely consistent in everything he did despite the apparent contradictions of the period just before the crucifixion [...all useful] and all that material went into the *Roebuck*. I will soon have finished the Jesus book completely and when it is off my hands I'll get the *Roebuck* tightened up more, because I have been continually making small discoveries as I get hold of the rarer books (*Broken Images* (22 January 1945), p. 329).

The implication here is that not only are the two texts connected, but that they can only be understood in relation to one another. Much of the radical theory and interpretation of *King Jesus* is incorporated into *The Roebuck in the Thicket*. Beryl Graves recalled that Graves started writing *King Jesus* 'against his own better judgement [...] although [...] he was excited about it. Something about it worried him' (Seymour-Smith, *His Life and Work*, p. 387). Graves had been disenchanted with Christianity for some time,<sup>21</sup> but any

<sup>21</sup> Graves writes concerning his disillusionment and rebellion from his Christian upbringing in *Goodbye to All That* (1929).

book about Jesus, even when dressed as fiction, would have been controversial in the 1940s and he worried about the effect the novel would have on his family (Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. 95-6). He even wrote to his mother in 1945 assuring her that the novel was not 'derogatory to the dignity of Jesus' (Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. 97). In a letter to Seymour-Smith's father dated 29 April 1945, Graves wrote: 'I am still working on my book about Jesus – now called *The Power of the Dog* (a quotation from the Psalm Jesus quoted from the Cross). I can't afford to get too many things wrong' (Seymour-Smith, *His Life and Work*, p. 385). The fifth version of *The Roebuck in the Thicket*, which by January 1946 Graves had decided to name *The White Goddess*, was altered and expanded. This final version contained much of his new-found material from *King Jesus*. Indeed, *The White Goddess* is littered with references from the novel. When he sent the new version to T. S. Eliot on 28 January 1946, Graves wrote:

I hope that *The White Goddess*, the new version of *The Roebuck in the Thicket*, will meet all your former objections. Since I have got the *Jesus* book into proof (it will appear about May) I have the leisure to work the *Roebuck* into more presentable form. The problem is clearly stated at the beginning and argued out ruthlessly to the very end (*Broken Images*, p. 336).

The 'problem' Graves is referring to is that the 'language of true poetry', bound to a Goddess or Muse worshipped since the 'Old Stone Age' (*White Goddess*, p. 6), was finally suppressed by the beginnings of the Christian faith and the advent of Christianity (*White Goddess*, p. 8). *King Jesus* is the story of the final overthrow of the Goddess.

### **Novelization of the Jesus Story**

When he was nearing completion of *The Golden Fleece* in August 1943, Graves wrote in a letter to Seymour-Smith, 'isn't it queer that English poets have always owed loyalty to the Muse rather than to Jehovah?' (*His Life and Work*, p. 375). Graves links poetic inspiration to the matriarchal Goddess, rather than to the more common patriarchal God who presides



over the religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The implication here is that the poet places his loyalty in the Triple Goddess over and above Western civilization. Graves became obsessed with the link between poetry and the birth of Christianity. In a letter to Roberts (part of which has been referred to above), he wrote that the 'whole Christian business is badly in need of clearing up' ('Correspondence' (4 December 1943), p. 53). He felt that poetry as a medium could only be properly understood if the truth about Christianity were known and understood, and he continues in the same letter:

[Christianity's] formidably crystallized errors & inconsistencies get in everyone's way. Yet it can't be cleared up by persecution or ridicule: only by reason. And reason transforms it into an ethical system; based on historical and poetic fact, which one can either accept as o.k. or reject as unsuitable to one's temperament, but which requires no 'faith' and invites no incredulity. And until it *is* cleared up poetry is hampered by having no valid, constant set of references which all initiates of poetry can learn to use & love and refine individually (pp. 53-54).

It seems that Graves perceived himself to be on a mission, to clarify the origins of Christianity and its link to the overthrow of the Goddess, which was seen by some as audacious and daring, but was viewed by others with suspicion and doubt. On September 30 1946 (the publication date of *King Jesus* in America) one reviewer of the novel (though anonymous, it was almost certainly Matthews<sup>22</sup>) referred to Graves as a 'mighty leaper-to-conclusions' ('Old Heresy, New Version' *Time*, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/printout/0,8816,887225,00.html>). Graves used *King Jesus*, his account of the life of Christ, to explore the beginnings of the Christian faith, reinterpreting almost every detail of the Gospel accounts of Jesus, using *The Gospel of St. Luke* in particular as his starting point (Raymond, 'Review of *King Jesus*', <http://www.jjraymond.com/books/historicalfiction/kingjesus.html>). Graves indicates clearly in his writings from the period that without the retelling of the origins of Christianity, *his* perceived truth of Christianity, it would be impossible for the world of patriarchal domination to understand

<sup>22</sup> In his autobiography, *Under the Influence*, Matthews writes: 'From time to time I have reviewed books by Robert; although then the reviews in *Time* were anonymous, he knew I had written them' (p. 282).<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, Graves wrote later in an essay entitled 'Don't Fidget, Young Man!' (1958) that Jesus 'is best portrayed as a historical character of the early first century AD, if only because the Gospels claim to be factual reports, not allegories or pious legends' (*Speculations*, p. 90).



the difference between true and false poetry and the role of the poet. This argument has led in places to a serious revaluation of Graves's project by critics such as John B. Vickery, John Woodrow Presley, Robert Davis and Harold Bloom. While Bloom's own final stance towards *King Jesus* is unclear, it is obvious that he believes it to be an earnest and challenging interpretation of the New Testament. In the Introduction to *Modern Critical Views: Robert Graves*, Bloom contends that it is Graves's 'quest for his kind of historical Jesus [that] may [...] prove [more...] lasting and disturbing' than *The White Goddess* itself (p. 5). Though there are countless readings of 'Jesus', Graves's attempt is 'disturbing' because the reader is confronted again with the task of re-evaluating and questioning the conventional interpretations of the story of Jesus.

#### **Development of Poetic Theory Following *The Golden Fleece***

As in *The Golden Fleece*, the story of *King Jesus* has a plot and a subplot. But while the plot of *King Jesus* appears to chronicle the life of Jesus, it is in fact secondary to the main focus of the novel, which is on the Goddess. The first readers of *King Jesus* must have been mystified by the various references to the pagan beliefs depicting the Goddess as the religious focus, in a novel telling of Jesus's emergence as a religious leader. Like *The Golden Fleece*, the text gives the background to the history of the Goddess and seems almost to be part of *The White Goddess*. Graves sets out his aims before the story commences, in order to prove in a fictional text the accuracy of his interpretation, which is of course steeped in mythological as well as historical detail. Through *The Golden Fleece* and *King Jesus*, Graves shows first of all how the events of the Old Testament and the Gospels document the rise of patriarchy and the suppression of the Goddess.

Unlike the narrative of *The Golden Fleece*, in which there was a war between the gods and goddesses of Olympus, the principal event in *King Jesus* is the final usurpation of female domination by the male. The war this time is between the Queen of Heaven and the Ox. The Ox may be decoded into meaning *Aleph* in Hebrew, which represents Jesus, King

of the Jews (*King Jesus*, p. 219). Thus it is Jesus himself who wages war on matriarchy. As King, Jesus tries to impose a new religion of patriarchal domination; his mission is to bring down the Goddess. In so doing, according to Graves, Jesus unconsciously tries also to destroy poetic truth. Graves found himself, as a result, writing an 'alternative' 'life of Jesus' to prove his own thesis that Christianity was fundamentally misunderstood. According to Christian belief, Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah who differs from the nationalist Messiah whom the Jews expected (Cohn-Sherbok, *Who's Who*, p. 150). Graves wished to change perceptions about Christianity by rediscovering Jesus as a human Hebrew Messiah (Seymour, *Robert Graves*, p. 315). Consequently, in Graves's retelling of the beginning of Christianity, he relates the story to the end of matriarchy and blames Jesus for its demise, in a narrative process which had begun with *The Golden Fleece*. As Graves wrote to Roberts, 'I am now started on the actual writing of my story & it is the most alarming story I have ever attempted' ('Correspondence' (13 February 1944), p. 69). The story is 'alarming' because the Jesus of *King Jesus* is not the same as the Christian saviour depicted in the Bible. Graves describes Jesus as an ascetic man who knows the power of woman and so shuns her as a distraction from his lofty purpose, which is to destroy the Female and her works. Graves concludes that Jesus is led to the cross by his misguided faith in God as Father, and his death paradoxically seals the victory of matriarchy, the ultimate revenge of the Goddess. In this way, Graves's Jesus unconsciously plays the part of the sacrificial King, a Frazerian concept elucidated in *The Golden Bough*, (pp. 331-341). Frazer argued that all Western secular and religious archetypes originate from the idea of a King, consort to the Mother-goddess, who must be sacrificed annually for the future assurance of his people's security. The King is chosen carefully, for while he must be possessed of great power, he is also responsible to his people. However, Jesus is blinded by his fear of the female and his consequent desire to destroy her, viewing her as evil. This blindness inexorably leads him to his own sacrifice. When Jesus says to Judas: 'All women

are daughters of the Female; and the Female is the mother of all witches' (p. 336), he reveals the distrust and misogyny born of that fear which forces him to live apart from his wife. Thus he inadvertently becomes the willing king and virgin-fool: a man who has denied himself the pleasures of the flesh, who has turned away from easy enjoyments in the name of a greater cause and, therefore, has become the appropriate prize to be sacrificed in order to appease the Goddess.

### **Absence of Poetry in *King Jesus***

In contrast to *The Golden Fleece* and *Seven Days in New Crete*, which, with their interweaving of prose and verse, are austere concerned with the connection between poetry and religion, *King Jesus* is notable for its singular absence of poetry other than translated material. Indeed, during the writing of *King Jesus*, Graves found it impossible to compose any poetry other than to make translations of Hebrew verse in the form of hymns and psalms, and he included these in the text. Graves was so focused on the highly complex matter of the nature of the poet's relationship with his muse that he could not concentrate on original verse composition. In a letter to Roberts, he wrote: 'How's poems? I won't be able to write any until I have my Jesus book done' ('Correspondence' (3 October 1944), p. 77). Yet crucial to the narrative of *King Jesus* is Graves's depiction of Jesus as a poet, for Jesus adapts his speech to all, and most importantly he is able 'in the manner of a poet, to convey a plain and a difficult meaning simultaneously' (*King Jesus*, p. 297). Graves is at pains to show how Jesus is the true poet who, blind to his folly, has been led away from the source of inspiration that is the Goddess and has turned to the Father-god, transforming poetic discourse into the patriarchal and the Apollonian.

According to Graves's rendering, Jesus is a sadly misguided figure led as he is by the Father-god, rather than the Mother-goddess. The novel may be literally devoid of poetry, yet *King Jesus* focuses on the nature of the poet and the religious role he must fulfil to create poetry because Graves identifies his own vocation with that of his Jesus, despite



the differences with the Jesus figure of Scripture. Graves's Jesus has the soul of a poet, displaying sensitivity and appreciation of religious verse. As Robert Davis writes in his Introduction to the Carcanet edition of *King Jesus*, 'it is [the] specifically *religious* character that lends [...*King Jesus*] much of [...its] value and which opens commerce between [...] the religious poetic principles associated with [...its] author in his vocational roles as poet and apologist for poetry' (p. viii). Graves created a poetic theory in which he essentially believed he had a mission to tell the truth as he viewed it, about the muse-poet's relations with the Goddess. According to this theory it is the poet's honest submission and recognition of the Goddess's attributes – that she is the source of his inspiration – which will then inspire him to write poetic truth, which by extension, will restore her ancient value system of peaceful and fruitful existence to the contemporary world – of which he was highly critical. While there may be faults in his poetic theory, through *King Jesus*, Graves attempts to champion the poetic cause as he viewed poetry as a means of creating a better world, one without war and strife, where the place of poetry would be valued, and where it would actually have a beneficial influence in the world.

### **Generic Complexity of *King Jesus***

While *King Jesus* is classified in bookshops as historical fiction, it transgresses the boundaries of this genre, incorporating a hybridity of forms, mythopoetic, theological and biographical. Fictional reconstructions of the Gospels and Jesuine fiction continue to be a popular and marketable genre in themselves and are, by their nature, both contentious and controversial. Graves's rendering is one of a long line of narratives about the life and death of Jesus appearing from the nineteenth century onwards. The challenge for Graves, as a modern novelist, was to transform the historical Jesus into a compelling and aesthetic literary character (Stevens, *Faith and Fiction*, p. 113). Graves's novel diverges from this tradition, however, at those points where he no longer confines himself exclusively to the

mode of fiction, but pursues a line of religio-poetic argument central to his overall vision of the Goddess.

Graves's argument in this text differs radically from accepted theories about Jesus. He interprets the introduction of Christianity as a conscious attempt on Jesus's part to undermine the Mother-goddess as the Divine Queen of Heaven and replace her with God the Father. Ironically, according to Graves, Jesus (the Jewish prophet and Messiah (Seymour, *Robert Graves*, p. 309)) dies precisely because of his defiance of the Goddess's rule. In justifying his interpretation of Jesus's life and crucifixion, Graves explained in a letter responding to Matthews's criticism of *King Jesus* that Jesus 'was not a charlatan but true born and perfectly uncompromising [...]. By his failure to be the Jewish Messiah, he became the Christian God' (*Between Moon and Moon*, (29 August 1946) p. 31). He goes on to write:

The Gospel story as it stands simply does not add up unless one makes three assumptions: that Jesus was actually King of the Jews crowned in the ancient formula (Psalm 2) which makes him technically a "Son of God"; that at the close he was literally carrying out the "worthless shepherd" prophesy of Zachariah; that he survived the Crucifixion but then had to disappear, after having briefly returned (p. 32).

Graves sets out to explain and elaborate the above points in the text of the novel itself and arrives at a startling conclusion.

### **Methods 1: Historical Sources**

In keeping with historical novelistic convention, Graves included an 'Historical Commentary' at the end of the narrative, a valuable aid to protect himself as the author of a fictional rather than a factual text about Jesus. Although he has invented much of the story of Jesus, it is presented in the guise of history. Included are black and white plates of illustrations of scenes from matriarchal mythology as well as a map of Palestine (Davis, 'Introduction', p. xxvii) lending his work authority (techniques that are discussed in Chapter Two). Graves admits, however, that in order to develop the story further he has

introduced certain 'inaccuracies' in *King Jesus*: 'All that matters is the influence on events exercised by these assumptions' (p. 424). With the voice of the historian, he views his findings seriously and uses the historical genre as a mode of testing out his theories. In fiction, events can be manipulated to suit the author's intention but here the focus is not on the actual central events, which are widely 'known', but on Graves's explanation of the reasons behind them.

Graves writes in the 'Historical Commentary' of the novel, 'I undertake to my readers that every important element in my story is based on some tradition, however tenuous, and that I have taken more than ordinary pains to verify my historical background' (p. 420). While it is to some extent true that there is attention to referencing in order to 'prove' the validity of his interpretation, there is such obscurity and eccentricity in his sources that it would be next to impossible to prove or 'verify' them. A significant admission by Graves in his 'Historical Commentary' is that while Sir Ronald Storrs, a classical scholar and Orientalist, approved of and was intrigued by Graves's hypothesis, he refused to commit himself to accepting it as *truth* (p. 419). Another expert, Dr Solomon Zeitlin, editor of the *Jewish Quarterly*, was also sympathetic towards the central argument of *King Jesus*, and Graves, writing to Basil Liddell Hart in November 1946, told him that although Zeitlin was also noncommittal, he had owned 'that the facts are not historically disprovable'. The author records: 'off record but never mind' (*Between Moon and Moon* (4 November 1946), p. 36). Yet revealingly, Graves also writes in 'The Historical Commentary':

A detailed commentary written to justify the unorthodox views contained in this book would be two or three times as long as the book itself, and would take years to complete; I beg to be excused the task (pp. 419-20).

In other words there is no hard evidence to support his claims that Jesus was, for example, Herod's successor, after Antipater. Instead, Graves employs unorthodox methods such as 'analepsis' and 'iconotropy' to arrive at his conclusions. Using these methods he draws



attention to the unorthodoxy of his project and its procedures and undermines the validity of the conclusions.

### **Methods 2: 'Iconotropy'**

*King Jesus* is a complex and difficult novel. In places a historical novel but also resolutely fictional, its mixture of genres enabled Graves to 'prove' that 'Jehovah' had once and for all usurped the Mother-goddess, who was the Moon-goddess ('Correspondence' (January 29 1944), pp. 63-64). In the 'Historical Commentary' Graves uses a technique of 'misinterpretation' (p. 423) termed 'iconotrophy'. He explains:

In iconotropy the icons are not defaced or altered, but merely interpreted in a sense hostile to the original cult. The reverse process, of reinterpreting Olympian or Jahvistic patriarchal myths in terms of mother-right myths which they have displaced, leads to unexpected results (p. 423).

Graves has chosen this method as a credible way of restoring the original underlying matriarchal reading, to historical images which have been corrupted by patriarchal readings throughout history, and he uses this technique to reinterpret the origins of Christianity. According to Graves's interpretation, laid out in *King Jesus*, five separate messiahs and prophets predicted that Jesus was King Herod's rightful heir as ruler of Judaea. The mission of Graves's Jesus is to finally put an end to the cult of the Female and enforce a belief in a paternal male God, destined then to re-orientate civilization toward patriarchy. The Jesus of the New Testament sacrificed himself for the sins of humanity so that mankind would be redeemed. In contrast, Graves's Jesus is not the nationalistic messiah desired by the Jews but a controversial figure whose role is to rebel against the Goddess and her matriarchal religion, in order to supplant her world view with his patriarchal one. Graves uses aspects of his sources and his ideology in his representation of Jesus. Yet despite this revolutionary role imposed on him by Graves, the characterization of Jesus is one that is close to the Jesus of the Gospels. Central to Graves's hypothesis is that Jesus set out to *destroy* the Female. He elaborates later in *The White Goddess*:

Jesus [...] by his unswerving loyalty to the only contemporary God who had cast off all association with goddesses [...] declared] war on the Female and all her works [...]. Jesus came of royal stock, was secretly crowned King of Israel with the antique formula, preserved in the Second Psalm, that made him a titular Son of the Sun-god, and concluded that he was the destined Messiah (p. 414).

While Graves based his novel on a version of an historical event, that of Jesus's crucifixion, he did not ignore the Christian belief that Jesus was both human and divine. Whereas *The Golden Fleece* is the re-interpretation of a myth to convey the impression that it is actual history, *King Jesus*, with its dramatic anthropological interpolations, is a re-interpretation of history, incorporating the Christian myth of the divine nature of Christ into the story of the origins of Christianity.

### **Methods 3: Narrative Voice / Analeptic Method**

In choosing to write *King Jesus* as a work of fiction, Graves was able to avoid the numerous critical arguments that would otherwise have to be made to justify his theories. Graves is unconventional in placing his 'Historical Commentary' at the end of the novel rather than at the beginning. In a letter to Karl Gay on 8 November 1945, Graves explains why:

At present I am with *Jesus*. The first 18 galleys have just turned up; printed admirably by the Edinburgh University Press. I have decided that I have put one water-jump too many at the beginning, before the story begins. Since Phanaël's introduction has to stand, I am putting my own at the end as a *Historical Commentary*. Anyhow nobody will know what it's about until they've read the book (*Broken Images*, p.333).

While Graves felt he had no other option but to add the 'Historical Commentary' at the end, in doing so he subverts the historical novelistic generic conventions and 'Chapter One' is consequently presented as the introduction of the novel. As in the *Claudius* novels, Graves chooses to use a narrator in the first person to present the story. Unlike other rewritings of the Gospels, which are narrated from an omniscient standpoint, or presented in the first person from the point of view of an anonymous disciple (Stevens, *Faith and Fiction*, p. 213), Graves presents his interpretation of the Jesus story through the subjective

gaze of a Decapolitan Greek called Agabus, living in the Roman Empire during the reign of the Emperor Domitian in 89-93 AD (p. 3), and uses him to narrate the story of Jesus's life.<sup>23</sup>

*The Brook Kerith* (1916) a 'Jesus-novel' by George Moore, controversially depicts the story of 'failed Messiahship' (Stevens, *Faith and Fiction*, p. 213) narrated partly from Jesus's own point of view. Though this was shocking and daring in its day, Graves attempts to go further than Moore in narrative technique. Agabus has met Jesus once, and so his story is necessarily a partial interpretation of the events. Graves relies on the use of the analeptic method (*King Jesus*, p. 421) to extract information about the past. In the 'Historical Commentary' accompanying *King Jesus*, Graves justifies his choice of narrator by stating that to use the analeptic method effectively he has to impersonate 'the supposed author of the story' (*King Jesus*, p. 421), with the intention of balancing the evolution of the plot and the subsequent choices made in the narrative action. Analepsis, according to Graves, also serves to tell the underlying 'truth' of the biblical stories, although the method itself is more mystical than scholarly and the 'truth' which emerges from it becomes a distinctly Gravesian claim, skewed to reflect his thesis.

The device of a first person narrator is also necessarily unreliable and serves further to confuse and tantalize the reader for, as Graves admits in the 'Historical Commentary', it is he himself who is telling the story of Jesus's rise and fall. The 'Historical Commentary' exposes Graves as the narrator of the narrative; the device telling of an almost 'eye-witness' account of the life of Jesus from the first century AD is consciously executed, as the supposed author of the narrative is placed not so far into the future as to be wholly detached, yet not so close as to be personally involved in the events. Agabus/Graves is in consequence an intrusive narrator behind a mask of objectivity.

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<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, Graves wrote later in an essay entitled 'Don't Fidget, Young Man!' (1958) that Jesus 'is best portrayed as a historical character of the early first century AD, if only because the Gospels claim to be factual reports, not allegories or pious legends' (*Speculations*, p. 90).



Through the first person narrative of Agabus, Graves clarifies his interpretative standpoint in Chapter One:

My own problem of reconstruction is very much more difficult, because history, not myth, is in question. Yet the history of Jesus [...] keeps so close to what may be regarded as a pre-ordained pattern, that I have in many instances been able to presume events which I afterwards proved by historical research to have taken place, and this has encouraged me to hope that where my account cannot be substantiated it is not altogether without truth. (p. 13).

Here he virtually acknowledges that he has made up the story, wherever doubt or question exists. Graves does not always admit to invention in either *The Golden Fleece* or *King Jesus*. *The Golden Fleece* is connected to *King Jesus* by the techniques he employed to appropriate information. Graves researched his chosen subject thoroughly and where he found no proof, he used the analeptic method. Graves believed that he had successfully reversed time with his use of intuition to reconstruct unrecorded events – unproven events even – and that he had recovered by this technique the truth about Jesus. The same method is also employed in *The White Goddess* and he writes: ‘The proleptic or analeptic method of thought, though necessary to poets, physicians, historians and the rest, is so easily confused with mere guessing, or deduction from insufficient data, that few of them own to using it’ (*White Goddess*, p. 339). However, it can also be argued in both cases that Graves distorted the ‘facts’ to strengthen his predetermined theory of the origin and meaning of Christianity. As Matthews sardonically writes in his autobiography, Graves ‘was evolving a technique of “historical research” that would enable him to discover anything he set out to find’ (*Under the Influence*, pp. 281-83). Under the guise of fiction, Graves arguably exploits the author’s privilege to be as fantastical and shocking as he wishes by making up an alternative history of his own which he presents as an accurate and trusted account.

Yet in the Foreword to the second edition of *The White Goddess*, Graves acknowledges that readers of his historical novels ‘have grown a little suspicious of unorthodox conclusions for which the authorities are not always quoted’ (*White Goddess*,

p. 5). While tacitly commenting that there is criticism of his methods, which he stubbornly resists acknowledging, Graves continues: 'Perhaps [...] readers of *The White Goddess* will now be satisfied, for example, that the mystical Bull-calf formula and the two Tree-alphabets which I introduced into *King Jesus* are not "wanton figments" of my imagination but logically deduced from reputable ancient documents' (*White Goddess*, pp. 5-6). With his historical and non-fictional texts, Graves attempted to challenge accepted Christian beliefs and ideas because he wanted to pursue his own agenda and develop his own justification for writing poetry. As Graves stated in a letter to Roberts in late 1944, he was writing to 'prove a theory about poems' ('Correspondence' (4 December 1944), p. 82). Through the prose fiction written at the same time, Graves manipulates the causes of the world choosing artifice over truth, and he concludes that it is due to the brute suppression of the Female which emerged from the enforced demise of Goddess worship. By reinforcing his theory of the Goddess, he was drawn to skew certain facts or myths to suit his thesis. In his poetry Graves strove to create his own poetic persona of the muse-poet. The Goddess can be seen in various ways: as a vehicle for writing poetry, a treatise or manifesto of how to write a true poem, or as a psychological device making use of the demons of Graves's past.

### **King Jesus as Fictional Text**

With so much apparent 'evidence' in doubt, the question remains as to why Graves chose to depict the story of Jesus's life and death as fiction, with the aspiration that it be accepted as a historical document, such as he did later in his collaboration with Podro on *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* (1953). One motive for doing so, according to Seymour-Smith, may well have been the highly controversial subject matter of *King Jesus*, which as a text claiming 'historical truth' may not have found a publisher during the 1940s because of the likely charge of blasphemy (*His Life and Work*, p. 387). Yet it can be argued that there were other reasons why Graves chose to confine himself to the medium of fictional prose

for this task. R. P. Graves writes that one incentive for Graves's novelization of the life and death of Jesus was financial. Producing 'potboilers' was a necessary aid to supporting his two families (*Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. 74). Indeed, Graves was having such financial troubles during the writing of *King Jesus* that he admitted at the time that he was 'broke' (Seymour-Smith, *His Life and Work*, p. 351). Apart from these financial considerations, a major advantage for Graves of casting *King Jesus* as fiction was that his theories would have a larger audience and, ironically, he would be taken more seriously by the general public who might not otherwise readily read or believe an historical account of Jesus's life and actions that was not altogether credible within the standards set by orthodox scholarship. In a letter to Matthews in 1958, Graves, writing about *King Jesus*, states: 'in fiction one has license to rearrange events' (*Under the Influence*, p. 284). Graves was recreating 'history' as fiction for his own purposes, so the profound revelations and 'unorthodox views' (*King Jesus*, p. 419) that he proposed in his re-telling of the origins of Christian history would, he believed, be more easily digested if related as fiction. He observed later that the success of *The Brook Kerith* was due to a great extent to its timing rather than, according to Graves's own judgement, its literary merit, since it was in 'wartime that books about Jesus have the most appeal' (*Speculations*, p. 90). Published in 1916 at the time of the Battle of the Somme (*Speculations*, p. 90) *The Brook Kerith*, about Jesus's survival of the crucifixion, resonated strongly with the soldiers and the general public who were disillusioned and horrified at the human cost of the war. *King Jesus*, published at the end of the Second World War, when once again Christ would have been 'invoked alike by the Germans and the Allies' (*Speculations*, p. 90), would, Graves argues, capture a similar sentiment and be taken all the more seriously by the reader because of the general post war-climate.



### *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* (1953): Fiction and 'Fact'

Graves covers himself on both sides: the novel is not an historical document, yet neither is it pure fiction.<sup>24</sup> This is in contrast to his second book about Jesus, styled 'a follow-up to *King Jesus*' (Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. 157), *The Nazarene Gospel Restored*. This was an undertaking for which Graves and his co-author Podro were heavily criticized, because of their questionable analysis of the alleged errors of the Gospels and their controversial theories about Jesus's ministry and beliefs. After the publication of *King Jesus* and the first edition of *The White Goddess*, Graves's theories about Jesus changed. In a marginal-note in a letter to Eliot, written at the time of the second edition of *The White Goddess*, Graves said: 'I had to abandon a good deal of what I wrote in *King Jesus* which was a novel not a historical work' (*Between Moon and Moon* (14 May 1950), p. 73). The argument is acceptable only as fiction about a man who, Graves explained, had 'one serious fault' (Seymour-Smith, *His Life and Work*, p. 247). However, Graves and Podro's contention in *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* was that they were revealing the historical life of Jesus that had been obscured in the New Testament (Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. 157) and they argue among other things that, as in *The Brook Kerith*, Jesus survived the crucifixion. This, of course, proved less tolerable to readers and critics because Graves and Podro claimed that their interpretation of Jesus's life and beliefs was historical fact under the shield of biblical scholarship.

An important point of difference between the fictional *King Jesus* and *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* lies in the subject of Jesus's parentage. In *King Jesus* Graves argued that Jesus's father was Antipater, son of King Herod the Great, not God, as biblical sources claim. Jesus was therefore Herod's heir, and after Antipater's death, is next in line to the throne of Judaea, as the King of the Jews. *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* is a more sophisticated and radical interpretation of the life of Jesus than that offered in *King Jesus*

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<sup>24</sup> The reading public took to *King Jesus* and it sold very well in both England and America despite mixed reviews (Davis, 'Introduction', p. xxvii).

because it is offered as fact, in the knowledge that it would be scrutinized academically. Graves confidently told Eliot in the same letter of 14 May 1950 that *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* (then proposed as *The Gospel of the Zophim*) was historically sound and that 'every sentence' of the text was 'documented' (p. 73).

In the final analysis, the story of *King Jesus* and *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* both make substantial (if ill-founded) historical claims. Bloom finds the former far more vital (*Robert Graves*, p. 6), because it is a tantalizing interpretation – even though a fictional rendering – of the foundations of Christianity, based on the subversive premise that Jesus, King of Judaea, decisively brought down matriarchy and replaced it with patriarchy. As fiction *King Jesus* has the power to move and transport the reader to imagine an alternative version of the story of the Nativity or birth of Jesus. *The Nazarene Gospel Restored*, however, restricts the reader, confining him to a limited account without the open-ended nature of fiction which encourages the reader to consider different possibilities and engage his imagination.

### **King Jesus and Anthropology**

Chapter Twenty-Nine of *King Jesus*, entitled 'The Power of the Dog', seems to serve as an introduction to the central theme of *The White Goddess* as foreshadowed in Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Frazer's theory of the dying and reviving god is crucial to *King Jesus*. Graves bases his interpretation of the Jesus narrative on a discussion of the condition of the Jewish peoples to which the Frazerian concept of the sacrificial king is profoundly apposite.

Graves injects this narrative with his own preoccupations so that even before it is properly underway, the narrator Agabus, Graves's narrative surrogate, explains that the reason that the Jews are 'the most miserable of all civilized nations – scattered, homeless, suspect – is ascribed by the superstitious to the Goddess's ineluctable vengeance' (p. 5). One intention of *King Jesus* is thereby immediately made clear: to assert and prove the

superiority of the Goddess over all creeds and religions. Agabus continues his explanation of the fall of Judaism saying,

the Jews have been prime leaders in the religious movement against her [...]. They have proclaimed Jehovah as the sole Ruler of the Universe and represented the Goddess as a mere demoness, witch, Queen of Harlots, succuba and prime mischief-maker (p. 5).

Jehovah 'in solitary splendour attempt[s] to rule over men and women alike' (p. 5). Along with their Christian cousins, the Jews ultimately pay for their misguided rejection with the decline of civilization, and are punished for their refusal to acknowledge the Goddess as Jehovah's Mother. Graves seeks to prove that Jesus is the true-born King of the Jews, so that the focus of the Goddess's vengeance can become coherent. Jesus's death is the ultimate revenge of the Goddess on Man. As Agabus continues:

Nobody can understand the story of Jesus except in the light of this Jewish obsession of celestial patriarchy; for it must never be forgotten that, despite all appearances [...] Jesus was true to Jehovah from his childhood onward without a single lapse in loyalty (p. 6).

Jesus's statement that he had 'come to destroy the work of the female' (p. 6) makes him an enemy of the Goddess, yet, paradoxically, he is a complex Gravesian character who is represented with compassion and heroism. Jesus's intention, as Sacred King of an ancient dynasty (p. 284), was 'to fulfil all the ancient prophecies about him and bring the history of his House to a real and unexceptionable conclusion' (p. 284). Believing that the end of the world was imminent, he aimed to create an extraordinary Kingdom by defeating death in his own way, a Kingdom where women, though not excluded entirely, were tamed and harmless. In Graves's rendering of the story, Jesus is represented as believing that man and wife would avoid death and live in the Kingdom of God (p. 308) by practising unconsummated wedlock. Jesus's weakness is his uncompromising insistence that he is the Messiah. With this insistence, he refuses to recognize that he is transgressing the domain of the White Goddess. And with this refusal, Jesus becomes the ultimate Patriarch. Jesus is firm and resolute in his decision to destroy Woman's role. Graves creates a paradoxical



character who is a true poet but has abandoned his calling, and thus becomes an anti-hero, an enemy of the Goddess and therefore, of true poetry.

### **Interpretation and Intertextuality of *King Jesus***

Graves's choice of the title of *King Jesus* suggests, at first, the mockery of the Jews by the Romans, quoting as it does from the notice pinned to the cross of Jesus's 'statement of crime' (*King Jesus*, p. 398):

HIC EST JESUS NAZARAEUS, REX JUDAEORUM.  
*This is Jesus the Nazirite, the King of the Jews* (p. 398).

The Jewish population at the time was outraged by this claim, and Graves's explanation in the novel is that although the 'humorous, bold, greedy and entirely unprincipled' (p. 387) Pontius Pilate may have used Jesus in part for his own political aims (p. 392-98), whilst simultaneously preserving genuine sympathy for him. Part of the reason for the above inscription is that he acknowledges that Jesus was the true successor to Herod and therefore, 'King of the Jews' and he admits later, 'I have come to pity and even admire the man' (p. 398). Graves transforms the traditional interpretation of Pontius Pilate as a villain into a more radical and complex character who treats Jesus with unexpected courtesy and equal respect as he recognizes that he is in the presence of one of noble birth.

Graves elucidates in the 'Historical Commentary' that while reading the thirteenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament (Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. 75), he discovered that Sergius Paulus, Roman Procurator of Cyprus, had been persuaded that Jesus was the rightful King of Judaea (p. 419). Graves seizes upon this, apparently without any 'personal prejudice' or 'any religious interest', claiming that it lends credence to his argument in *King Jesus* and its suggestion of 'a new solution of the Nativity problem' (*King Jesus*, p. 419). He then presents as evidence the fact that Pilate granted Jesus a private interview – an unusual practice as he was not a Roman citizen – which, for Graves, was the most revealing explanation for the statement affixed to Jesus's

cross. In Graves's imagined meeting between Pilate and Jesus, the former offers him a compromise: to swear allegiance to the Emperor and 'break down the misunderstanding between [...Judea and Rome]; to decentralize worship; [...] and generally to bring Judaea into line with other civilized members of the Imperial community' (p. 390). In return Jesus would 'be given a free hand in spiritual matters, as well as the title of Allied King'. Jesus swiftly refuses by stating, 'My Kingdom is not of this world' (p. 390). There is something sinister in Pilate's offhand and 'jocose' manner, especially in his desire to be remembered 'generously' (p. 392) once Jesus has come into power. With Jesus's refusal, Pilate changes track and further manipulates the situation to meet his own ends by sending him on to Prince Herod Antipas of Judaea, a deed for which he would be handsomely rewarded. The Prince wishes for the immediate death of his rival, and it is up to Pilate decide his punishment. Partly to spite the Jewish people and partly to award some dignity to Jesus, Pilate chooses the above inscription without intending any irony.

#### **'Conversation at Paphos – 43 AD'**

Though also written without 'personal prejudice', Graves uses the trope of analepsis for 'inspiration', to reflect and distinguish the voices of Theophilus [...] and Lucius Sergius Paulus' (*White Goddess*, p. 341), in the episode 'Conversation at Paphos – 43 AD', which appeared as Chapter Twenty of *The White Goddess*. Revealingly, a draft of the chapter was published earlier in the winter issue of *The Windmill* in 1946 (Higginson and Williams, *Bibliography*, p. 274). *King Jesus* was published in England on 28 November 1946 (*Bibliography*, p. 94), which suggests that the article/chapter precedes and anticipates *King Jesus*. The chapter/article is a good example of the way Graves interweaves several genres such as verse, riddle, myth and biblical history. Chapter Twenty sets out to prove that it is the Goddess who inspires the writing of true poetry. Beginning with part of a poem-riddle, 'Circling the circling of their fish / Nuns walk in white and pray; / For he is chaste as they...' (p. 340), Graves demonstrates that the riddle can be understood as a contest over

hidden knowledge (Frow, *Genre*, p. 34) in order to illustrate 'the peculiar workings of poetic thought' (p. 340). Then, proceeding through the use of analepsis ('I threw my mind back in an analeptic trance' (p. 341)), he magically conjures up two men from the past, Theophilus and Sergius Paulus. By means of 'detective' work, he revises historical and anthropological matters through these personalities and then deconstructs them. Theophilus and Paulus discuss, for example, the origins of the conflict which led to the mass emigration of peoples from the Southern coast of the Black Sea towards Gaul and Ireland (p. 341). Graves then uses the characters as mouthpieces for his own views to show an evolution of his theory. Reiterating, but significantly moving on from the argument that Graves first set out in *The Golden Fleece*, they establish that it is from the downfall of matriarchy that Christianity was born. As a result, they are thus able to solve the riddle, 'Who was dark-faced and hot in Silvia's day / [...] And in his pool drowns each unspoken wish' (p. 354). The holder of the key to this hidden knowledge is predictably Graves himself. Ultimately this is Gravesian psychobiography and, as Bloom observes dryly, 'as such has a certain limited authority' (*Robert Graves*, p. 3).

The chapter and article, however, is of particular relevance to the theory presented in *King Jesus*. Like the Sergius Paulus in *King Jesus*, Sergius Paulus of 'Conversation at Paphos – 43 AD' is not only aware of a 'matriarchal history' preceding the rise of Christianity but recognizes its links with Christianity. Besides, for example, the heir to the Kingdom of Rome having descended through the female line (p. 347), certain matriarchal rites in Rome concerned the worship of a king 'who dies ceremonially every year' (p. 346). Therefore, Sergius Paulus's acknowledgement and acceptance of Jesus's title as King, as well as the worship of Jesus as 'a demi-god', become more logical and coherent since the meaning of 'Jesus' has already been explained by Graves in the winter issue of *The Windmill* in 1946, prior to 'Conversation at Paphos – 43 AD'.



Graves makes repeated use of such dialogue to exploit every opportunity to probe the Jesus narrative, particularly upon introducing into *King Jesus* the figure of Mary the Crone, in order to expound his historical and anthropological knowledge of the Goddess. One example of this use of dialogue can be found in Chapter Eighteen of *King Jesus*, 'The Terebinth Fair'. Here, on the way to Hebron, Jesus and his disciple, Simon, engage in a discussion with two Greeks dressed in the grey cloaks of philosophers (p. 237). The rather forced and unnatural exchange at the beginning is in the form of a dialogue concerning the Goddess. The belief endorsed by the Greeks is that 'certain of our ancestors, in common with yours, once worshipped the same Sea-goddess at the Oaks of Mamre' (p. 239). The discussion becomes more engrossing as the reader, along with those participating, learns that the sacred place to which the Jewish pilgrims are travelling is filled with pagan idolatry. Jesus takes no part in this discussion of the Goddess (p. 241), for he 'did not consider it his duty to interrupt or denounce the religious practices of strangers' (p. 247). By drawing continuous parallels between the origins of Judaism and pagan religions, Graves is deliberately re-educating his twentieth-century readers in their 'ancient ancestry'. This evidence, as Patrick Keane writes in *A Wild Civility*, displays 'Graves's mythographic skill in placing the 'true' Christ within the pattern of the White Goddess's ultimate revenge on patriarchy' (p. 55). For Graves, Jesus is the unknowing instrument of the Goddess. The discussion, now expanding with the participation of other disciples of Jesus, eventually leads to the discovery that not only do the origins of Judaism lie in a reverence for female deities, but that worship of the Goddess still persists. Her oracle stands, controlled by the pythoness, familiar to readers of *The Golden Fleece*, in the person of the most enduring character of the *King Jesus* narrative: Mary Magdalene or Mary the Hairdresser, the procuress of harlots.

### **The Three Marys**

Throughout the text of *King Jesus* there are references to the various female deities and to the traditions practised by the Jews, the origins of which Graves attributes to worship of the Goddess. Integral to the plot of *King Jesus* are the three Marys who represent the Matriarchal Holy Trinity of the cycle of life. The first archetype of the Goddess Trinity is Eve, who is represented by the temple virgin, Miriam/Mary, mother of Jesus. Then there is Mary, daughter of Cleopas, later to become Jesus's bride and Queen, who remains a virgin. Finally, Mary Magdalene completes the Holy Trinity; she serves the Goddess and represents the witch/crone. Together the three Marys configure the Goddess, and their force governs the direction of the narrative, and ultimately controls Jesus's destiny.

### **Miriam: the First Mary of the Matriarchal Trinity**

As pointed out earlier, the birth of Graves's Jesus is presented as natural rather than miraculous. Rather, it is the conception of Miriam – the first Mary of the Matriarchal Trinity – not Jesus, which is 'miraculous'. At every turn, Graves reinforces the importance of the Female and her determining of events in the story of the Nativity. Joachim, heir to King David, and Hannah have been married for ten years and have remained childless until a temple servant conveys instructions from a prophetess about how they can conceive successfully. Joachim complies with these instructions, and they are blessed with a daughter whom they call Miriam. A poet sings to Joachim of the sun and the moon, and in his song he connects poetry and the moon. The Moon is personified in her many aspects as the Goddess. The definition of 'goddess' and Miriam's importance is explained: 'goddess' signifies 'a line of priestesses in whom a divinity is held to be incarnate, as Miriam [...] is incarnate in the Michal line' (p. 58). The poet sings:

The Moon has many names among our poets. She is Lilith and Eve and Ashtaroth and Rahab and Tamer and Leah and Rachel and Michal and Anatha; but she is Miriam when her star rises in love from the salt sea at evening (p. 21).

While Miriam is not the actual subject of the poet's song, the chant foreshadows her importance, and she is accordingly treated by Graves as an incarnation of the Goddess. Graves adds in *The White Goddess* that it was necessary for Miriam, as the Mother of Jesus, to be transformed into 'the immaculate human receptacle of the Life and Brightness of God [...] herself immaculately conceived by her mother Hannah St. Ann' (p. 463), since the Christians wanted wholly to separate from Judaism, 'and Jesus as King of Israel was an embarrassing concept to Christians' (p. 463). It is only as the *King Jesus* narrative develops that it becomes clear that Miriam is first 'the Virgin of the Moon' (p. 22) and then in her Mother aspect, parent to Jesus – 'goddess of motherhood and fertility' (Frazer, *Golden Bough*, p. 398). According to Herod's High Priest, Simon, the 'unorthodox historical theory' (p. 56) of the ancestral line is matrilineal; in other words, title and inheritance are carried through the female, rather than the male (*King Jesus*, p. 57). Encompassed within Miriam or Mary are the three stages of Womanhood. While she is heir to the house of David on her father's side, on her mother Hannah's side she is descended from Samuel and thus, according to Simon, is 'a daughter of the Lord' (p. 61). Miriam is crucial to Graves's narrative: she is true and noble born, and more importantly, she is the Muse-goddess who gives birth to Jesus, and is known first in her maiden aspect and then in her mother aspect, and finally, as Joseph's widow, after her son's death, as the crone. Not merely confined to the role of the mother of Jesus, Miriam is rather redefined by Graves as one who played a key role in the Nativity. In developing such a provocative hypothesis, Graves suggests that Miriam is as important as Jesus in understanding the birth of Christianity and moves the narrative to a worryingly contentious scenario.

### **Antipater, Biological Father of Jesus**

Integral to Graves's reading of the Nativity story is the mystery surrounding the births of Miriam and Jesus. This points to what he saw as Jesus's true destiny: to hail a new epoch of reconciliation between the Goddess and the patriarchs who had hitherto undermined her



power. The births of both Miriam and Jesus were the fulfilment of prophecies. Considering that one of Miriam's two parents was most certainly infertile, her birth can only be explained by divine intervention.<sup>25</sup> Yet this 'divine intervention' is assisted by the agency of her mother, the 'prophetess' Anna, acting on the orders of the Goddess (p. 31). Jesus's biological father is the noble and good Antipater, eldest son of King Herod, who is merely instrumental in the conception of Jesus. King Herod's High Priest, Simon, an Alexandrian Jew, persuades Antipater, who is without 'prejudice in religious matters' (p. 49), that he would have a truer claim to the throne than his father (p. 61) if he married Miriam. The High Priest adds that only by marrying Miriam can Antipater become 'the authentic King of Israel' (p. 63). Antipater secretly marries Miriam and by doing so feels 'enroyalled': 'It was as though he had died to his old faded world and been instantly reborn to her new, glorious one' (p. 99). The description of her, as Antipater remembers her, suggests someone who is the Goddess incarnate: 'Her image [...] remained fixed in his mind; motionless and calm like the statue of a goddess. [...]. Holiness emanated from her' (p. 99). Antipater is reborn as the Goddess's consort, and his premature and violent death, like that of his son Jesus and those of the Argonauts of *The Golden Fleece*, symbolizes the death of the dying and reviving god (Frazer, *Golden Bough*, p. 407).

In making Antipater Jesus's father, Graves is changing the biblical story passed down through the centuries and recorded in the New Testament. He found it necessary to make a hugely controversial claim: that Jesus's conception was not miraculous but natural. While dramatic effect would be one reason for this – Herod and Antipater are in every sense opposites in the novel – Graves here is preparing the ground for his interpretation of Jesus's part in the downfall of the Goddess. Graves depicts Herod as a psychotic and paranoid tyrant who goes to extremes in order to remain King, while the picture he

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<sup>25</sup> Miriam's birth can also be interpreted naturalistically. There was no scientific concept as to the causes and remedies of fertility and infertility in the ancient world. It would therefore not have been unusual for seemingly infertile women to conceive.

presents of Antipater is of a man who emanates unswerving goodness. Even the wrath of Herod towards Antipater does not shake the prince's loyalty and devotion toward his father. It might be argued that Antipater acts tactfully in order to prolong his own life and retain the right to the throne after his father's death. Yet his sincerity when defending himself against his father's charges of hypocrisy, fratricide, and parricide (p. 103) is a prominent feature of his characterization.

However, Antipater is not wholly believable as a character, for he is *too good* by comparison to what is known from biographical and historical sources. Therefore no realistic or naturalistic rendering will contribute to his aims in writing *King Jesus* as the 'facts' of historical records are ignored. Historically, it is well documented that Herod appointed Antipater as his successor in four of his seven wills, only to change his mind and then have him executed, suspecting him of attempted patricide (Richardson, *Herod*, pp. 34-36, p. 292). According to Peter Richardson's biography of Herod, the historical facts actually reveal this suspicion to have been plausible, as Antipater is recorded as being a malicious and sadistic man (pp. 282-84), determined to succeed his father at all costs. Ironically, Antipater was executed five days before Herod's own death. Whilst Antipater was imprisoned, Herod attempted to kill himself with a paring knife (he suffered from syphilis (*Herod*, p. 18)) and, hearing the cries, Antipater concluded that his father had died. Hopeful that he had finally succeeded his father, he tried to bribe his jailer, only to discover his fatal mistake and be immediately executed (*Herod*, p. 19). However, Graves plays around with different biographical sources in order to make his story appear more plausible than it really is and overlooks the standard version of Antipater's unpopularity with both the military and the populace (apparently provoked by his execution of his two younger half brothers, Alexander and Arisobulus, rivals to the throne (*Herod*, p. 286)). Instead, Graves portrays this character, though rather unconvincingly and flatly, as an

earnest and honourable young man in order to make him a suitable biological father of Jesus.

There may, however, be one similarity between the historical and reinvented Antipater. Ambition is the essential motivation behind both the historical figure and Graves's version of Antipater. However, in Graves's narrative, it is ambition rather than greed for the throne that drives Antipater into secret marriage and sexual union with Miriam. In terms of the development of the plot, however, Antipater must necessarily be presented as a worthy husband to Miriam and father of Jesus. Although Graves would have been familiar with the well-documented accounts of the historical Antipater's behaviour, he deliberately distorts these versions of the facts, shaping his own account from his need to develop the Goddess's mythology. Graves's interpretation, which is not based on any conventional 'historical' evidence, but on analepsis and other obscure and questionable methods, is crucial to his hypothesis: for it not only puts Jesus in the immediate line of succession – as King of the Jews – in terms of pedigree, but also indicates the deeply moral character of his mother and father.

In Graves's version, the figure of Antipater also serves to intensify the power struggle between the paternal and maternal forces. While the marriage of Herod's son, Antipater, to Miriam symbolizes an acceptance of the Goddess's supremacy, Antipater's father, Herod, is enemy to the Moon (p. 145) and hence symbolically to the Goddess. Ironically, Herod has an obsession with the messianic because he believes he is the Power, the Sun of Holiness (p. 125) and he seizes the chance to enact the religious rites of the Sun-god by sacrificing his eldest son, Antipater, because he hopes to become the Messiah himself by doing so. With the premature death of his father, Jesus becomes Herod's successor, and ironically, it is Jesus, Herod's grandson, who turns out to be the Messiah. The narrator clearly defines the term 'messiah' in order to clarify and justify Jesus's role within the narrative, saying it is necessary, because otherwise 'the story of Jesus's life will



lose something of its clear beauty' (p. 162): 'The word Messiah signifies "the Christ" or "the Anointed One", and is therefore applicable only to an anointed king, not to a commoner, however greatly distinguished by spiritual gifts or military achievements' (p. 162). It is evident from this definition that Jesus fulfils the title, for he is both of David's lineage on his mother's side, and the rightful heir to the throne via his father. By making him the grandson of the ruthlessly ambitious Herod, Graves departs from orthodox views and reliable sources, and uniquely weaves the conflict between matriarchy and patriarchy into the extraordinary story of Jesus's claim to the throne.

### **Jesus in *King Jesus: His Childhood and Youth***

According to Graves's interpretation and the narrative voice that presents his argument – which of course differs radically from the traditional interpretation in the Bible – Jesus's childhood and youth are deeply imbued with reverence for the Female. One example of this is when he experiences the sea for the first time. The family travels to Egypt by sea – a 'courageous decision' as, according to Graves, the Jews dislike the sea because of its ancient associations with the Great Goddess in her erotic character (p. 178). Behind this aversion to the sea, the narrator later explains, is an attempt to conceal the truth 'by a transliteration' (p. 238), so that the Goddess in her various aspects is disguised as an icon of Judaism. For example, while the effigy of Miriam is displayed in a sacred grove – as a fish-tailed Aphroditian Love-goddess – the 'people of Hebron pretend that the effigy represents Sarah, wife of Abraham' (p. 238). The young and impressionable Jesus has no such aversion, and finds his first experience of the sea to be 'the most beautiful sight that he had ever seen' (p. 178). The narrator later goes on to explain that Jesus comprehends the power of the Goddess and, standing hand in hand with his mother in perfect union, realizes: 'The sea is our mother. From the sea the dry land was delivered at the Creation as a child is delivered from the womb. How beautiful is our mother's face!' (p. 178). Jesus, at this point in the narrative, is untainted and pure as he is still under the influence of his

mother. Contradicting traditional readings of the Nativity, therefore, Graves builds a picture of a child very much bound to his mother and the scene hints at 'Goddess propaganda', serving to alienate the reader from an idea of patriarchal Christianity, and endorse an alternative Nativity.

Later, Jesus, aged twelve, without seeking permission from his parents, obtains admission to the Temple precincts where public debates take place, conducted for students by popular Doctors of the Law (p. 187). Radically for one so young, Jesus questions the breach of the law by the High Priest Doctors. One question concerns the acceptability of a donation of money for the Temple Treasury from a Jewish prostitute (p. 193). Jesus argues the permissibility of the donation by upholding the necessity of prostitution. Here, Jesus is still spiritually connected to his mother though he bases his argument on logic, rather than on his sympathy for the Female. He concludes: 'From what I judge that so long as deceitful men must seduce virgins, and fools must company with harlots, harlotry is a necessity' (p. 194). The young Jesus is becoming a skillful debater with a superior knowledge of the Law. His emerging sense of destiny becomes apparent, however, when he reunites with his distressed mother, for he no longer feels 'accountable' to her and says that he is now 'engaged on the Father's business' (p. 195). It is only when Jesus is seventeen (p. 201) that his mother finally tells him the truth about his heritage: that he is 'the uncrowned King of the Jews, the secret heir to the throne which has stood empty since the days of King Herod' (p. 203). He reacts to the news by renouncing his mother's authority over him, thus marking his spiritual departure from the Female and his chosen destiny in opposition to the Goddess. Yet it is the mother with whom the reader sympathizes, rather than Jesus. The reader must uncomfortably balance his or her conception of 'Christ' with the petulant adolescent who rejects his mother's love for a 'higher cause.' Graves tantalizingly paints a portrait of a youthful Jesus who is full of anger and hostility towards Woman.

Jesus immediately leaves home and joins a postulancy at Callirrhoe. Whilst at the postulancy, he reinterprets the prophecies of Ezekiel, the founder of their Order (p. 210) – forbidden for anyone to study but the Head of the Academy (p. 217) – entitled the *Ma'aseh Merkabah*, or the 'Work of the Chariot', as his new-found mission to conquer the Female. The language Jesus uses in describing the Goddess is conspicuous for its extreme lack of empathy. He chooses, for example, to identify her as 'the threefold demoness' (p. 214). Jesus's anger towards the Female stems from his interpretation that the fate of fallen Man – who is epitomized in the five midsummer days which are the five seasons of the year (p. 215) – that he claims is caused and continues to be caused by the Female. It is she who leads Man to destruction and ultimate ruin as Jesus explains:

On the first day of the five she spins the thread of his life; on the second she flatters him with hope of fame; on the third she corrupts him with her whoredoms; on the fourth she lulls him to deathly sleep; on the fifth she bewails his corpse (pp. 215-16).

The Female is viewed as the temptress who preys on men's weaknesses. Focusing on Daniel's vision, it becomes clear that Jesus views himself as the saviour of Man: 'He shall appear to all men on the day that the Female is defeated at last. He is neither God nor man: he is the image of God in which man was first made and which shall then be renewed in pure love of God for man, of man for God' (p. 216). The Overseer's attempts to castigate Jesus for his reading of *Ma'aseh Merkabah*, with threats that he will be consumed by fire, only add to his confidence in his new-found identity and mission, for nothing happens to him. Jesus declares triumphantly: 'Yet I am not consumed! And I have heard it said: "When fire descends from Heaven that burns but does not consume, then is the time to sing the Hymn of Praise"' (p. 217). It becomes clear that Graves viewed Jesus's actions as fuelled by the contradictions in his own nature as his anger and hostility are a means of denying and repressing his own sexuality. If, as Camille Paglia writes in *Sexual Personae*, 'sex is the natural in man' (p. 1), then it can be argued that Jesus's attitude to his own sexuality is anti-nature and anti-humanity. This then becomes his motivating force in



building a new religion which is anti-woman and therefore, anti-sex, almost in order to punish humanity.

Jesus is determined at all costs to destroy the Female, because he claims that no man can combine the love of God with that of woman. For Jesus, the matter is simply explained: 'No man can at the same time love God as he demands to be loved and woman as she demands to be loved. He must choose between the Eternal Father and the fish-tailed Queen of Heaven' (p. 224). The implication of Jesus's statement means the death of humanity: the work of the mother is to submit to sexual desire, and for man, this means union with the Great Mother – sins that must be eradicated, so women must cease bearing children. Under the Goddess, the cycle of death and rebirth continues without end. For Jesus, death can only be conquered by rebirth into immortality in the Father's Paradise. Jesus seems cruel and extreme in describing the Female as Lust and the First Eve, 'who delays the hour of perfection' (p. 225). This is but a single aspect of the Trinity that configures the Goddess he despises. There is something dehumanizing and brutal in Jesus which, through rationalism and logic, hides his primal fear of woman and proves a damning indictment on Graves's version of Christianity. What is of value to readers here is that Graves presents an alternative story of Jesus which challenges traditional, received ideas about Jesus as Christ and about Christianity, suggesting a convenient veering from the truth as he saw it.

### **The Third Mary in *King Jesus***

For the purpose of the narrative, Mary of Magdala (p. 249) is depicted as the crone of the matriarchal trinity rather than the beautiful prostitute of traditional biblical imagery. Graves's Mary is greatly feared, for she has the power to speak prophecies in the 'name of the Mother' (p. 241). Mary, now too old to practise harlotry, rules over the prostitutes and adorns their hair 'with embellishments of tresses stolen from the dead, receives their stolen jewels, regulates their prices, provides them with the necessary charms and philtres, and

lays them out when they come to die' (p. 247). Jesus realizes the importance of this matriarch and searches for her, 'determined to measure and subdue the power of the Female' (p. 247). The importance of *King Jesus* to Graves in his creation of the White Goddess myth is underlined in his famous description of this Mary; she is Graves's White Goddess: 'She was a blue-eyed hag, her nose crooked like a falcon's beak' (p. 249). Added to this, Mary's mistress, the Goddess herself, is described as being 'white as leprosy' (p. 255). This familiar representation of the White Goddess is later articulated in the first stanza of the poem, 'In Dedication':

Your broad, high brow is whiter than a leper's,  
Your eyes are flax-flower blue, blood-red your lips,  
Your hair curls honey-coloured to white hips  
(*White Goddess* (first edition), 1-3 (p. 5)).

Dedicated to the Goddess in the prelude of *The White Goddess*, she first emerges in *The Golden Fleece* and now in *King Jesus*.

#### **War of Words between Matriarchy and Patriarchy in *King Jesus***

Mary leads Jesus to a beautiful temple of the Goddess hidden in a cave that lies in stark contrast to the filth of her surroundings, close to where offal and bones are left to rot. Jesus's disgust hides the terror he feels for the Female and what he perceives as her bloody chaos, her natural element, represented by the numerous basins strewn around, coated with the blood of bulls, which he assumes Mary drinks in order to prophesy (p. 250). The threatening, tempting and all too real symbols of the feminine and her hidden sexuality, the dark cave and the beautiful temple, evidently put Jesus on edge and he immediately engages in an argument of epic proportions with the Hairdresser. The argument, slanted to convey Graves's own commitment to the Goddess as the source of inspiration to the poet, highlights his recognition that Jesus must submit himself to her, in the symbolic war between matriarchy and patriarchy. Apollo, patron of anti-poetry, upholds the light of reason, and Jesus is the natural inheritor of this attitude. In binary opposition, Woman represents for Man chaos, darkness, and subtle control of his destiny. Mary then displays a

lamp showing a series of pictographs which Jesus comprehends as the biblical story of Noah's Ark, depicting 'the annals of kings and princes and prophets of Israel' (p. 251). Mary interprets the pictographs through the religion of the Goddess as the Holy Ark of the ancient Covenant, but Jesus disputes her reading with his own patriarchal interpretation of the religion of Jehovah (Presley, '*King Jesus*' p. 172). Jesus's weakness is his fear of her power and the clothing of this fear is self-righteous condemnation of all things feminine. His view of the world seems one-dimensional: he fails to understand that darkness has to exist beside the light, that life issues from the Female.

The reader hears of Graves's theme<sup>26</sup> for the first time when Mary insists that the lamp tells 'one story and one story only' (p. 251). For Mary, the story worth telling is Graves's own myth, in which he writes in 'To Juan at the Winter Solstice', '[...] each new victim treads unfalteringly / The never altered circuit of his fate' (II. 15-16). In a sense, Mary is telling Graves's story. The child born at the time of the solstice is the naked King reborn of the Goddess. In his notes on 'To Juan at the Winter Solstice', written for an American Anthology, Graves writes that the winter solstice is traditionally the birthday of 'solar heroes,' and that their fate was intrinsically bound with that of the Moon-goddess. The lamp and the poem depict one story and one story only, that of the fate of the Solar Hero. Therefore the central theme of all true poetry is the fate of the hero who shows his allegiance to the Goddess (*White Goddess*, pp. 329-30).

Jesus initially feels confused although he pretends indifference to the contents of the lamp. The significance of Jesus's birth taking place at the winter solstice (*King Jesus*, p. 269 and *White Goddess*, p. 310) is that the year turns towards waxing which symbolizes fertility. Later, his death as the maimed virgin god of the waxing year symbolizes rebirth and then regeneration. The lamp depicts a mythic story that relates the fate of Jesus as the sacrificial King. Mary says that the story of the lamp describes the Goddess and the twin

<sup>26</sup>The Sacred King [is] the Moon-goddess's divine victim; holding that every Muse-poet must, in a sense, die for the Goddess whom he adores, just as the King died' (Graves, 'Appendix B', *White Goddess*, p. 494).



Kings of Hebron who have sworn a covenant 'that she will share her love and her anger equally between them both so long as they obey her will' (p. 251). Jesus disagrees with the Goddess-orientated interpretation of the lamp, and they continue to argue. Jesus, unable to give the story a patriarchal rationale, finally declares, 'my fate will be as the Father ordains, not as your Mistress ordains. I am released from the jurisdiction of the Female; I have come to destroy her works' (p. 256). Mary, then, begins to invoke evil spirits to overthrow him. The battle evolves from patriarchy versus matriarchy into good versus evil.

Graves here treads a delicate line between defining Jesus as a hero wishing to rid the world of the Goddess and her evil powers, and a villain who tries to subvert and undermine the Female. At this point in the narrative, however, Jesus is the more powerful, for he is able to cast off the evil spirits. Yet Mary cries: 'The apostate may deny his mother, the First Eve; and his bride, the Second Eve, he may reject; yet the Third Eve, his grandam, will inexorably claim him for her own' (p. 257). She continues by accurately accusing him of an inherent weakness. Jesus, terrified by her perception, prays: 'Oh, cleanse me from my secret fault' (p. 258). Similarly, in *The Golden Fleece*, the power of the Goddess may be temporarily weakened but ultimately she will rise as the triumphant one. Jesus's weakness, according to Graves, was his intransigent belief that he was the 'destined messiah' (*White Goddess*, p. 414) because in denying the power of the Female, and therefore weakening humanity, he showed how his loyalty to the male god was misguided.

### **Jesus's Sacred Lameness**

Jesus's secret connection to the Goddess is that he was lamed with a sacred lameness in the initiation ceremony of the Sacred King in which he was 'marred' and renamed King. Graves further explains in *The White Goddess*:

In my *King Jesus* I suggest that the Hebrew tradition found in the *Talmud Babli Sanhedrin* and the *Tol' Doth Yeshu*, that Jesus was lamed while attempting to fly, refers to a secret Coronation ceremony on

Mount Tabour, where he became the new Israel after being ritually lamed in a wrestling match. This tradition is supported by Gospel evidence which I adduce, and by a remark of Jerome's that Jesus was deformed (p. 325).

Once again, there is a shifting between genres: through the use of autobiography, Graves transfers fictional narrative into his historic grammar of poetic myth to give information. This time analepsis is not employed; rather, narrative explanation is accompanied by sources and references. Yet there are doubts in his findings because 'Gospel evidence' is somewhat vague and 'adduce' suggests that the reader has only Graves's opinion, rather than proper sources. The main source of reference again is the *King Jesus* text itself, which at first impression lends both works an appearance of authority, but actually serves to undermine *The White Goddess* text<sup>27</sup> by its fictionality and the very questionability of its factual authority.

With the completion of the ritual battle against Mary the Crone, Jesus makes the rounds of the kingdom (Patai, *Robert Graves*, p. 42) as the new King. Mary the Crone laughs for joy, and kissing the younger Mary on both cheeks, flees back to the woods. With his marriage and ritual injury, Jesus, in his ignorance, begins to fulfil the Frazerian sacred pattern of being possessed of great power and with it great responsibility for his people, as the dying and reviving King, and as consort to the Queen. The argument of 'the same suffering Sacred King [...who had been] worshipped under various names from time immemorial' (*White Goddess*, p. 138) appears later in *The White Goddess*. Jesus refuses to participate in the marriage festivities, for he has no intention of consummating his union with his bride and declares: 'This custom is ended' (p. 264) referring to the end of man's slavery to his sexual impulse, and, consequently, bringing about the end of the Female's role to reproduce life, a role in which she has hitherto defeated death. Jesus believes that he must destroy the cult of the Mother-goddess and says: 'I am your King, and I have come

<sup>27</sup> In a letter to Alan Hodge, on 12 June, 1944, Graves discussed *King Jesus* and his findings and said, 'You won't believe this until I show you the supporting evidence [what it was is left to the reader's imagination], but it makes a good story until you do. As you know, Jesus was lamed [...]. It was done on Mt Tabor, I think, with the help of a griffon-culture as a piece of ritual furniture, a precipice, and the 'cabbages' from the centre of date-palms. What complicated minds they had! Or is it my own?' (*In Broken Images*, p. 324).

not to renew but to make an end' (p. 266). Jesus feels for his wife the pure and untainted love of the bond of brother to sister, but Mary of Cleopas and Jesus's mother feel disturbed and unconvinced. In eschewing carnal love for woman, Jesus is chained by an inverted morality and thus blind to the wider implications of his actions.

Jesus's fear of women proves self-destructive. With the news that his wife's brother, Lazarus, is seriously ill, Jesus's paranoia leads him to suspect a ruse, rather than feel concern for his beloved friend. At first Jesus refuses to help Lazarus, because he believes that his wife has concocted the story to encourage a reconciliation. Confiding in Judas, he accuses woman of striking 'at a man through his loved ones' (p. 336). Jesus refuses to face his wife, for he secretly senses her power. He recognizes her as a creator of life, and that, ultimately, the balance of power lies with woman and not in patriarchy. In other words, Jesus both fears and comprehends the power of the Female, and her victory in the war between matriarchy and patriarchy.

### **Raising Lazarus**

With the death of Lazarus, Jesus's wife, Mary, tells him that he has a heavy debt to pay to her: 'You have debts to God, and these you pay and are glad to pay; but you owe me a debt too, the debt of flesh and blood' (p. 337). Jesus eventually pays the heavy debt with Lazarus's miraculous resurrection – and soon his own life. In a crucial sense, Jesus resurrects Lazarus in response to the terrible guilt he feels towards Mary. She accuses him of injustice and cruelty in denying her his love and a child. By acknowledging Mary's accusations, Jesus is also accepting his own grave faults for which he knows he must pay. But it is not to his God that he pays his debt but to the Goddess alluded to in Mary the Hairdresser's prophecy. At Lazarus's tomb, Jesus cries 'O Lord of Hosts, how long will you permit the Female to cut off your sons by her witchcrafts?' (p. 338). Jesus fatally misunderstands the Goddess, and his question is misdirected. In a sense Jesus, the willing chrestos (Pilate cannot decide whether Jesus is chrestos or christos – that is 'simpleton or



anointed king' (p. 391)) and the Virgin-King is, in the end, a hopelessly impotent sacrificial victim, even with his power, a victim who must die in accordance with the ancient tradition the Goddess imposes on her suitors. The 'Third Mary' (p. 343), Mary the Crone, prematurely anoints Jesus with terebinth ointment for his burial, a peace offering from the 'Second Mary' (p. 343), Mary daughter of Cleopas, his wife. The supremacy of the Matriarchal Trinity is enforced: Jesus no longer holds power: he is enacting the sacrificial rite over which he has no control.

### **Jesus as the Sacred King**

However, before the narrative progresses toward its inevitable conclusion, Agabus interrupts the action to give the reader the anthropological background regarding the sacrifice of the Sacred King in Chapter Twenty-Nine – 'The Power of the Dog'. It is obvious that Frazer's theories dominate in this chapter, theories that have relevant parallels with Graves's poetic theory. From primitive sacrifice, Graves gently leads the reader toward its association with Judaism, and finally to Jesus. Graves deliberately prevents the reader from becoming too involved in the narrative so that as the climax of the novel is reached, deep moral horror is felt only from a distance. The climax is Jesus's crucifixion, and the narrator connects this to the fate reserved for the annual Sacred King made to the Mother-goddess (pp. 402-03), not to Christian worship or values:

Jesus as a Sacred King in the antique style, despite his extraordinary efforts to avoid the destiny entailed upon him by his birth and marriage – or, you may well say, in consequence of these very efforts – was about to be immortalized in the antique style (p. 404).

Jesus's righteous faith is, therefore, acutely ironic – his fault is that he presumes that what he fears must therefore be evil. He is, at the last, in his over simplistic-definition of evil, the willing king and virgin-fool: a man who denied himself the pleasures of the flesh, who turned away from the sensual in the name of a greater cause, little realizing that he would become the appropriate sacrificial victim which would appease the Goddess. The Trinity of

Marys is present as Jesus is crucified. As death approaches, Jesus realizes at last that his death fulfils the Goddess's wishes (p. 408) for, according to Mary the Hairdresser, the great fault was 'that he tried to force the hour of doom by declaring war upon the Female. But the Female abides and cannot be hastened' (pp. 408-09). Jesus had set out to destroy the Goddess and the Female who endorses her power, but, instead, he became her sacrificial victim (Canary, *Robert Graves*, p. 111).

What must be truly shocking for Christian readers is that Graves's Jesus did not view himself as the redeeming saviour dying for the sins of humanity. Instead, he understands that he is the sacrificial victim of the Goddess. Shortly after his crucifixion, Jesus rises mysteriously from death to say a final farewell to his Apostles only to be beckoned by the three Marys. And the four suddenly disappear, enveloped in mist. The Female has won the war: the Goddess has reclaimed her son-lover. However, it seems a Pyrrhic victory, as his death is also a victory for Christianity since 'by his defeat of death [he] remains alive, an earth-bound power' (p. 417). Graves writes, in an essay entitled 'The Bible in Europe', that because Christianity is 'a stubbornly patriarchal religion' (*Difficult Questions*, p. 27), Jesus's Kingdom is full of confusion and moral disquiet, robbed of a vital moral component with a sense of a fatal dislocation about to happen. The fanatic grip of patriarchy is only half the human story.

### **Conclusion**

*King Jesus* was written towards the end of the Second World War. Graves, as has been described, had taken part in and witnessed the miseries and horrors of the First World War – the war to end all wars. Yet once again, the world was engaged in mortal combat, and Graves felt that these two world wars within a space of twenty years were an indication of the failure of the patriarchal Judaeo-Christian tradition. On a personal level, the first war had threatened his sanity and the second had cost Graves his son, close friends and acquaintances. In returning to humanity's earliest origins in *King Jesus*, Graves makes the

case for a pre-Judaic civilization, for the older religion when people seriously believed in the Goddess, over the dedicated partial vision of all religious fundamentalism. He attempts to give a new vision of the familiar life of Jesus, to shake the foundations of Christianity with his mythopoetic rendering of Frazer's idea of the dying and reviving god-king (Vickery, *Robert Graves*, p. 148).

Through prose fiction, Graves concentrated on certain historical contradictions within the Judaeo-Christian tradition. In *King Jesus*, he is concerned with explaining and decoding a well-known story and presenting a differing interpretation. Both *King Jesus* and *The White Goddess*, written at the same time, are concerned with Graves's 'single grand theme of poetry – the life, death and resurrection of the Spirit of the Year' (*White Goddess*, p. 413). In Graves's view, Jesus is intrinsically bound up with his Goddess myth as the dying and reviving God-King. As he writes in *The White Goddess*, that belief in the Goddess 'reasserted itself popularly with the Virgin as the White Goddess, Jesus as the Waxing Sun, the Devil as the Waning Sun. There was no room here for the Father God, except as a mystical adjunct of Jesus' (p. 464). According to Graves in *King Jesus*, Christianity is based on a fundamental misunderstanding, a misunderstanding which is the source of the spiritual decay of Humankind. If *The Golden Fleece* serves as the prologue to *King Jesus*, then both texts are a way of fitting Graves's argument and the poetics of *The White Goddess* into the final part of the 'story': *The White Goddess* being the remedy to the degradation of Western civilization that was set in motion when the Goddess was supplanted. With *King Jesus*, Graves attempted to create a new myth, believing that only a true poet can re-establish what has been lost: the relationship between humanity and its divine source (Psilopoulous, 'Esoteric', p. 169). With the retelling of the story of Jesus's birth and death, Graves wrote a convincing parable demonstrating his own views, to be practised in his poetry thereafter.



## Chapter Four: Translation of *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius (1950) - Graves's reconstruction of Apuleius

### Background

*Te tibi una quae es omnia dea Isis*<sup>28</sup>

The above first century AD Latin inscription to Isis by a Roman senator is indicative of how widespread the cult of the Egyptian deity, Isis – an Egyptian mystery religion dating back to 2500 BC – had become. This was not merely confined to Egypt but had established a strong popular following in ancient Rome often at the expense of indigenous Roman beliefs (Pomeroy, *Goddesses*, p. 217). Isis is the presiding goddess of the popular Latin novel *The Golden Ass: The Transformations of Lucius otherwise known as The Golden Ass* by the second century author Apuleius.<sup>29</sup> In view of Graves's attachment to the story of Lucius (reflected in his widely-read translation of the text), Isis can be seen as the prototype of the 'mythological' or 'prehistorical' Goddess who is at the core of several of Graves's mythopoeic narratives: the ancient myth of Jason and the Golden Fleece, the 'historical' Goddess from the story of the crucifixion in *King Jesus* – in which Jesus is ultimately interpreted as her sacrificial consort – and visible finally in the later novel *Seven Days in New Crete*. Isis has a special relevance in wider goddess literature because, as Sarah Pomeroy writes in *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*:

The cult of Isis is unlike the others [...religious cults of classical antiquity]. Through it the religious and emotional needs of women and men of the Hellenistic and Roman worlds could be expressed and satisfied. Isis met with official resistance from the Romans, but ended by having a larger sphere of influence in religious ideas than [...most cults] (p. 217).

<sup>28</sup> A Roman senator's inscription to Isis, around the first century AD, found in Capua, translated as, 'Isis, you who are one and all' (Pomeroy, *Goddesses*, p. 218).

<sup>29</sup> All quotations from Robert Graves's translation of *The Golden Ass* are taken from Apuleius's *The Transformations of Lucius Otherwise Known as The Golden Ass*, trans. by Robert Graves (1950) (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 1979).

Unlike *The Golden Fleece* and *King Jesus*, which are concerned in the main with the Goddess's downfall, *The Golden Ass* presents a Goddess who is endowed with magical capabilities as well as the exercise of powers commonly associated with male divinities. Added to this, Isis was traditionally represented as both wife and mother – and whore (Pomeroy, *Goddesses*, p. 218) – encompassing all of the qualities of the White Goddess that Graves set out to reassert in *The White Goddess*.

Graves's own 1950 translation of *The Golden Ass* was therefore at the time a happy coincidence with his writing of *The White Goddess*. There was much in the Latin text – with its Ovidian emphasis on instability in worldly affairs and transformations – that Graves found, as Martin Seymour-Smith writes, 'central to the story' (*His Life and Works*, p. 417) of the White Goddess. The text of the novel concerns the miserable adventures of Lucius, who is transformed into an ass only to be delivered from his fate by the Egyptian goddess Isis – whom Graves was to use later as the model for the White Goddess herself. It was apt that Graves should make this translation, given his adumbration of *The White Goddess* in earlier texts and taking full account of the unassailable dominance she was destined to assume in his oeuvre. However, it becomes apparent from a close reading of *The Golden Ass* that Graves actually alters the work in his translation in order to make 'her' 'central to the story'.

Only after the mid-1940s did the belief in the Goddess as the source of poetic inspiration become more explicitly developed in Graves's thought and seep into every area of his creative and critical activity. Nevertheless, from the readings of earlier texts a goddess figure can be evidenced in Graves's writings prior to *The White Goddess*, and, in particular, Apuleius's version of the Goddess can be seen as the progenitor of several such texts.

As with the novels examined in the two previous chapters, Graves began work on *The Golden Ass* while he was rewriting drafts of *The White Goddess*. Significantly, Graves

began translating *The Golden Ass* in the autumn of 1946, before he had formally completed *The White Goddess* (Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. 129). In view of these parallels, this chapter will examine the way in which these two texts influence each other in order to show that his alterations of the original work were made in keeping with his intention to make the Goddess of *The Golden Ass* conform to his poetic theory of the White Goddess.

The translation of *The Golden Ass* holds an important place in the development of what can confidently be termed 'Gravesian poetics', because it is evidence of Graves's determination to shape his own account according to his need to develop a personal understanding of poetic inspiration and its relationship to the Goddess. It is this imperative, indeed, which made him distort the facts in his translation of the Latin text. Graves of course claimed routinely that his conception of the Goddess was not based solely on his imagination but was derived from scholarship of the ancient traditions of the Mediterranean and Northern Europe (*White Goddess*, p. 6). While Graves was clearly influenced by ancient myths, he is even more explicit about the *classical* source of his vision of the Goddess when he writes in the title chapter of *The White Goddess* that 'the most comprehensive and inspired account of the Goddess in all ancient literature is contained in Apuleius's *Golden Ass*' (p. 65). For Graves, it seems, Apuleius's Goddess is in a key sense the model by which to judge all other manifestations of the Goddess.

### **Aims of this Chapter**

In view of this larger context, the present chapter will examine the way in which *The Golden Ass* and *The White Goddess* influenced each other, with a particular focus on the choices Graves made in translating the text of *The Golden Ass*. The argument of this chapter is that *The Golden Ass* is not so much a *translation* of Apuleius's work as an *interpretation* of it, reflected in its deviation from the principles of fidelity in translation. The chapter will also demonstrate how Graves's translation is shaped to prove the poetic



theory of *The White Goddess* as well as working the other way in becoming an authoritative reference source for the Goddess theory in the text of *The White Goddess*.

It will also be argued that the contribution of this Latin text to the general development of Graves as a writer, and its wider impact on his oeuvre, cannot be overestimated. Long familiar with *The Golden Ass* and the myth of Isis from Plutarch's study of Isis and Osiris, before finally translating the entire text, Graves mentioned the story four times in his works: first in the poem 'Alice', from the collection of poems entitled *Welchman's Hose* (1925); then in the short story 'The Shout' (written in 1926 and published in 1929 (Graves, *Stories*, p. 327); again in several of the 'As it Were poems' from *To Whom Else?* (1931); and finally, most definitely and authoritatively, in *The White Goddess* itself. It is clear, then, that Graves's absorption in Apuleius's work can be traced back to his early writings.

To clarify and explain Graves's approach, his translation of *The Golden Ass* will be discussed and compared in this chapter to two others: the edition revised by Michael Grant (1990), and that translated by E. J. Kenny (1998, reprinted in 2004). There will also be a general discussion of earlier works by Graves which refer to *The Golden Ass*, because although his unorthodox translation of the text may have offended more contemporary Latin scholars, it remains of vital importance in tracing the development of Graves's own poetic ideology.

### **Premonitions of the Goddess: Prior to *The White Goddess***

As acknowledged above, the origins of the White Goddess as muse have been traced through Graves's earlier works, including *The Golden Ass*, by scholars such as Michael Kirkham (1969), Patrick Keane (1980), Robert H. Canary (1980) and Frank Kersnowski (2002). However, little attention has been paid to the importance of Graves's use of Apuleius's story in relation to the Goddess in the period preceding the appearance of *The White Goddess*. Critics have also identified the influence of *The Golden Ass* on Graves's

thinking and development as a poet, with reference to various individual poems, but have tended to neglect its influence on the evolution of the wider muse-poet relationship. According to Kirkham, the title poem of Graves's collection, *The Marmosite's Miscellany* (1925), argues that the notion of the Goddess is inspired by Apuleius's description of Isis (*Poetry*, p. 86) for she is represented by the moon and appears as a benign influence. The moon in this context is 'the Mistress of escape and pity' (l. 233 (p. 295)), and thus is suggestive of a compassionate Goddess who pities and aids the unfortunate or those who are both deserving and in need. This is Apuleius's – and therefore Graves's – experience of the Goddess (in contrast to his later, more predatory imaginings of her). It is not only of interest that the presence of the Goddess is detected by readers, but also that the poet is gripped by a more general sense of anticipation about imminent change. The first poem of the volume, 'To M. In India', anticipates the wondrous and the unexpected. The speaker of the poem, 'Bruised, battered, crushed often in mind and spirit' (l. 18 (p. 287)), is waiting 'chin to knee, hands moodily clasped' (7) for something miraculous to happen. He says to 'M', who shares his sense of anticipation, '[...] in waiting / Watch the clear morning waters for a sign, / And when you see it, laugh, and I'll see mine' (45-47). The 'sign' is unspecified but both the speaker and 'M' will understand it when they see it.

In the second poem of the volume, 'The Marmosite's Miscellany', the speaker comes across a talking Marmosite monkey in a cage during a visit to a World Exhibition. Though 'astounded to hear the creature's voice' (22), the speaker acknowledges 'there at Larissa, that Thessalian town, / Things happen most oddly by chance or by choice: / The least confusion shown would prove me a clown' (23-25). The location of Thessaly is significant as it is where Lucius, the protagonist of *The Golden Ass* travels to 'on particular business' (trans. by Kenney, *Golden Ass*, p. 7)<sup>30</sup> at the opening of the story. Lucius's *business* it transpires is his unusual interest in witchcraft, for which Thessaly was well-

<sup>30</sup> Business once took me to Thessaly' (p. 3) begins Graves's translation of *The Golden Ass*.

known. Therefore, Thessaly, the territory of Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, is the hinterland of the narrative, providing the magic mental and psychological environment and raising expectations in the reader that anything extraordinary can happen – a situation that the speaker accepts 'calmly'. The Marmosite goes on to offer the speaker a satirical view of the history of the world. Then, in stanza 34, towards the end of Part I, the Marmosite faithfully describes the Goddess:

"The Moon is the Mistress of escape and pity,  
Her regions are portalled by an ivory gate.  
There are fruit-plats and fountains in her silver city,  
With honeysuckle hedges where true lovers mate,  
With undisputed thrones where beggars hold state,  
With smooth hills and fields where in freedom may run  
All men maimed and manacled by the cruel sun"  
(232-38).

Here a utopian paradise is described where the Goddess reigns. There is a reversal of status whereby the poor and handicapped preside. Here there is also freedom of thought and expression: true lovers do not have to hide. The Goddess is not the hostile deity Graves was later to elaborate but one who allows her subjects to think and act freely: 'Her madness is musical, kindly her mood' (239) for 'She is the happy Venus of the hushed wood' (241). She is gentle and kindly, ruling over a world that is the very antithesis of what the Marmosite had previously described (i.e. the depressed world of post-war civilization). The Goddess's paradise is an ideal to be yearned for: an escape from the decay of contemporary civilization.

While 'The Marmosite's Miscellany' depicts the gentler aspect of the Goddess, 'On Portents' suggests a deity who is miraculous and mysterious. Kirkham (*Poetry*, p. 142) and Keane (*Wild Civility*, p. 69) suggest that in 'On Portents', from *To Whom Else?* (1931), Apuleius's Isis actually makes an appearance, as there is an occurrence of supernatural events in keeping with the magical nature of *The Golden Ass* (Canary, *Robert Graves*, p. 142). There is again prophetic significance of something miraculous about to happen in 'On Portents', causing a reversal of nature: graves open, the dead walk (II, 2-3 (p. 63)) and



the 'unborn are shed' (4). So it can be read that the reversal will lead to the Father being replaced by the Mother, the process of which has begun, for 'strange things happen where she is' (1). 'Such portents' also occur with Lucius's miraculous transformation from human to ass and then the reversal of his state, which 'are not to be wondered at' (5) as they are merely instances of the Goddess's power and mercy. These supernatural occurrences are possible, being 'tourbillions in Time made / By the strong pulling of her bladed mind' (6-7). The motif of violence, intimated in the image of the whirlwind or whirling storm, is recurrent in Graves's work and heralds change. A later example is in *Seven Days in New Crete* where the protagonist Edward Venn-Thomas is summoned in such a manner to the future. His presence could be years but in 'actual' time is likely to be 'a dream lasting no longer than from one breath to the next' (*Seven Days*, p. 11). Then, through Venn-Thomas, the Goddess instigates the destruction of the entire foundations of New Crete and 'a yellow wind sprang up [...] with increased violence in a widening spiral' (*Seven Days*, p. 279): change is caused through catastrophic ferocity. The significance of the wind for Graves is emphasized in *The White Goddess* as the 'winds were considered as under the sole direction of the Great Goddess [winds...which] stand for the White Goddess's complementary moods of creation and destruction' (*White Goddess*, p. 173). The wind in connection to the Goddess is about transformation and the manifestation of her power. The influence of *The Golden Ass* is not openly obvious, but these poems all play their part in Graves's later shaping of *The White Goddess*.

*The Golden Ass* and its theme of transformation is an important link between the translation and earlier citations of the text in Graves's works. That the magical or unreal elements are not conveyed as so very extraordinary, but as a natural aspect of daily existence, can also be seen in the poem, 'Alice' from the 1925 collection, *Welchman's Hose*. There is an incidence of magic and superstition in 'Alice' that blurs the boundaries of truth and fiction and inner and outer worlds: Graves is not writing about transformation

from the outside but from within. 'Alice' is also the first poem in which *The Golden Ass* is first actually mentioned. Graves uses the character Alice from the stories by Lewis Carroll and creates a poetic study of two forms of reality: that which is material and that which is reflected in the mirror. Kersnowski writes in *The Early Poetry of Robert Graves* that, in this poem, Graves uses 'childhood experiences as analogies for the war' in order to relate the 'two forms of reality that differ so greatly' (p. 96). Thus the child Alice is able to escape into the unreal world of the mirror and away from a life which is only too real and painful, filled with war and strife. Still dissatisfied, the clever Alice wonders why she cannot go further: 'why must I assume / That what I'd see would need to correspond / With what I now see?' (l. 10-12 (p. 249)). She is prompted to realize that both worlds are true, each in their particular way. Thus, in the reality reflected in the mirror, she is able to play 'Where Apuleius pastured his Gold Ass' (36), in the knowledge that outside is that other reality of the 'Dull round of mid-Victorian routine' (30). As Quinn writes, Alice 'is at home in both places and recognizes the relativity of truth in both places' (*Great War*, p. 114).

Graves's choice of Apuleius is apt here, for in the same year that he wrote 'Alice' he published a collection of essays in *Poetic Unreason and other Studies* (his B.Litt. degree). In one essay, entitled 'The Illogical Element in Poetry', he writes (as quoted in Chapter Two) that in 'Poetry one is continually straying into the bounds of a Thessaly like the land Apuleius celebrated, where magic is supreme and where therefore things happen which realistically-minded strangers find difficult to understand' (*Speculations*, p. 54). As in 'The Marmosite's Miscellany', anything is possible and believable in the magic world of an imagined ancient Thessaly. The significance of the allusion to *The Golden Ass* in 'Alice' serves to illustrate Graves's familiarity with the work early on in his career. In the world on the other side of the mirror it is possible for people to be transformed into beasts and for the Goddess to descend on those worthy of her benevolence. This poem suggests

Graves's early interest in the Goddess as a powerful deity who can challenge the idea of reality.

The fleeting reference to *The Golden Ass* in 'Alice' also underlines Graves's interest in magic and superstition, and in particular their figuring of the blurred boundaries between truth and fiction. Graves's use of Apuleius's novel in the short story 'The Shout' is still more overt. In one sense 'The Shout' is similar to 'Alice' insofar as the world reflected by the mirror is replaced in the short story by a mysterious place of sand-hills, both within and outside the realm of dreams: 'They are of themselves [...]. There is no life and no death in the sand hills. Anything might happen in the sand hills' (*Stories*, p. 9). Both mirror and sand hills serve as separate, exterior entities – a kind of Thessaly – while at the same time existing autonomously in the realm of material reality as reflections of an interior state where anything is possible. 'Alice' is permeated with magic. However 'The Shout' and *The Golden Ass* go further, in that their themes are entwined with superstition. There are other curious similarities between *The Golden Ass* and 'The Shout'. In both cases the reader is led to question the authenticity of the texts: whether they are truth or fiction, and whether the protagonists, as will be seen, are actually reflections of the authors themselves or are author surrogates.

The action of 'The Shout' revolves around three characters: a married couple, Richard and Rachel, and the mysterious Charles, who suddenly enters their lives – a man surrounded by a peculiar negative energy. Richard, with his 'great gift of fear' (*Stories*, p. 14), is a passive observer as Charles hypnotically induces Rachel to commit adultery with him. Richard meddles with the unknown, with magic – and, too curious for his own good, insists on hearing 'the shout'. The unwise willfulness and covetousness of Richard can be likened to the protagonist of *The Golden Ass*, Lucius, who begs his lover, the slave Fotis, to steal her mistress's magic ointment so that he can be transformed into a bird, only to be unfortunately metamorphosed into an ass instead. The impact of the shout is frightening,



and yet Richard miraculously survives the experience, as does Lucius, but with the result that both heroes suffer great pain and degradation, for they lose control over life and soul. The conscious and the unconscious realms of dreams merge into a terrifying world where anything seems possible. Richard's soul is trapped in a stone, just as Lucius's body and soul are trapped, but in the body of an ass.

Both 'The Shout' and *The Golden Ass* have the act of transformation as a connecting theme. The narrator of 'The Shout' recounts the story, related above, in turn told to him on the cricket field of Lampton Asylum, where the narrator has gone in order to keep score for the Lampton team. Sharing the scoring is the madman, Crossley, a man of 'unusual force' (p. 7) who is kept in the asylum because he suffers from delusions. Crossley insists on telling the narrator an entertaining and unusual story. Lucius, likewise, promises to entertain the reader in a similar way. Paralleling Lucius and the remarks with which he opens *The Golden Ass*, Crossley ends his tale toward the close of 'The Shout' and is congratulated by the narrator for engaging his interest with the compliment: 'a Milesian tale of the best. Lucius Apuleius' (p. 20). Both narrators seem frequently to reduce their stories to the level of the salacious and the rather sinister low-brow styles of the Milesian story-tellers, trivializing them as 'amusing gossip' (trans. by Kenney, *Golden Ass*, p. 7). Yet both stories go beyond mere entertainment, for each recounts the sufferings and final deliverance of the hero (Kenney, 'Introduction', p.xii) who in each case is transformed from his current misery by a mysterious force.

Before beginning his story, Crossley states that his story is true, 'every word of it':

Or, when I say that my story is "true", I mean at least that I am telling it in a new way. It is always the same story, but I sometimes vary the climax and even recast the characters. Variation keeps it fresh and therefore true (*Stories*, p. 8).

Just as a myth is a new myth with each successive retelling, so Graves was, in a sense, writing modern myths or updating ancient ones in these texts to make a point about the Goddess who resided in his unconscious. Crossley's statement, however, pointedly

contrasts with the preface at the beginning of the story, which is taken, significantly, once again from an epigraph from Apuleius, translated by William Aldington: 'Leave off now, I pray you, and speak no more for I / cannot abear to hear such incredible lies' (*Stories*, p. 327). This teasing of the 'facts' leads the narrator/reader to question the authenticity of the story and whether, in fact, Crossley is the same figure as the demonic Charles, supposedly possessed of magical powers. 'The Shout' seems at once fiction – by the very essence of the tale that emerges – and yet, simultaneously, it opens itself to the possibility of autobiography. Indeed, Graves has manipulated the reader to arrive at just such a conclusion. In the 'Dedicatory Epilogue' to *Riding*, which appears in the first edition to *Goodbye to All That* (1929), Graves writes that "'The Shout' [...] though written two years ago, belongs here; blind and slow like all prophecies' (*Goodbye*, p. 323). It is as though fact were preceded by fiction, art prefiguring life. In one sense Graves is the author of his own autobiography in whichever genre he chooses to write. The Gravesian persona of the adoring acolyte that comes through his poetry is one which he attempted to play in life.

In some ways a fulfilment of this same autobiographical impulse, the poems are the result.

Graves writes much later in his Foreword to *Collected Poems 1965*: 'My main theme was always the practical impossibility, transcended only by a belief in a miracle, of absolute love continuing between man and woman' (p. ii). While belief in the miracle sustained the poet in his pursuit of perfection in his verse, that is, as a theme in his verse through his relations with the White Goddess, his poetry is a cultivation of doomed impossibility. Graves's own myth or 'dominant theme' is derived from a belief in the Goddess who is personified in a muse-possessed woman. Through his reading of *The Golden Ass*, Graves knew well the other, benevolent face of the Goddess. Without a mask, but with a 'boy's presumption' and naïve hope, the poet willingly offers himself to be hurt over and again ('The Face in the Mirror' (*5 Pens in Hand* (1958))). Only a handful of joyful love poems emerges from the late 1950s, in contrast to the pained verse in which the poet-

lover pines for acceptance. The abundance of verse about the rejected lover was the result of being 'plagued' by the Goddess, as he wrote in a letter to James Reeves at the time (*Between Moon and Moon* (14 December 1950), p. 83). He is pained because of his chosen role to be the rejected lover. His experiences with women tend to be the basis of his life philosophy until they become overwhelmingly counterproductive. 'The Shout' contains the beginnings of Gravesian autobiography, only apparent in hindsight, which can then be traced through *The Golden Ass*, leading on to the path to *The White Goddess*.

It is deliberately left unclear whether it was, in fact, Lucius Apuleius, the autobiographical author, rather than an entirely fictionalized Lucius, who was transformed into the ass of the ancient narrative. Apuleius plays with both possibilities. Lucius, the ass, would have been transformed back to his natural state, we learn, simply by eating roses, but instead he is rescued by Isis and becomes her acolyte and priest. As mentioned earlier, the questions about the 'authenticity' of the texts are never quite resolved. In his Introduction to *The Golden Ass*, Graves states that Apuleius was a pious priest (p. x), later adding that 'Lucius's conversion [by the Goddess] at the close of the story is a real and moving one' (p. xi). The implication here, that author and protagonist are, in fact, the same person, makes the claim that *The Golden Ass* is a religious novel more convincing, yet it is still a deviation from the original. Graves sees Lucius, the hero of the narrative, as the author Apuleius himself, without any evidence to substantiate his claims. For Graves, Lucius's ordeals, however fantastical and extreme in the misery and humiliation they caused, bound the two authors to each other. For Lucius's physical and transcendental transformation brought about by the Goddess is symbolically mirrored by Graves's 'cathartic' state during the writing of both *The White Goddess* and the translation of *The Golden Ass*, a process that had begun much earlier. On still firmer ground, Graves openly identified himself with the protagonist of 'The Shout' by admitting in *Occupation: Writer* that, 'Richard in the story is a surrogate for myself: I was still living on the neurasthenic



verge of a nightmare' (p. x). While Richard is evidently Graves's creation, there are indisputably autobiographical elements in his characterization. Graves's post-war mental state and sense of victimization are very much apparent in Richard's suffering in the text.

Though Richard, unlike Lucius, is not saved by the Goddess, his life is filled with intimations of her. The reader is aware of the power of the Goddess in the day-to-day activities of the couple: Richard prepares the breakfast, feeling weak and unwell due to the aftershock of the shout, and Rachel does not mask her scorn towards her husband:

He asked, could he come back to bed and would she get breakfast? That was a thing she had not done all the years they were married.  
'I am as ill as you,' said she. It was understood between them always that when Rachel was ill, Richard must be well (*Stories*, p. 16).

Rachel only complies with Richard's request reluctantly and 'ungraciously' (p. 16). Clearly the more sensitive and vulnerable of the two is Richard. In casting off patriarchy, the Richard and Rachel household becomes susceptible to other influences. The balance of power between the couple is not necessarily straightforward: while Rachel seems to be the more dominant of the couple, Richard covertly rejects the role of weaker or passive lover and this causes disruption. (It also allows him to succeed in defeating Charles). This instability between them is caused by the feminine principle being so powerful and overweening that Charles deliberately selects this couple upon whom to act, by entering their dreams. With his intrusion into their lives, moral standards as well as feminist ideals are overruled or forgotten. Charles exploits the feminine principle and, reinstating patriarchal order in the household, begins to deliver commands without tolerating dissent. Thus, after an absence of two days, he returns to Richard and Rachel's home

Without a word of greeting [...he] sat down by the fire and asked:  
'When is supper ready?' [...]  
She answered: 'Eight o'clock', in her low voice, and stooping down, drew off Charles's muddy boots and found him a pair of Richard's slippers.

Charles said: 'Good. It is now seven o'clock. In another hour, supper [...]. At ten o'clock, Rachel, you and I sleep together.'  
[...] Rachel answered quietly: 'Why, of course, my dear' (p. 18).

Now the roles are reversed: Richard (unhappily) and Rachel (willingly) submissively accepts Charles's commands at the expense of their dignity and honour. Charles acts as the patriarch who undermines the power of the Goddess. Richard only manages to change the outcome of the story by accident, when he destroys Charles's soul (trapped within a stone) rather than his own. Virtually thrown out of his home by Charles, who has seduced Rachel, he goes to the place where his misfortunes began – to the stones in which the souls of the inhabitants of Lampton are locked. In utter despair, Richard decides first to kill Charles by smashing the stone in which his soul is locked, but then changes his mind and chooses to commit suicide because Rachel prefers her new lover to him. Through some mysterious source, he 'accidentally' destroys Charles's soul thinking it is his own and falls into a deep sleep only –like Lucius – to awake as the sun is setting. It emerges that catastrophic changes have taken place in the meantime, while Richard has been restored to his former self. It can be argued that Richard's victory is the Goddess's victory and an affirmation of Her power as the patriarchal force that 'possesses' Charles has been undermined and destroyed.

Richard's 'restoration' mirrors Lucius's transformation: the ass is to be publicly forced to engage in sexual intercourse with a condemned murderess. However, miserable and unable to bear this final degradation, the ass runs away and falls asleep on a secluded beach only to wake up at the 'secret hour that the Moon Goddess [...] is possessed of her greatest power' (*Golden Ass*, p. 261). And so, *in extremis*, he prays to her. There are obvious differences between the two texts, for 'The Shout' only hints at the emergence of the Goddess. But there are also definite similarities. Both Lucius and Richard travel the same path to spiritual transformation: through experiencing an abject humiliation from which they are delivered by the Goddess, they are restored to their former selves, and finally undergo a spiritual transformation.

Another early text that anticipates the themes of transformation, restoration and inspiration through the intervention of the Goddess is the collection of poems entitled *To Whom Else?* (1931). These poems are singled out for discussion because they concentrate on the Goddess of *The Golden Ass* and because the entire collection develops the foundation for the later construction of the Goddess myth. Between the writing of 'The Shout' and *To Whom Else?* significant changes occurred in Graves's life that had a considerable impact on his poetic outlook and production – for by the time of the completion of these poems he was living with Riding in Majorca. *To Whom Else?* is a short collection of poems dedicated to her, published by Graves's and Riding's own Seizin Press in Majorca. The poems are a celebration of his adoration, and it may be posited, his *deification*, of Riding. Indeed, Graves refused to allow the title poem to be reprinted in subsequent collections of his work because he considered his overt veneration of her through his verse (Matthews, *Under the Influence*, p. 147) to be no longer appropriate. The 'As It Were Poems' in this collection, placed towards the close of the book between the lyrical poems, 'To Whom Else?' and 'On Portents' (which end the volume), are a particularly idiosyncratic set of prose poems – a genre Graves very rarely used. Graves seems to be placing himself and the object of his adoration, Riding, in a series of situations, into a 'Gravesian' myth. The poems' depth and detail, in which he mythologizes his own place as the Sacred King to the Goddess, defy the standard poetic form. Part I of the 'As It Were Poems' consists of seven stanzas in which the speaker compares himself to seven characters from legend, asking and answering the repeated riddling question: 'where was I?' From the legend of Reynard the Fox, for example, the speaker chooses to be the foolish victim, Bruin the Bear. Then in the legend of Troy, the speaker becomes the person of Ajax who is cheated by Odysseus, and wrongly branded a madman. Again, in the legend of Robin Hood he is the fool, Friar Tuck. In all seven stanzas, the speaker laments that he



is not the 'hero' but the Fool-victim who is either tricked or suffers misfortune. In the sixth stanza, the speaker is the Golden Ass himself:

In the legend of that Lucius whom a witch of Thessaly turned into a dumb ass and who after many cruel adventures was restored to human shape by the intervention of the goddess Isis, where was I?  
I was that impassioned ass in the gold trappings (ll. 31-35 (p. 61)).

The speaker prefers to refer to himself as the victim, the suffering ass, rather than he who was restored by Isis to his original state. In the final stanza the ass is finally transformed into Osiris of the Isis myth: the speaker is Osiris, Isis's brother and lover, who is 'yearly drowned' (36-37).

The speaker goes further in the third and final section of the 'As It Were Poems'. For like the desperate and unhappy Lucius in *The Golden Ass*, he invokes the Goddess. Graves was clearly influenced by Plutarch's study of Isis and Osiris, (Plutarch contends that Isis 'is concerned with matter which becomes death, beginning and end' (Pomeroy, *Goddesses*, p. 218)). The powerful female divinity's true name is revealed as Isis: she tells the poet: "'Call me [...] by my open name, so you do not call / upon any of those false spirits of the legends, those names of / travesty'" (62-64). Knowledge of her name is given only to the privileged few. Since the speaker has been chosen, she tells him: "'So let my open name / be my closed name, and my closed name, my open name'" (66-67). The speaker, who acknowledges and accepts her, replies, "'And so the names of the travesty vanish / into the single name against the meddling of men with the unchangeable / import of the name: Isis, the secrecy of the import'" (68-70). She has a special place, which the muse-poet alone recognizes. The speaker goes on to describe her attributes:

In Egypt she was the holy name of the year of holy months: she was known to the priests as the invisible removed one, and to her people as the manifoldly incomprehensible. Every new moon crowned her with its peculiar head-dress – a rose, a star, an ear of barley, the horns of a goat: and she became the Moon itself, the single head of variety, Hecate by name. And Lilith, the owl of wisdom, because her lodges were held in stealthy darkness (71-78).

What is curious here is Graves's choice of goddesses who are likened to Isis: Hecate and Lilith. Both are associated with the night. Hecate, though popular in ancient Greece, was a goddess who could create nocturnal mischief and necromancy (Lurker, *Dictionary*, p. 146). Paired (and later merged) with Hecate is the blood-sucking nocturnal demon, Lilith, to whom the owl is sacred (Lurker, *Dictionary*, pp. 207-8). (Coincidentally, it is an owl into which Lucius tries to change, only to be metamorphosed into an ass instead.) The choice of these goddesses is symbolic of Isis's power, for she was 'the Great Magician' endowed with both good and sinister powers. Graves was later to introduce the hostile and cruel side of the Goddess, beside the qualities of the loving mother for which she was traditionally known, and which he later vested in his concept of the Black Goddess of Wisdom.

Yet there are goddesses who conflict with what Isis represents and who she is. According to the speaker of the 'As It Were Poems', they are false goddesses 'sprung' from her. The speaker continues his invocation by urging: 'Now let all the false goddesses sprung from Isis – Pallas, Diana, Juno, Ceres and the rest – return to Isis' (81-82). Only the true devotee is able to recognize her and not be deceived by those masquerading as her. Among these goddesses considered false, however, there is one who stands out: that is, Diana, also known by the Greeks as Artemis. The very goddess that Graves calls false was known in one of her manifestations as the personification of the moon and was worshipped as a Moon-goddess (Lurker, *Dictionary*, p. 95). It comes as a major surprise therefore that Graves, as Brittan-Ortiz has established ('Priests and Prejudice', pp. 138-42), purposely misrepresented Apuleius and the Isis cult in his translation of *The Golden Ass* by substituting 'Artemis' for 'Minerva'. In Kenney's translation, in answer to Lucius's pitiful invocation to Isis, the 'Queen of Heaven', the Goddess lists the names of the goddesses by which she is known all over the world: Minerva, Venus, Diana, Proserpine, Ceres, Juno, Bellona, Hecate and Rhamnusia. Isis is mentioned among the many listed by 'the native Athenians [...] Cecropian Minerva' (p. 197). Grant translates the same sentence as 'the

Athenians, sprung from their own soil, call me the Minerva of Cecrops' citadel' (p. 183). Then Graves quotes from William Aldington's 1566 translation in *The White Goddess*: 'the Athenians, which are sprung from their own soil; Cecropian Minerva' (p. 68). However, bizarrely, Graves's version differs significantly from the above translations: 'the Athenians, sprung from their own soil, call me Cecropian Artemis' (p. 264-65). The blatant replacement of one goddess with another was, according to Brittan-Ortiz, because 'Minerva's attributes [...] are analogous to those of the Greek Athena: she presided over the intellectual, and, in particular, academic, activity' (p. 142), unlike Artemis, who was worshipped as a fertility goddess and symbolized by the moon. Graves, once again fitting the text to suit his theory about true poetry, would have identified Minerva with the Apollonian and the classical, and the Moon-goddess, Artemis, with instinctive poetic truth. In his cavalier attitude toward fidelity in translating the classics, Graves in fact manipulated *The Golden Ass* to demonstrate a truth about the Goddess which confirmed his own theory.

### **Isis as the Prototype of the White Goddess**

Musgrove has contended that part three of the 'As Were It Poems' 'is significantly closer to the thought of *The White Goddess*' than Graves's pre-*White Goddess* works ('Ancestry', p. 31). He continues: 'the universal identification of all female divinities with the name of the absolute Isis' (p. 31) is shown through these poems. It is apparent that Graves's depiction of the White Goddess is specifically influenced by the Goddess Isis in *The Golden Ass*, first from Aldington's translation and also from his own on which he was working alongside his draft of *The White Goddess*. This is clearly demonstrated in his translation of Apuleius's novel:

Just above her brow shone a round disc, like a mirror, or like the bright face of the moon, which told me who she was. Vipers rising from the left-hand and right hand partings of her hair supported this disk, with ears of corn bristling beside them (p. 263).



The Goddess then tells Lucius:

'Though I am worshipped in many aspects, known by countless names, and propitiated with all manner of rites, yet the whole round earth venerates me [...] the Egyptians who excel in ancient learning and worship me with ceremonies proper to my godhead, call me by my proper name, namely, Queen Isis' (p. 263-64).

Sarah Pomeroy has written that Isis 'readily encompassed inconsistencies and mutually contradictory qualities' (*Goddesses*, p. 218). It is important to note that not only was she the assimilation of all female deities, but she was also endowed with the powers of the male gods, such as the Indo-European sky god who held dominion over the winds, thunder and lightning (p. 218). The descriptions given of the Goddess by Apuleius and Graves in both extracts are of a supreme deity who is a synthesis of other goddesses with many manifestations (p. 218), but whose true name is Isis: this may explain why Graves chose Minerva over Artemis.

Isis, the Great Goddess of life, death and rebirth, is also famously both the wife and sister of Osiris, the God-King of vegetation and eternal life (Graham, *Goddesses*, p. 275) who was murdered by his brother Seth. Osiris's relationship with the Goddess is essentially one of dependence, for it is Isis, the Magna Mater, who grants him rebirth with life after death. As Graves identifies Riding with Isis in the 'As It Were Poems', so again, he establishes his own role as the doomed Osiris in relation to her:

So likewise Osiris was myself greatly meddling, Osiris the triple-named. He was Apollo in bright strength who dries up the floods. He was Dionysus, the growth of the vine. And he was Pluto, the dead man of the pit, the flooded Egypt to which life ever returns. Every year he rose again from the dead, but every year returned to the dead again. For she was only Isis, a closed name (87-93).

Here, the Goddess is one, while the God is 'triple-named' as the son and brother, the lover and then the eternal victim who is annually slain. Graves was later to condemn all that was Apollonian. However, in these early poems, the polarization of Apollo and Dionysus defines Graves's inner conflict in terms of his role as a true poet, rather than a classical one, with regard to the White Goddess myth, which was in this period slowly taking shape.

As Isis rescues Lucius, so she also saves her husband and brother, Osiris. The Isis of Apuleius and Graves is essentially the same goddess merged to become the White Goddess. The role of the muse-poet, and Graves's self defined role within the White Goddess myth, would become very clear: that 'there is no choice' (*White Goddess*, p. 17) as the only theme of poetry was 'the life, death and resurrection of [...] the Goddess's son and lover' (*White Goddess*, p. 413).

The 'As It Were Poems' are crucial in conveying an understanding of Graves's gropings toward an idea of the Goddess in the early 1930s, fifteen years before he wrote *The White Goddess*, showing how he viewed himself poetically within his relationship with Riding. The poems display a breaking down of reality, for there is in them, as Hoffman writes, 'the absence of anything outside the self by which the significance of the self's adventures may be measured' (*Barbarous Knowledge*, p. 184). If Graves casts himself in roles in which he suffers indignity and degradation then, like the ass, he is finally rescued by Isis only to die annually and be reborn as Osiris. In such an enactment, if Graves is Osiris, then Riding has to be the Isis who delivers him annually from such misery. The comparison of himself with Osiris meant that Graves perceived himself as both victim and king in relation to the Goddess Isis. There is a mythical and religious dimension at the end of Part I and Part III of the 'As It Were Poems', and a determination to grasp the role in that drama, which anticipate the later development of the myth.

### **The First and Final Typescripts of *The White Goddess***

The interwoven relationship between *The Golden Ass* and *The White Goddess* stems from Graves's familiarity with the former. His use of the text in earlier writings anticipates its presence in *The White Goddess*. Yet his emphasis on Isis as the prototype of the Goddess in *The White Goddess*, was certainly developed *after* he had started translating *The Golden*

*Ass* text, and therefore after he had completed the first typescript of *The White Goddess*.<sup>31</sup> Bertholf shows that 'The White Goddess' chapter was originally chapter 11 in the first (and second) typescripts of *The White Goddess*, thus emphasizing the absence of Isis from *The White Goddess* as a point of reference by which to judge Graves's Goddess:

No sections from that chapter moved over to chapter 4, which in the published book is also called "The White Goddess". Sections from the typescript of chapter 4 move over to chapter 22, "The Triple Muse", to chapter 24, "The Single Poetic Theme", and to chapter 25, "War in Heaven". So the present chapter 4 of the book was written after the typescript, and the place of the titular chapter has been moved from the 11 to 4, indicating a change in emphasis ('First Typescript', p.119).

The first/second typescript is dissimilar from the final version of *The White Goddess* and the difference in emphasis brought about by moving the chapters around is what is important in these changes. The Goddess figure is assumed to be the basis of Graves's poetic theory. Bertholf argues that in the first and second typescripts, Graves was concerned with the solving of riddles and proving that the riddles contained in the language of 'The Battle of the Trees' revealed the secret language of poetry ('First Typescript', p. 120). In later versions, however – but certainly by the fifth and final typescript/first edition – Graves chose to emphasize the Goddess as a source of poetic inspiration. She is not simply a vague concept, but rather an actual, literal deity. Graves, in the final version of *The White Goddess*, first identifies the various goddess figures in myth and ancient literature who were worshipped in prehistory and also concludes that Apuleius's depiction of the Goddess in *The Golden Ass* is the most definitive account of her. According to Graves, Lucius's prayer, followed by the Goddess's appearance, is the same as that invoked in other hero and Goddess relationships 'as Aesculapius originally stood to Athene, Thoth to Isis, Esmun to Ishtar, Diancecht to Brigit, Odin to Freya, and Bran to Danu' (*White Goddess*, p. 69). Graves here reinforces the view that the Goddess may come from all corners of the world with different shapes, forms and names but they are all actually the same Goddess: the White Goddess. By the time of the final draft, Graves

<sup>31</sup> As said previously, Graves completed five typescripts.



viewed and used *The Golden Ass* as both an authoritative text and as an historical source, and he refers to the text and Apuleius, its author, several times, sometimes including the references as footnotes. *The White Goddess* can therefore be seen as a key to understanding how he came to approach his version of the story in his translation of *The Golden Ass*. Moreover, Graves's concept of the Goddess and of the poet's role as these were finally consolidated in *The White Goddess* is also evident in his version of *The Golden Ass*.

#### **Dating *The Golden Ass* and the Final Typescript of *The White Goddess***

In preparing both texts for publication, Graves continued to edit and add to *The White Goddess*. He wrote to his mother in October 1946 to tell her that he was 'busily engaged on a translation for Penguin classics of Apuleius's novel *The Golden Ass*' (Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. 129), but he was also in the process of preparing the text of *The White Goddess* for publication. By April 1947, he had completed the galley proofs of *The White Goddess*, having added 15000 words to it (Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. 134). It seems probable that Graves had also completed his work on the translation by this date, as two months later, in June of that year, Karl Gay typed out *The Golden Ass* (Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. 136). In a long letter to James Reeves on 13 May 1949, Graves mentions that *The White Goddess* was due to be published that month and goes on to discuss various issues and writing projects without mention of *The Golden Ass* (*Between Moon and Moon*, pp. 58-59), hence indicating that the translation had been completed roughly eighteen months earlier. This is substantiated in a letter from Amy Graves to John Graves, Graves's youngest brother, on 14 October 1947, where she notes that Penguin publishers were 'enthusiastic' about Graves's translation (Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. 147) and which implies that they had read Gay's typescript. The translation was later published in England in April 1950 (Higginson and Williams, *Bibliography*, p. 107).

It was only when Graves came to translate *The Golden Ass*, having completed four drafts of *The White Goddess*, that he perceived dramatic links between his own developing theory of the Goddess and the Goddess Isis of Apuleius's text. From those links, Graves saw fit to make alterations to the fifth and final draft of *The White Goddess*. As early as May 1947, when he was translating *The Golden Ass*, Graves was also urgently preoccupied with last-minute amendments to *The White Goddess* text, now in galley proofs, which were prompted by his translation. In a letter to Eliot dated 8 May 1947, almost exactly a year before the publication of *The White Goddess* by Faber and Faber on 21 May 1948 (Higginson and Williams, *Bibliography*, p. 98), Graves wrote:

My dear Eliot,

I am just finishing a translation for Penguin Classics of Apuleius's *Golden Ass*; and finding that Aldington's lovely version [1566] is full of mistakes. There is a particularly mischievous one in his account of the pageant of Isis at Corinth where he shows Mercury with a birchen wand, not an olive one. This has led me into the error in *White Goddess* Galley 96 last two lines, Galley 97 first nine lines as far as the words *Birth Goddess*. The whole passage should be removed except for the words on line 3 Galley 97:

*The birch is the tree of inception.*

If the printers have already made up the pages and don't want to lose the space, I can send them new material to fill up.

I am so sorry (*Between Moon and Moon*, p. 47).

This urgent letter, written at such a critical stage of printing, reveals that Graves was working on his translation of *The Golden Ass* at the same time as finalizing his argument in *The White Goddess*. More importantly, his translation influenced his explication of the White Goddess myth. The alteration Graves wished to be made to his draft of *The White Goddess* indicates that he viewed *The Golden Ass* as an authoritative text that would inform and confirm his thesis about the Goddess and her relationship to poetry. In *The White Goddess*, however, Graves chooses to refer to Aldington's version of Apuleius, and concludes that,

the most comprehensive and inspired account of the Goddess in all ancient literature is contained in Apuleius's *Golden Ass*, where Lucius invokes her from the depth of misery and spiritual degradation and she appears in answer to his plea (p. 65).



Yet immediate concerns arise with this claim as Graves shapes his interpretation of *The Golden Ass* by assimilating this reading into his own hypothesis of the White Goddess as muse, so that it becomes evidence of his poetic theory. He goes on to quote lengthily from Aldington's translation, taking the passage from the beginning of Book 11 of *The Golden Ass*, and incorporating it into Chapter Seventeen of his own translation of the text (Cummings, *Translating Rome*, p. ix), rather than from the original Latin, or from his own translation. In addition he makes four more references to the text of *The Golden Ass*, all with quotations (again from Aldington's translation), although in these he neglects to indicate which translation(s) he is using. The fact that he quotes so extensively from Aldington's translation is surprising considering his own knowledge of Latin and given that he had probably translated most of the text for Penguin by then – although his translation would not have been in galley proofs at this point. Furthermore, the detailed corrections outlined in the letter to Eliot refer to his own translation of *The Golden Ass* on which he was working. He compares this with Aldington's, stating in the letter that he considers the earlier one to be at fault. Later, Graves remarks on the first page of his Introduction to *The Golden Ass* that Aldington's 'vigorous early-Elizabethan translation [...] is still best known' (p. ix) and most familiar to scholars. Perhaps because of this Graves is controversially at pains to point out the faults of Aldington's prose in Latin stating, 'Aldington was a pretty good scholar, but the text he used had not been critically examined and amended, and no reliable Latin dictionary had yet been published so he often made bad mistakes' (p. xi). While Graves does not dismiss the translation completely by undermining its authority, he elevates his own text as the definitive version.

One reason that Graves used Aldington's translation in preference to others may be because this established and respected translation was the most renowned in England and therefore would have lent greater credibility to his White Goddess argument. Graves naturally compared his translation with Aldington's, then discovering 'mistakes' in the



latter, he corrected *The White Goddess* according to his own translation of *The Golden Ass*. Here he skews the translation to his point of view and thus displays a seeming lack of respect towards previous scholarship and an arrogance in tampering with the text. Perhaps another reason for using Aldington's text was that his own translation was due to be released by Penguin Books, and was therefore prohibited from prior publication. Nevertheless, Graves used his translation of *The Golden Ass* as a means of clarifying and substantiating his argument about the Goddess of *The Golden Ass* as the foundation for his own conception of the White Goddess as explicated in *The White Goddess*.

Graves identifies the White Goddess herself as the Goddess Isis – this being one of her numerous names – who frees Lucius from being an ass. Added to this, according to Graves, it is Lucius Apuleius, the author, rather than the fictional protagonist of the original *Golden Ass* text, who is rescued by the Goddess. Graves's 'biographical' interpretation, therefore, profoundly affected his translation of *The Golden Ass*. As will be discussed, while the Graves translation is compelling in terms of reinforcing his theory of the White Goddess, Graves the translator commits the apparent transgression (in terms of standard translation theory, which commonly decrees fidelity to the source text as an important criterion for an effective translation) of adjusting the text to fit his thesis.

The question of fidelity in translation versus approximation is of course greatly debated. Any translated text is judged to be acceptable by virtue of its fluency and the degree to which it reflects the intention of the original (Venuti, *Translator's Invisibility*, p. 1). But no translated work can be judged on standards of accuracy alone. In an essay entitled 'Thomas Mann's 'Felix Krull'', George Steiner outlines his theory that only a translation that is as close to the original as possible deserves to be judged as loyal to the author's intentions. This does not mean that a translation must be technically accurate. A good translation goes beyond this requirement as it must observe the spirit of the original. Great translators, Steiner writes, 'act as a kind of living mirror. They offer to the original

[...] a vital counterpoise [...]. An act of translation is an act of love. Where it fails, through immodesty or blurred perception, it traduces' (*Language and Silence*, p. 299). While it is not possible to be absolutely faithful to the original writing, there should be understanding and respect for its meaning. There is also, argues Lawrence Venuti in *The Translator's Invisibility*, the question of the visibility of the translator: 'The more fluent the translation, the more invisible the translator, and [...] the more visible the writer or meaning of the foreign text' (p. 1). Graves, the translator, it may be argued, is highly visible in his version of Apuleius, though he remains fluent and the translation is highly entertaining. This point, indeed, is highlighted in the Preface to *The Golden Ass*, which announces plainly the writer's translation strategies. Though Graves is at pains to prove himself an earnest and serious translator, he also uses translation as an occasion for the poet to appear rather than writing translation as transmission.

### **Critical Standing of Graves's *The Golden Ass***

Critics such as Douglas Day (1963), Robert H. Canary (1980) and Katherine Snipes (1979) contend that Graves's translation of *The Golden Ass* was the best translation currently available at that time. Graves's translation was commissioned by the Penguin Classics Series, of which E. V. Rieu was both general editor and creator (Rieu's translation of Homer's *The Odyssey* in 1945 had opened the series). Graves was engaged intermittently in the work from mid 1946 until 1948 and its publication in 1950 – a period, as has been noted, of intense creativity for Graves. Penguin Classics was an innovative publication of classics designed for the general reader as well as students. As such it was a cheaply produced mass-market paperback imprint that was highly popular owing to its pricing, quality and brand identity. The prose style for these books was necessarily appealing because it was plain or a 'transparent discourse' (Venuti, *Translator's Invisibility*, p. 25). Graves's translations for the Penguin Classics Series, which were domesticated to suit the general post World War II British readership, were hugely popular as he catered

sympathetically for this particular market and its growing readership (*Translator's Invisibility*, p. 26). Before Graves's version was published, the most popular account of Apuleius's Latin text was still William Aldington's translation, made as far back as 1566 (though *The Golden Ass* had more recently been translated by H. E. Butler (Oxford) in 1910). Graves's translation was reprinted three times in England, with a new edition in 1976 as well as numerous impressions (Higginson and Williams, *Bibliography*, pp. 107-11). The success of Graves, writes Venuti was due to

making the foreign text "plain" [meaning...] that Graves's translation practice is radically domesticating: it requires not merely the insertion of explanatory phrases, but the inscription of the foreign text with values that are not only anachronistic and ethnocentric, but dominant in the receiving culture (Venuti, *Translator's Invisibility*, p. 26).

Graves, in the Introduction to *The Golden Ass*, declares that he has chosen a writing style and has made particular choices in his translation strategy in recognition of the postwar climate, 'convulsed times like the present', making it appropriate to present a writing style that is 'an easy and sedate an English as possible' (p. x).

However, contemporary criticism and critics such as Simon Brittan-Ortiz (1999) and other translators of *The Golden Ass* are less accommodating of Graves's version than Day, Canary and Snipes. They criticize Graves for his 'irresponsible' mishandling of certain passages (Brittan-Ortiz, 'Priests and Prejudice', p. 135) and because of the liberties taken to present his personal opinion. In other words, they argue, Graves has not been faithful to the spirit of Apuleius's meaning. Indeed, Graves's translation does more than 'mirror' Apuleius's original text to explain his own theory of the poet and muse relationship, but by doing more, he weakens the text. In the most recent translation of *The Golden Ass*, the translator, Walsh condemns Graves's translation, saying that despite the 'craftsman's enviable supple use of English [which] makes this translation attractive to read independently of the Latin', it 'misleads at some points and condenses at others' ('Introduction', p. xlix). Much the same criticism can be applied to *The Golden Ass* as that



levelled by Seymour-Smith against Graves's translation of *The Greek Myths*. *The Greek Myths* is still popular with the general reader to help determine mythological meaning. But although the study is still reprinted, acknowledged and respected, its main fault, Seymour-Smith claims, is that the translation has been skewed to such a degree that it 'can be read as a sort of extended series of footnotes to *The White Goddess*' (Robert Graves, p. 16). While Graves may be excused for the possibly unconscious influence of his all-important theory of the White Goddess, it is his willful distortion of *The Golden Ass* text which ultimately undermines the integrity of his translation.

### **Graves's Translation Practice**

It is quite likely that while Graves was translating *The Golden Ass*, the ideas behind Apuleius's work leaked into *The White Goddess*, just as theories about the White Goddess developed in the latter text undoubtedly influenced his approach to the translation. Because of his habit of working on several things simultaneously, Graves was unable to separate his ideas into discrete literary activities or genres, with the result that they all bled into each other. This practice may only be condemned if a certain strict view of translation and influence is followed. It is indisputable that Graves was not only unfaithful to the original, but that he was guilty of the more serious charge of meddling with the meaning of the text, making it less Apuleian and more Gravesian.

That Graves was preoccupied by the two texts at the same time there is no doubt. During this same period he was working on the galley proofs of *The White Goddess* and adding a further 15,000 words to it. He wrote to Karl Gay, on 15 February 1947: 'I am making slow progress with *The Golden Ass*, because I keep tinkering with *The White Goddess*' (*Between Moon and Moon*, p. 41). However, the question remains as to whether *The Golden Ass* and *The White Goddess* can or should be viewed intertextually, and whether indeed Graves consciously re-interpreted Apuleius's text in order to substantiate his theory. As discussed and analyzed in previous chapters, Graves wrote much whilst

researching and writing *The White Goddess*, and the translation of *The Golden Ass* is a case in point, as it affected his conception of the Goddess. However, it can also be argued that his theory of poetic inspiration had an influence on his translation recognizing that he then deemed it necessary to alter the Apuleius text accordingly. For the translator fidelity to the original text must be balanced with the *intention* of the author, sometimes at the expense of the former. Most importantly, the translator must be humble, his ego undetected – he/she must be invisible. Steiner, in agreement with Venuti, writes in his critique of ‘Felix Krull’ that ‘all that translation can hope to do is recompose something [...] of what a foreign writer might have put down had he felt and chosen in another language’ (p. 298). *The Golden Ass*, in particular, is written in complex Latin prose and, as contemporary translators of the text argue, in order to be understood and enjoyed by the modern reader the English has to be as plain as possible rather than flowery or obscure in meaning. Kenney writes that attempting to

reproduce Apuleius’ peculiar Latinity, its idiosyncratic mixture of colloquial, poetic, and archaizing vocabulary, which includes many words coined by Apuleius himself, its often willfully contorted phraseology, and its elaborately balanced rhythmical structures [...] would involve something like the creation of a new dialect of writing (‘Introduction’, p. xxxiii).

Not only is *The Golden Ass* too difficult to translate faithfully to the letter, to do so would be ill-advised, as a faithful reproduction of Apuleius’s fantasies would not be readable. So the agreement amongst Latin scholars – including Aldington – was that an English translation of *The Golden Ass* must be, as Graves writes, ‘in as easy and sedate an English as possible’ (*Golden Ass*, p. x) so that it can be appreciated and understood by a contemporary audience. According to this dangerously contradictory argument, translating close to the original text would mean that the author’s intended meaning would be lost, along with the authenticity of the original. The resulting damage would therefore alienate the reader. Graves writes that translating a foreign text was for him ‘essentially a moral

problem: how much is owed to the letter, and how much to the spirit. "Stick strictly to the script", and the effect of authenticity is lost' (*Golden Ass*, p. xi).

### **The Question of Morality in Translation**

A translator, according to Graves, knows the language patterns of the original text and aims to be as accurate in meaning as possible, although his choices may not always lie exclusively in questions of language. By indicating these moral aspects of translating, Graves hints that he went beyond a merely technical translation of the text. According to this reasoning, it is only by a series of moral choices that the translator can hope to create an effective translation. Sometime later, in an article entitled, 'Moral Principles in Translation', published in *Encounter* in 1965, Graves puts the art of translation on a par with writing poetry. The two are linked, he argued, by a theory of creativity which is deeply personal:

Since the age of fifteen I have been dedicated to one sole pursuit: that of poetry. And the writing of English poetry demands that one should know the language in depth as well as in breadth. A poem's emotional force depends on the strength and virtue of its component words; and the longer a word has been turned over by countless tongues and pens, and smoothed with use, the more powerfully will it strike home (p. 48).

Graves applies his fundamental interpretation of writing poetry to highlight the overriding emphasis given to 'truth' when translating a text. Just as he strives always to tell the truth through his poetry, so he believes that the role of the translator is to do the same. Despite this seemingly moral imperative, there is a characteristic trait in Graves to blur genres and to elevate the power of poetry as an art form above all others in ways which impinge on the principles of faithful translation.

Graves continues in the same article to say that while language has developed and changed through the centuries, so a poet and a translator should know the 'history of each word he uses' (p. 48). Graves treats translation very much as a personal text and ends his article by saying that the duty of the translator is to regard the work as if it were his own



and to 'present it with loving care' (p. 55). In the light of this confession, the translation of *The Golden Ass* can be seen to say more about Graves at a particular moment in his creative development of the Goddess theory than it does about Apuleius, because Graves does indeed treat the text as his own. The translator in this instance is palpably 'present' and does not allow the original author's text to be read or to be received as straightforwardly as the original intended. As a result, what is problematic for the purist, who may be obsessed with principles of fidelity, when reading his translation of *The Golden Ass* is that Graves has altered the meaning of certain passages, causing a tension between his objective scholarship and his subjective aims. For critics such as Brittan-Ortiz and Michael Grant, this creates a flawed work. If viewed through Steiner's standard for judging a good translation, then Graves's work is also marred by being too clearly 'Gravesian', in that while he commendably brings scholarship into his translation, he also uses poetic intuition (Hoffman, *Barbarous Knowledge*, p. 203), or poetic license, to draw conclusions that will substantiate his own theories about the Goddess even at the expense of faithful translation. Graves in effect remodelled Apuleius's text to serve as a prototype to suit his theory, creating a new work rather than a translation. Undoubtedly the current critical consensus, which has swung away from the earlier admiration of Graves's translation, reflects more serious scholarly values such as accuracy, fidelity, lucid rendition of original, and linguistic insights than when it was first published in 1950. The result is that *The Golden Ass* is no longer regarded by Latin scholars as a faithful translation, and Graves's work has long been out of print in England. The last reprint was revised by Michael Grant (1990). While Penguin Publishers continue to reprint Graves's *Greek Myths* and his translations of Latin works such as *The Twelve Caesars* of Suetonius, they chose to abandon *The Golden Ass* in favour of a more consistent academic approach. Penguin has published three new translations of *The Golden Ass* to date.

### Difficulties in Translating: To Instruct or Entertain?

Robert Graves first mentioned his translation of *The Golden Ass* in a long letter about *King Jesus* to Matthews on 29 August 1946: 'At the moment I am amusing myself by translating an early religious novel – Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* – which was last well translated in 1566' (*Between Moon and Moon*, p. 33). 'Amusing' underestimates the novel's complexity and belies Graves's own particular interest in it. At first glance *The Golden Ass* is one of the most accessible and popular, as well as entertaining works, to have come down from classical antiquity. Yet it is immediately clear when reading the original Latin that it is a far from easy undertaking to translate the novel into the English language. Graves's assertion that translating it is an amusing task makes light of the obvious difficulties involved.

As already indicated, scholars have found Apuleius's style extremely problematic when it comes to translation – Michael Grant, in his Introduction to *The Golden Ass*, asserts that the text is 'very difficult Latin, which only a restricted number of people have been trained to understand [...] since people were brought up on the immensely different Ciceronian language' (p. xvi). One reason for the difficulty in understanding the text is that, with the exception of 'Cupid and Psyche' and the final chapters, the stories are written in the style of Aristides of Miletus (*fl.c.* 100 BC) whose salacious tales were popular with the masses. Graves asserts in his Introduction to *The Golden Ass*, that the anecdotes in the text proclaim that the author's intention is to entertain the reader with 'a string of anecdotes in the popular Milesian style' (p. vii), and immediately give the impression that the following works are merely light and saucy entertainment. In his Introduction to the text, Graves explains that Apuleius was consciously 'parodying the extravagant language which the "Milesian" story-tellers used [...] as a means of impressing simple-minded audiences' (p. ix). He went further in a letter to Eliot written towards the completion of translation: '*The Golden Ass* is a much better book than I had suspected and the queer

Latin is a deliberate joke, a parody of the high-faluting style of the popular story teller who liked to impress audiences at fairs and street corners' (*Between Moon and Moon* (21 May 1948), p. 47). The reason for this, according to Graves, is that the novel has a far greater ambition, missed by previous translators: Graves writes in his Introduction to *The Golden Ass* that as a 'priest [...] the popular tale gave [...Apuleius] a wider field for [...his] descriptions of contemporary morals and manners' (p. x). In other words, Graves perceives the novel as setting out to educate its audience. The letter to Eliot seems to be reiterated in 'Apuleius's Address to the Reader', where Apuleius is used as Graves's mouthpiece: 'You should be amused by this queer novel, a string of anecdotes' (p. vii). Graves's contention is that, in previous translations, Apuleius's style was presented as this parody Miletus without due attention to the contents of *The Golden Ass*, which had been presented merely for their pornographic and salacious content. While Graves certainly does not evade the pornographic nature of the tales, they nevertheless become for him a means of reinforcing the contrast with the protagonist's later religious conversion, which Graves describes as 'a real and moving one' (p. xi). Graves reinterprets the purpose of the Apuleius narrative to allow him to present his own views concerning the Goddess and poetic inspiration, thus transgressing his role as translator. The ethical implications are clear: by appropriating Apuleius's work to serve his own ideology of the poet and muse relationship, Graves inevitably compromises the reader's trust, but he does so in the sincere belief that a critical feature of Apuleius's design has been recaptured and he cannot see the implications for his own appropriations. As a result, the chief flaw of Graves's translation is that it has a more didactic focus than the original: his aim to convince the reader of the importance of the Goddess is achieved at the expense of Apuleius's aim of merely entertaining the reader in the manner of Miletus.



### Comparison of Translation Focus

As Kenney's contemporary translation shows, Apuleius says: 'what I propose in this Milesian discourse is to string together for you a series of different stories and to charm your ears, kind reader, with amusing gossip' (p. 7) – that is, light-hearted entertainment without any religious purpose. Kenney explains in his Introduction to *The Golden Ass* (2004) that *The Golden Ass* is

a collection of tales of the kind associated with [...Miletus]: anecdotes, more often than not scabrous, culled from the illimitable subliterate repertoire of traditional popular storytelling and embellished for an educated audience. This class of literature was not considered edifying (pp. ix-x).

'Amusing gossip' implies that the novel aims to shock and to amuse but hardly to 'edify' or to instruct. For Graves, *The Golden Ass* cannot be intricately connected to Miletus as this would undermine and contradict his own interpretation of Apuleius's text, which he believes serves a loftier purpose: to indicate a connection between Apuleius and the Goddess. Graves writes in his Introduction:

it is unlikely that many readers have ever spent much time over [...Lucius's conversion at the end of the story]. The book's popularity, ever since it was written, has rested almost wholly on its 'pleasant and delectable jest', especially the bawdy ones (p. xii).

For Graves, what gives the text its essential meaning is the conversion, or transformation, of Lucius as a devotee of the Goddess Isis, not the entertaining stories. The implication here is that past readers of the story have been distracted from its true aim. Graves's Introduction deliberately influences the reader's interpretation of the tale (Brittan-Ortiz, 'Priests and Prejudice', p. 130) to show that *The Golden Ass* was 'above all, a religious novel' (*Golden Ass*, p. xi). By the end of the text, Lucius is a very different man, having himself been metamorphosed, not only from an ass back into a man, but to a man who has evolved into a higher level of development, to that of a devotee of the Goddess Isis. As his translation reads: 'Thereafter I devoted my whole time to the attendance on the Goddess, encouraged by these tokens to hope for even greater marks of her favour' (p. 277). While

the ending of his translation corresponds with the contemporary translations, he chooses Isis as one of the manifestations of the White Goddess. What is at odds with the original story is that in Apuleius's version, the ass was abhorrent to the Egyptian Goddess because it was identified with her enemy Seth-Typhon, the murderer of her husband and brother, Osiris. Yet in all the translations, the benevolent Isis only agrees to retransform Lucius once he has promised to serve and worship her: 'From now onwards', she tells the ass, 'until the very last day of your life you are dedicated to my service. It is only right that you should devote your whole life to the Goddess who makes you a man again' (p. 266). The text gives no warning of the unexpected turn of events as the conversion is so sudden. Moreover, before Lucius is changed back into a man, Isis is not mentioned once.

Contemporary critics are divided about the reasons behind the conversion. Kenney argues that in order to tell the stories, Lucius must necessarily be human so his transformation can only come through a 'plausible opportunity' ('Introduction', p. xii). Only when he has been degraded to a point beyond endurance, does Lucius the ass escape to be 'allegorically transformed so as to illuminate an actual spiritual experience' (p. xiii). Grant, by contrast, maintains that as a moral allegory the whole work is more or less discredited ('Introduction', p. xiii). Walsh argues in his 2008 translation that the emphasis of the novel is on Lucius's punishment: 'The moral of the *Metamorphoses* is that Lucius's avid curiosity to explore the realm of magic, attained by way of sexual encounters with Photis, was punished because it was a perverted path to universal knowledge' ('Introduction', p. xxxii). In these three translations, it is not so much Lucius's *conversion* which is emphasized, but rather his *punishment* and his subsequent experiences as an ass. However, in the Introduction to his translation, Graves emphasizes Lucius's retransformation and his religious conversion, explaining that the reason for the miraculous transformation from an animal into an acolyte of the Goddess at the end of the novel – and therefore for such an elaborate writing style – was essentially attributable to the fact that

*The Golden Ass* was a 'religious novel' (p. xi), with the Goddess finally as Apuleius's muse. As Graves told his mother in mid-October 1947, he considered *The Golden Ass* a 'pagan religious work' (Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. 129), and felt that the tales – despite their eroticism and comedy – were telling a different story: a dedicatory work of the muse-poet to the Great Goddess (Brittan-Ortiz, 'Priests and Prejudice', p. 134); in other words, the spiritual autobiography of Apuleius himself.

### **The Golden Ass as Autobiography**

Graves's central assumption, that the author Apuleius was the same person as the actual character of Lucius, profoundly affected his translation of *The Golden Ass*, and this in turn influenced his concept of the identity and nature of the White Goddess. It is clear that Graves's own identification with Apuleius brings about a conflation of the identities of the two authors – Apuleius and Lucius – within the text. Very little is known about Apuleius, but according to Graves, as he explains in Chapter Sixteen of *The White Goddess*:

The metamorphosis of Lucius Apuleius into an ass must be understood in this sense: it was his punishment for rejecting the good advice of his well-bred kinswoman Byrrhaena and deliberately meddling with the erotic witch cult of Thessaly. It was only after uttering his *de profundis* prayer to the White Goddess [...] that he was released from his shameful condition and accepted as [her...] initiate (p. 282).

The inclusion of the full name, Lucius Apuleius, means that Graves is referring not to the fictional character of the narrative, but to the author Lucius Apuleius. The account is treated as an event that actually happened and is therefore viewed by Graves as autobiography. Another striking element of the above account is that the Egyptian deity, Isis, is renamed the White Goddess thus placing the Apuleius-Graves's text, and Graves's reading of that text, as one that clarifies and proves his own thesis.

Graves's Introduction to his translation of *The Golden Ass* reinforces his interpretation of the author's spiritual leanings. Lucius Apuleius was, according to Graves, a priest of the Goddess who was 'pious, lively, exceptionally learned [...] who] found that



the popular tale gave [...him] a wider field for [...his] descriptions of contemporary morals and manners, punctuated by philosophical asides, than any more respectable literary form' (p. x). Graves has firmly labelled Apuleius a religious man, meaning he is an acolyte, but of the pagan Goddess Isis. In Graves's opinion, this is substantiated by Apuleius's knowledge and interest in Egypt. The Egyptians, the Goddess Isis tells the character Lucius, 'excel in ancient learning and worship me with the ceremonies proper to my godhead' (p. 265). Clearly, Apuleius was a learned man who had a deep knowledge of Egypt. While worship of Isis in ancient Egypt dates back to 2,500 BC, her cult was still very popular during Apuleius's lifetime, having spread throughout the Mediterranean world. Isis was a favourite divinity in Rome and efforts to suppress her worship were largely unsuccessful (Pomeroy, *Goddesses*, pp. 217-18).

Graves uses the few facts known about Apuleius and surmises in his Introduction much more, concluding that he 'became a priest of Aesculapius, the God of Medicine, as well as of Isis and Osiris' (p. xxii). Added to this, Apuleius, Graves deduces, 'had a-first-hand knowledge' of magic (p. xxi), for he had written a study entitled *A Discourse on Magic*. This was written in his own defense after he had been accused of seducing the wealthy and much older Pudentilla into marriage. When she subsequently bequeathed him all her money, he was accused, more seriously, of poisoning her son (p. xvi). Although Graves gives no documentary evidence to support these claims about Apuleius's life, he treats *The Golden Ass* unreservedly as a biography; he also claims that Apuleius was not only a priest of Osiris and a barrister (p. xx), but furthermore a poet and an historian (p. xxii). So the rescue of the ass by the Goddess towards the end of the novel does not signify simply the reversal of his metamorphosis but the transformation of the character of Lucius into that of the author. The implication here is that it is not the character 'Lucius' who is the priest of the Goddess, but Apuleius himself.

For Graves, nothing is beyond the realm of possibility in the act of reading and interpreting classical legend for his own purposes: the improbable is logical. In what seems to be a message to the reader, Lucius says to one of the two travellers he encounters whilst journeying to Thessaly that it is either 'natural dullness or cultivated obstinacy that prevents you from [...] recognizing the truth [...]. Stupid people always dismiss as untrue anything that happens only very seldom, or anything that their minds cannot readily grasp' (*Golden Ass*, p. 4). The novel can only be understood retrospectively, Graves implies – that is, after Lucius's conversion to the religion of Isis. 'Lucius' is a mask for the author himself, and his story is an allegorical telling of his spiritual transformation (Kenney, 'Introduction', p. xiii). In this light, this interpretation of *The Golden Ass* becomes not a selection of comic tales but a dedicatory work to Isis, the muse-poet being Apuleius himself (Brittan-Ortiz, 'Priests and Prejudice', p. 134) so replicating Graves's own preoccupation with the worship of a muse figure.

### **Apuleius as Muse-Poet**

Apuleius's new role as a muse-poet comes as a result of pain and degradation; but he has his reward. As Isis tells the wretched Lucius before transforming him back into his natural state, 'from now onwards until the very last day of your life you are dedicated to my service [...]. Under my protection you will be happy and famous' (*Golden Ass*, p. 266) – this is in some ways a prescription for Graves's own future. *The Golden Ass* thus shows, according to Graves in his Introduction to the novel, that Apuleius's greatest desire was *not* for applause, but rather:

it was to show his gratitude to the Goddess whom he adored, by living a life worthy of her favour – a serene, honourable and useful life, with no secret worm of guilt gnawing at his heart as though he had withheld some confession from her or mistrusted her compassion (p. xxi).

Graves concludes that *The Golden Ass* was written as a result of Apuleius's life-long devotion to the Goddess. The muse-poet is led by his unqualified love of the Goddess, and

as a consequence, he is able to write with integrity verse that is sincere and true with regard to his relations and experiences with Her. Graves told Douglas Day in Washington D.C. in May 1963, that he considered the poetry by the true poet had to embody an accurate self portrait (*Swifter than Reason*, p. 216). Thus for Graves, the translation works on two levels: Apuleius reveals himself as servant and consort of the Goddess through his spiritual journey of the self; while at the same time, the text presents those themes about the relationship between the Goddess and the muse-poet which are at the very core of Gravesian poetics. The result is that Graves creates a text that is both separate from, and in some ways at odds with, Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*.

#### **'Apuleius's Address to the Reader'**

The opening of *The Golden Ass* is crucial to an understanding of Graves's translation. Unlike the original Latin text, which launches straight into the adventures of the unfortunate Lucius, Graves chose to adapt the opening of the text. In consequence, he created a new layer in the story by dramatizing 'Apuleius' in his relationship to the reader with a separate introduction (Brittan-Ortiz, 'Priests and Prejudice', p. 130) entitled, 'Apuleius's Address to the Reader', which is followed by Chapter One: 'The story of Aristomenes'. The effect of a separate introduction gives the impression that it is an autobiographical address (Brittan-Ortiz, p. 130). While Grant chose to keep Graves's structure, he agrees with Kenney about the reason Lucius gives for telling his narrative: to entertain the reader. In Graves's translation, however, Apuleius emphasizes the 'Egyptian' nature of the novel 'which allows humans to be changed into animals and, after various adventures, restored to their proper shapes' (p. vii). Kenney and Grant by contrast show Apuleius enticing his readers with a 'Milesian' rendering of the tales. Kenney's translation begins:

Now, what I propose in this Milesian discourse is to string together for you a series of different stories and to charm your ears, kind reader, with amusing gossip – always assuming that you are not too proud to



look at the Egyptian book written with the sharpness of a pen from the Nile; and to make you marvel at a story of men's shapes and fortunes changed into other forms and then restored all over again (p. 7).

It is clear that the speaker begins his narrative in what seems to be the middle of a monologue and his purpose is plain: to entertain the reader with 'amusing gossip'. The Egyptian element is secondary to the overall aim. Grant keeps to the format of Graves's opening address but is in agreement with Kenney concerning the emphasis made on entertaining the reader:

In this Milesian story I shall weave together a variety of tales to make you wonder and charm your friendly ears with a pleasant whispering, if you are not put off by the Egyptian, Nilotic story-telling convention which allows humans to be changed into animals and later restored to their proper shapes: to make you wonder (p. 3).

Clearly, the two translations, though differing, tell the reader the same thing. The genre of the story may be Egyptian, where humans are changed into animals, but the mode of telling it is 'Milesian' in character – that is, both promise to entertain the reader through a (Latin) Milesian rendering with its 'extravagant language' (*Golden Ass*, p. ix). In the light of these two translations, Graves's work may come as somewhat of a shock, for it contrasts starkly with the above:

If you are not put off by the Egyptian story-telling convention which allows humans to be changed into animals and, after various adventures, restored to their proper shapes, you should be amused by this queer novel, a string of anecdotes in the popular Milesian style, but intended only for your private ear, which I call my *Transformations* (p. vii).

At first glance, each of the above translations seems to be almost exact, for the information from the original Latin text is present in all three: Milesian style, Egyptian story-telling convention, and a desire to entertain the reader. Yet the ordering and emphasis of information in Graves's version is clearly dissimilar and therefore distinguishable from the others. Graves reverses the order of importance by stressing the Egyptian element and this paves the way for paying homage to Isis, the Egyptian Goddess, and prototype of his White Goddess, with a corresponding undermining of the Milesian aspect of the text.

Added to this, the claim of 'my *Transformations*' arrogates greater power to the poet-translator than in the other two versions. Graves explains that in his translation of *The Golden Ass* into English he

[...] sometimes felt obliged to alter the order not only of phrases but of sentences, where English prose logic differs from Latin; and to avoid the nuisance of footnotes I have brought their substance up into the story itself wherever it reads obscurely. Aldington often did the same (p. xi).

Does the translation have as a result the same *meaning* as the original text? Contrary to Steiner, Graves considers a successful translation a *moral* issue, whereby the translator exercises the right to include what he deems 'appropriate' or 'suitable'. As indicated, this is a different approach to translation, but the enduring question of visibility and honesty still makes the translator accountable. Certainly the right to include or exclude as an issue of morality is not necessarily approved of or practised by contemporary translators. To be fluent and to follow the text closely is the aim of the modern translator (Venuti, *Translator's Invisibility*, p. 31). Yet Graves's translation lacks footnotes, a very questionable practice serving to undermine his scholarly interpretation of the work. Aldington is used here to invoke a respectable comparison. Also, Graves's method of translating *The Golden Ass* is to interfere with the original text in order to reveal its 'true meaning'. Dispensing with footnotes thus allowed Graves the freedom to make decisions in translating the novel without having to justify them in the text. Not only is Graves visible as the translator, but there is the question of veracity. In Graves's translation of Apuleius's address to the reader, the Egyptian element (which is obviously evident in the choice of the Goddess being Isis as opposed to a Roman deity) is emphasized at the expense of the Milesian style, and he introduces the tales by first describing the traditions of Egyptian story-telling (p. vii). These points are reversed to influence the reception of the text, the foregrounding of the Egyptian content and the prominence of translator as 'author' of his text. Although men are transformed in form and fortune, the Gravesian text serves a

purpose which extends beyond these entertaining happenings, one only made clear with Lucius's transformation into his human shape in the final section of the novel.

### **Incarnations of the Goddess**

The novel is populated with powerful women, all of whom can be interpreted as incarnations of Graves's White Goddess. The first powerful woman appears early on in the narrative when a traveller tells Lucius how his friend Socrates met his downfall by refusing to succumb to the supernatural powers of Meroë. With her beauty and charm, Meroë seduces Socrates, and with awe and terror, he describes her to his friend. Indeed, the description of the 'witch' is starkly reminiscent of Isis and the White Goddess herself:

'My Meroë is able [...] to pull down the heavens or uplift the earth; to purify the running stream or dissolve the rocky mountain; to raise the spectral dead or hurl the gods from their thrones; to quench the bright stars or illuminate the dark Land of Shadows [...]. Her ability to make men fall passionately in love with her – not only Greeks, but Indians, and eastern and western Egyptians and even, if she pleases, the mythical inhabitants of the Antipodes – this is only a slight sample of her powers' (p. 8).

There is something reverential in Socrates's rendering of Meroë's supernatural powers. The Goddess is a living force, manifest in certain women and is both adored and feared. The price Socrates pays for not accepting Meroë or the Goddess's favour is death. As the Goddess sacrifices those she adores, so Socrates's end demonstrates Meroë's supremacy. After slitting his throat, she pulls out his heart in what seems to be a 'sacrificial rite' (p. 12). The anecdote serves as a warning to the inquisitive and mischievous Lucius (who admits: 'I have an almost morbid interest in anything queer and out of the way' (p. 25)). In essence the Goddess is all-powerful and any interference which undermines her will is not to be tolerated, the punishment being ignominious death. Throughout his adventures, powerful women embodying the two contrasting aspects of Isis – kind and forgiving as well as cold and exacting – surround Lucius in his human and animal forms. The 'many-named' Isis (Fraser, *Golden Bough*, p. 460), the most complex and versatile of the ancient



goddesses, fluctuating between the spurned lover and the mother and all between, is embodied in the hostile and unforgiving White Goddess.

An early example of an intimation of the Goddess in Graves's translation of *The Golden Ass* is Byrrhaena, who nursed Lucius as an infant, his mother being her maternal cousin and foster sister. On his first visit to Byrrhaena's house, Lucius is awed by 'the majesty of [the Goddess's] presence' (p. 27) and an elaborate description of her courtyard is given:

a sculptured group of Parian marble which stood in the very centre of the court interested me [...] and put everything else into proper perspective. It was Diana with hounds; wonderful work. The Goddess seemed to be striding towards you as you entered [...] awing you by the majesty of her presence (p. 27).

Clearly overwhelmed, Lucius continues in a reverential tone until he is interrupted by the presence of Byrrhaena. She warns him to be careful of the darker side of the Goddess: Milo's wife Pamphilē, a witch who falls in love with and goes about possessing handsome young men. Instead of taking heed, Lucius manipulates Pamphilē's slave, Fotis, in his quest for forbidden knowledge as, according to Graves's translation, he had always harboured the 'secret ambition [...] to study the laws of magic' (p. 29) (which may be, according to Graves, a reference to 'A discourse on Magic', Apuleius's defense at his subsequent trial) and, tampering with the forbidden, is transformed into an ass. What Graves is cleverly doing here is showing us that Lucius's interest was not merely a passing fancy as seems to be intimated in other translations but that it was a focal point of his visit to Thessaly. Thus it can be surmised that Lucius's conversion to Isis is not so extraordinary, given his already lively interest in the Goddess.

By changing the emphasis of Lucius's interest in the supernatural, Graves creates a translation that is unabashedly 'Gravesian' – he has not only subjected the text to his own interpretation but his distinct presence overwhelms it. Rather than the poet-translator serving *The Golden Ass*, *The Golden Ass* is used to serve the creator with a new text. While

there may be some basis for Graves's interpretation of *The Golden Ass*, he seriously undermines the validity of his interpretation of the story by the method he uses. Eschewing reliance on historical documentation, Graves evidently preferred to utilize his analeptic method, used earlier in *The Golden Fleece* and *King Jesus*, to produce his elaborate interpretation. Though he tried to justify this method as acceptable and valuable in writing historical texts such as *King Jesus* and the *Claudius* novels, it is obviously inappropriate in a straightforward translation of any text into English. As a result, the translation is flawed, for Graves has literally reinvented Apuleius and his novel and has taken liberties without providing any explanation or justification to his readers. Although it may be easy to condemn Graves for making a translation that departs somewhat from the original, his version of *The Golden Ass* nevertheless gives the reader further insight into the techniques and ideas behind *The White Goddess* and Graves's theories concerning the muse and poet relationship. *The Golden Ass* reads as a Gravesian text in itself, the translation being an 'act of devotion' on Graves's part, not toward Apuleius, because the text transcends the author, but toward the idea of the Goddess herself.

### **Conclusion**

While the influence of *The Golden Ass* can be traced back to earlier works, Graves's understanding and interpretation of it is pivotal to the White Goddess myth and its relation to the theory of poet and muse. In becoming the muse, Apuleius's Goddess informed and influenced Graves's vision of the nature of inspiration through the relations with and worship of a higher being. With this in mind, the intertextual link between *The White Goddess* and *The Golden Ass* provides a valuable means of understanding Graves's theory. He viewed the perpetual cycle of crisis and adoration of the Goddess as the ultimate aesthetic experience of the true poet. The message is clear: the muse-poet is one of the chosen few who must devote himself to the Goddess. If he does not do this, he will write poetry that is uninspired and false, clever poetry written with the intellect, rather than from

the heart. So although Graves's translation of *The Golden Ass* obscures and transforms the original intention of Apuleius, he fulfilled his mission in creating the definitive text about the Goddess and her relations with the muse-poet.



## Chapter Five: *Seven Days in New Crete* (1949) - The White Goddess and the Destruction of a Matriarchal Utopia

Though the bread's good and the butter's good, there doesn't seem to be any salt in either (Graves, *Seven Days*, p. 151).<sup>32</sup>

While the subjects of the four texts so far discussed are taken from classical mythology, scripture and history, all the writings celebrate Robert Graves's concept of the primeval Goddess that he called the White Goddess. The novel *Seven Days in New Crete* (1949), written after *The White Goddess* was published, differs from this and the other three texts in being a futuristic hypothesis rather than a historical narrative. The novel served Graves, in other words, as an elucidation of his theories and enabled him to clarify them. Written and published last in the sequence, *Seven Days in New Crete* can be read as a fitting conclusion to ideas he explored in *The Golden Fleece*, *King Jesus* and *The Golden Ass* and *The White Goddess*.

*The Golden Fleece* and *King Jesus* were concerned with the origins of the Goddess's downfall, and the translation of *The Golden Ass* 'proves' and reinforces the argument articulated in *The White Goddess*. However, this novel sets out to explain the effects on humanity of legitimized Goddess-worship, and its usurpation by the masculine deity (Keane, *Wild Civility*, p. 65).

Although the three texts previously discussed are in a sense representations of *The White Goddess*, *Seven Days in New Crete* differs from them because it questions the very theory that Graves sets up in them. The matrilineal is reintroduced in the text as a means of reasserting the superiority of the female within what seems to be a utopian vision of future society. In *New Crete* there is no distinction between the Goddess and her 'representative': 'She always assumes the form of a living creature' (*Seven Days* p. 196). The literal

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<sup>32</sup> All quotations from *Seven Days in New Crete* by Robert Graves are taken from *Seven Days in New Crete* (Oxford: OUP, 1983).

interpretation of the Goddess and the metaphorical use of the Goddess paradigm (Wood, 'Concept', p. 10) are now merged in Graves's art to create a complete being for the White Goddess with an earthly purpose, and this figure of the Goddess reigns supreme. However, as the above epigraph suggests, an idealized world, in which the White Goddess reigns, brings quite unexpectedly (given Graves's reverential stance), death to poetic truth.

This chapter will show how *Seven Days in New Crete* initiates an overturning of the values celebrated in the preceding works. The issues brought out in the novel also had the effect of bringing Graves closer to rejecting the world of the Goddess than he might ever have expected or anticipated. The present chapter also argues, therefore, that the novel's approach ends up being highly critical of the system of worship so earnestly endorsed in the earlier texts. Spiritually and psychologically, by the time Graves came to write *Seven Days in New Crete*, he had reached a point in his thinking when he felt compelled to reconcile the two aspects of the Goddess – the gentle maiden/mother with the cruel seductress – within his life and work.

The chapter will in consequence also demonstrate how *Seven Days in New Crete* is the summation of the four texts discussed in this thesis and as a work of fiction represents Graves's thinking in a more advanced state following the publication of *The White Goddess*.

In order to trace Graves's trajectory in questioning the validity of the hostile, domineering Goddess as muse, it is necessary to return to earlier prose works. With the writing of *Goodbye to All That* (1929), Graves had rejected the contemporary world and his own personal history to turn to a future in which his relationship with Riding would play a crucial role in defining his persona as a poet, and in which she – his first muse – might prefigure his conception of the White Goddess. Later, through *The Golden Fleece*, *King Jesus* and *The White Goddess*, Graves turned to investigate the remote mythological past, employing a combination of historical sources and his own imagination to argue that

the Goddess had in fact reigned in a specific epoch of humanity's early development. In Chapter Two of this thesis, the argument is made that in *The Golden Fleece* Graves introduced his theory regarding the role of the poet. In Chapter Three on *King Jesus*, this same argument is developed further, to point out that Graves used this novel to develop his preoccupation with the origins of Christianity and its complex collusion in the demise of Goddess worship. *The White Goddess*, it is argued, was in a key sense the outcome of both these works. With the completion of *The White Goddess* in April 1947,<sup>33</sup> Graves applied the theories to his poetry and prose works. *Seven Days in New Crete* looks back to the poet's own past between 1929 and 1947, and can therefore be seen as an imaginative recreation of the joys and agonies of writing poetry, fused with the temporal experiences of Graves's life, (Seymour-Smith, 'Introduction', p. vii).

The story of *Seven Days in New Crete* can be summarized as follows: summoned from the twentieth century to an undefined time in the future, the protagonist, a poet named Edward Venn-Thomas, suddenly finds himself in New Crete, where poets and magicians work on behalf of the Goddess. Venn-Thomas soon finds that he has been brought to New Crete by the Goddess herself in order to introduce discord into the static tranquility of New Cretan existence. In all the works discussed, the Graves persona plays a central role, and in this work, as well, Edward Venn-Thomas is a surrogate of Graves himself.

The writing of *Seven Days in New Crete* (June 1947 to November or December 1948; (Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. 137, p.151) belongs to a new phase of its author's creative thinking. The novel is a departure from Graves's usual mythological and historical setting in that it is an imaginative leap into the future. It then explores Graves's compelling visions (Hoffman, *Barbarous Knowledge*, p. 148) of a future in which the patriarchal nature of Christianity and its 'moral chaos' is replaced by a new matriarchal religion ruled over by the Goddess.

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<sup>33</sup> As mentioned in Chapter Four, Graves sent off the completed galley proofs of *The White Goddess* to Eliot in April 1947 (Graves, *Robert Graves and The White Goddess*, p. 134).



Venn-Thomas explains to the New Cretans that poets of the late Christian epoch had no power and that poetry was of little significance to the masses. Being a poet in such an age, he states, was difficult because neither genuine artists nor poetry were valued or appreciated: 'to be a poet is something of an anachronism in my age, when none of the people's main interests have anything even indirectly to do with poetry' (p. 8). Yet even in the decaying world, the poet, Venn-Thomas, is a rare example of the enlightened few – a poet who is dictated to by the Muse-goddess (p. 19). In view of this typically Gravesian assessment of the condition of modern poetry, *Seven Days in New Crete* can in key respects be seen as the poetic answer to the question of how a true poem should be written, and a description of the role of the poet in such a world. Yet in the end, it is paradoxically *not* the Goddess's world that Graves chooses. Surprisingly, there is in fact a rejection of her world, when it becomes clear that her reign actually deals death to poetic truth, leaving Graves to conclude bleakly that a true poet can only create in the chaotic and destructively godless world of his own present.

#### **Dating of *Seven Days in New Crete***

Once again, as with the works already discussed, the issue of dating *Seven Days in New Crete* accurately is complicated and contentious, attributable to the fact that Graves worked on many texts simultaneously, stopping and starting as he moved between them and concentrated on other projects or commitments. However, the exercise in dating offers interesting indications of the progress Graves was making with his poetic theory concerning the Muse-goddess as the source of inspiration. *Seven Days in New Crete* seems to offer an alternative perspective on Graves's vision of the Goddess as muse in relation to the poet in that it departs from his practice of using fiction for establishing and endorsing his theory. This variation indicates how *Seven Days in New Crete* differs essentially from the earlier texts; they were written to prove the existence and power of the Goddess whereas it was not.

R. P. Graves notes that Graves's ideas for an unnamed 'utopian' novel can be dated to as early as the summer of 1940 (*Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. 18), but that the original idea of the subject was vastly different from what it was to become. It was at the end of 1939 and formally at the beginning of 1940 that Graves and Riding's intellectual partnership ended (Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, pp. 3-7). Graves had only recently separated from Riding, so it can be deduced that he would naturally still have been influenced by the work they had done together as well as by their plans for future collaboration. The 'Utopian' novel, R. P. Graves writes, was to be based on Riding's 'discarded ideas' 'about a social and political organization'. However, the plans were laid aside in late 1940 on his son David's advice (p. 137). It may be surmised that Graves used the aborted novel to deal imaginatively with the termination of his partnership. The creation of a 'practical organization of decent people' (*Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. 137) is telling, as he would have had definite ideas about the kind of person to be included and, no doubt, the by then estranged Riding and her lover, Schuyler Jackson, would have been excluded. Graves then seems to have envisaged a completely different novel, with little connection to *Seven Days in New Crete*, in 1947 to 1948. A significant shift in his focus can be noted when this proposed novel is placed in the context of the other texts discussed and in relation to the dating of the drafts of *The White Goddess*. While Graves was no longer interested in propounding Riding's theories and ideas, he was inspired to develop and write his own poetics, partly in response to his changing relations with her.

According to Miranda Seymour, a typescript described as 'The Cretan Novel', dating from 1944, was completed by Graves and handed to Beryl Graves on 31 December 1944 to check for inaccuracies (*Robert Graves*, p. 295). Graves writes in a letter to Beryl:

Please note any historical breach of the historical fact that all families in Crete were descended from the mother until the fall of Cnossus (at the end of this book) and even afterwards (except in the Greek colonies)

and that girls had free sexual relations before marriage in honour of the Mother Goddess (Seymour, *Robert Graves*, p. 295).

Seymour comments that 'The Cretan Novel' was

evidently an early version of *Seven Days in New Crete*, which, it has always been assumed, Graves began writing in 1947 after his return to Mallorca. In fact, he was then working on a second draft; the book was first written in 1944 (pp. 295-96).

Graves finished writing *The Golden Fleece* in July 1943; he began further writing in February 1944 and had completed the first draft of *The Roebuck in the Thicket* in June 1944. So he was perhaps writing *King Jesus* and beginning or thinking about a first draft of a 'Cretan novel' at the same time, which he then put aside while he concentrated on other work. According to the letter to Alan Hodge written on 12 June 1944, Graves, as discussed in Chapter Three, had even sent the typescript of *The Roebuck in the Thicket* off to Cape (*Broken Images*, p. 323). Graves abandoned the 'Cretan novel' while he concentrated his attention on other works and projects. It can be hypothesized, then, that the Cretan novel, which is thus titled because it was not intended to be a 'utopian' novel, was to be some kind of historical fiction. The details of the letter clearly indicate that the novel was concerned with an 'historical' Crete; the phrase in the letter to Beryl, 'until the fall of Cnossus' further suggests that the theme would have been similar to that of *The Golden Fleece*, in which the White Goddess reigned supreme, but this time it was set in prehistory during the late Minoan period.

It was when he had completed work on *The Golden Ass* by June 1947, and Karl Gay was typing it out (Graves, *Robert Graves and The White Goddess*, p. 137), that Graves started thinking about a utopian novel based on an entirely original story, rather than on the earlier typescript. He first mentioned this in April or early May 1947 to Hodge (to which he replied in a letter to Graves on 8 May 1947, 'I also like the Utopia idea' (Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. 535)). By March of the same year he had just added 15,000 words to the final draft of *The White Goddess*, which included the chapter 'War in



Heaven' (Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. 134), and he had completed work on the proofs of the entire text that spring. During the same period, Graves was writing letters about a 'utopian' novel and had even suggested a working title in a letter to the American publisher, Creative Press: *The New Cretans* (Presley, 'Fox, Vampire, Witch', p. 28). This clearly was to be a separate text from the 'Cretan novel'; his new subject seemed to be a resolution to the recently written 'War in Heaven' chapter from *The White Goddess*. The novel was to be about a society in which the inhabitants live according to the religion of the White Goddess and was to be based on what would seem to be a futuristic rendering of a subjective interpretation of life during the late Bronze Age.

Letters confirm that Graves was working on the novel more consistently during September 1947 (Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. 145). The background was Graves's stay in hospital in Barcelona during the course of his seven-year-old son William's recovery from an accident (his foot was badly injured when he was knocked off his bicycle by a taxi in August 1947). Perhaps the hospital's anti-spontaneous and sterile environment, as well as boredom caused by the lack of books and family, stimulated the act of imagination that led to writing the novel. Sitting at his son's bedside in the hospital, Graves used the opportunity to write a waking/dream story, which occurs in a 'somewhere-nowhere place' (*Seven Days*, p. 181). The letters Graves wrote about how the novel was developing suggest that he was working on a new story at the time, which had not been planned in an organized or even a structured manner. In a long letter to James Reeves on 13 May 1948, Graves wrote:

The Utopia possibly to be called *7 Days in New Crete* is in the 5<sup>th</sup> day and 4 chapters or so from the end: a damned queer affair. I have had only the vaguest idea what was going to happen and left the logic of events to surprise me, chapter by chapter (*Between Moon and Moon*, p. 59).

It can be argued that *The Golden Fleece*, *King Jesus*, the translation of *The Golden Ass* and *The White Goddess*, although not written simultaneously, are united in Graves's thought

process, with *Seven Days in New Crete* written shortly after the earlier four works (approximately a year after the completion of *The Golden Ass* and *The White Goddess*, the latter, as said, being published on the 21 May 1948 (Higginson and Williams, *Bibliography*, p.98)) and containing a conflation of the ideas presented in them. In this analysis, *Seven Days in New Crete* is not connected with his two previous efforts at writing about Crete, the first of which was unnamed but the second referred to as 'The Cretan Novel'. If this judgement is correct, then Seymour's conjecture is wrong: what Graves was in fact writing in 1944 was a completely different novel and *Seven Days in New Crete* needs to be recognized as a separate text worked on sporadically between June 1947 and June 1948. Moreover, by the time *Seven Days in New Crete* was completed, Graves's theory about the Goddess and the relationship between the poet and his muse had taken an unexpected direction.

#### **Ancient Crete in the Minoan Age**

So far in this thesis, the focus has been upon the prose works written during the conception and completion of *The White Goddess* from 1943 to 1947. Graves concentrated on a concept of history, rewrote periods of the past and drew upon his own interpretation of history to indulge his tendency to mythologize. He attributes the downfall of 'true' poetry to the emergence of patriarchal powers that began to 'substitute patrilinear for matrilinear institutions and remodel or falsify myths to justify social changes' (*White Goddess*, p. 6). The Minoan Age is significant because, according to Graves, the Minoan people are the Pelasgians described in *The Golden Fleece* and *King Jesus*. Additionally, Graves now transforms the Minoan Age that occurred in ancient Crete into a futuristic utopia in *Seven Days in New Crete*.

Sir Arthur Evans's discovery of the Palace of Minos (now called the Palace of Knossos) in 1900 uncovered what he called the 'Minoan' civilization (Platon, *Crete* p. 16). Although there is no proof that Graves would have known Evans personally, they were

neighbours briefly from 1919 to 1921 when they both lived in Boars Hill in Oxford where the latter lived until his death in 1941. Apart from this coincidence, Graves's interests suggest that he would have known of Evans's four volumes of work entitled *The Palace of Minos at Knossos* (1921-1935). What is clear from Evans's supposed discoveries at the time was that the 'Minoan' civilization of Crete, which existed from 1900 to 1300 BC, appeared to be a peace-loving culture, as frescoes found in and around the palace show scenes of pretty women, dolphins and fishermen. Such scenes contrast with those from the Bronze Age where many standard images depict brutality. Although research of the Bronze Age has since made great advances, disputing some of the early interpretations from the first part of the twentieth century, the Minoan period was, according to Evans's reconstruction, an egalitarian culture, as no graves of note had been found, and some archaeologists went so far as to conclude that men and women had equal status (Pomeroy, *Goddesses*, p. 15). Significantly, and seeming to prove Graves's thesis, the research up to the 1940s suggested that the Minoan religion focused on female deities, revealed by the fact that the artefacts and paintings of goddesses outnumber those of gods; and divinity in the human form, writes William Taylour in *The Mycenaeans*, was 'usually portrayed as a goddess; a god play[ing] an inferior role' (p. 43). This would indicate that Graves's choice of Crete as the location for his utopia is consciously and carefully selected rather than arbitrary. However, he remodels the chosen environment so that it reflects his own subjective view of ancient Crete and projects it into the future, where it becomes an apparently ideal environment in which true poetry can flourish and the true poet is accorded his rightful place.

In Graves's futuristic society, the Goddess is again worshipped, but this time in the very distant future of a 'New Cretan Epoch', where men and women appear equal and the poet is granted a certain power. This is another indicator of the logical choice of Crete as a setting. The memory of the Goddess of ancient Crete informs the religious landscape in the



novel's dream. However, Graves's creation of New Crete differs from ancient Crete in that he makes it arise in reaction to and as a protest against what he perceived as the catastrophe of patriarchal civilization during the previous centuries. He imaginatively reconstructs an ancient civilization projecting it to fit his own psychological biases toward a matriarchal society and religion.

### **Gender roles in *Seven Days in New Crete***

The novel is narrated in the first person by Edward Venn-Thomas who has been summoned to New Crete in the distant future. He interrupts the 'utopian' existence of New Crete to sow discord and thus save the civilization from destroying itself. The novel begins as a fantasy: it describes an apparent utopia where the feminine principle reigns, free from conflict and overseeing a futuristic paradise in which women are not only liberated but accepted as the superior sex. The men and women of New Crete, as Graves depicts them, appear to be of equal importance in their prescribed roles. Yet Graves's biases are fully evident, because it is the women who hold the power and the men who readily accept their own subservient place. The lack of tension between the sexes, because the men are happy to yield to female domination, should make for an ideal feminine utopia, yet there is something sterile about this particular matriarchal system which goes against the dynamic of Graves's convictions and suggests an inconsistency in his poetic theory. The stronger argument which Graves presents in the novel concerns the role of the true poet, who is transferred from a world full of discord into an apparently utopian one, and who comes to realize that it is only in the troubled world from which he has come that the poet can fulfil his role through his conflicted relations with the Goddess. At the same time, Graves confronts Venn-Thomas with his own predicament regarding the two aspects of the Goddess, represented in the novel by Sapphire and Erica, figures who function as personifications of Beryl Graves and Laura Riding respectively. While he is able to

historicize his own situation, he cannot adequately imagine the way out of it into a more satisfactory or dignified one.

### **Poetry after *Seven Days in New Crete***

Writing of Dante in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, Ted Hughes comments that the 'Great Goddess [of] female sexuality [...] is a symbol of the Mother of Creation' (p. 4); this can be applied to the way that Graves seeks out the muse in the forms of various attractive young women. Hughes's analysis of Dante provides a framework for an interpretation of Graves's relationship to his muse; the identification of the tormented, rejected lover with the muse represents the magnetic attraction between two poles which are inseparably 'active, and the continuum between them is the subjective life of Dante' (p. 4). This polarity provides the ground of Dante's creativity and can be seen to be true of Graves as well, because it is where the muse-poet's longing for acceptance and a subconscious desire for rejection meet, as is painfully evident in many of Graves's poems of the 1950s and 1960s.

The poetry immediately following *Seven Days in New Crete*, written in the 1950s and early 1960s, is full of the discord of a confused sense of identity, the origins of which began in that novel. This is characteristic of Graves's work written before the creation of the more benevolent sister Goddess, the Black Goddess, first mentioned in 1963 in the essay 'Intimations of the Black Goddess' where he discussed his poetry dating back to 1960. Graves's poetry of this period consistently conveys a certain dissatisfaction regarding the poet's place in the Goddess theory. The majority of the poems in *The Crowning Privilege* (1955), a collection of the 1954-55 annual Clark Lectures, are tense and agitated in tone, but they firmly adhere to his stance of the 'true poet' as, for example, in the despondent poem 'Interview':

Sixty bound books, an entire bookcase full,  
All honest prose, without one duplicate.

Why written? *Answer:* for my self-support –  
I was too weak to dig, too proud to beg.

Worth reading? *Answer:* this array of titles  
Argues a faithful public following (Il. 1-6 (pp. 232-33)).

Having asked the poet at length about his prose, which he calls 'honest', the hypothetical interviewer asks him to 'touch [...] (however lightly)' (8) on his poetry, which the speaker finds offensive, saying that 'this question makes me look a fool / As who breeds dogs because he loves a cat' (9-10). The Gravesian persona plays the role of the rejected suitor but there is some self knowledge, an awareness that the theory is flawed. The interviewer in 'Interview' suggests the failure, the paltriness of Graves's poetry, and this echoes the speaker's dissatisfaction with the Goddess.

In the poem 'Darien' (*Poems and Satires* (1951)), for example, the poetic-persona meets the Goddess in the form of a muse who is not quite of this world. In the fourth stanza the speaker, standing before her, says: 'No awe possessed me, only a great relief' (Il. 20 (p. 190)). He proudly announces, 'See who has come' (24). The poet who sees himself as the old king of the waning year is ready to be sacrificed, to die by her hand in order that her miraculous son, Darien, may be born. In the seventh stanza he implores her:

"Mistress," I cried, "the times are evil  
And you have charged me with their remedy.  
O, where my head is now, let nothing be  
But a clay counterfeit with nacre blink:  
Only look up, so Darien may be born!" (36-40).

The poet is prepared to die and he awaits his fate eagerly, for only through death can he be reborn, like Orpheus, in order to continue to write poetry that is true. The poem ends with the speaker pleading: "'Sweetheart," said I, "strike now, for Darien's sake"' (49). But does she? The poem ends without resolution. He *wants* this indifferent rejection as to die would be the ultimate triumph but instead, he is rejected as 'not worth the sacrifice'. The poet's desperation leads the reader to conclude that he has been abandoned and rejected because the muse, disappearing into the cosmos, feels that he is as yet unworthy of her divine love.



The muse does not allow the annihilation of the self, so the poet cannot hide behind a pose: he can only react to his rejection by being inspired to write tormented verse. Written for Judith Bledsoe (Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, p. 177), this poem indicates that Graves's relation with the muse cannot remain as it is.

The theme of rejection continues in 'Dethronement' (*Poems 1953*):

Hymns to her beauty or to her mercy  
Would be ill-conceived. Your true anguish  
Is all that she requires. You, turned to stone,  
May not speak nor groan, shall stare dumbly,  
Grinning dismay (II. 6-10 (p. 210)).

Poems to the Goddess are futile as this is not what she wants. About to be devoured by the Goddess, the speaker advises: 'Run, though you hope for nothing: to stay your foot / Would be ingratitude' (16-17), for the poet's 'true anguish / Is all she requires' (7-8). The poet resigns himself to being the rejected lover, and as he says in 'Prometheus' in *Poems and Satires*, to the 'intractability of love' (8). It is, after all, the infliction of emotional pain which is the important element of the White Goddess's relationship with her poet. The disillusionment of Venn-Thomas with the Goddess and her regime in *Seven Days in New Crete* mirrors Graves's own state of mind and anticipates his own subsequent rejection of her.

### **Generic Instability of *Seven Days in New Crete***

It has been shown how Graves used the historical fictional genre to bring credibility to his theory. However, in *Seven Days in New Crete*, Graves employs different generic techniques to explore an imaginary future. The novel is interestingly and confusingly classified by critics as a utopian novel, a dystopian novel, a social dystopia, a science fiction novel, even a science-fantasy (the cover advertisement to the 1975 edition of the novel); yet in spite of, or even because of, these labels, it is obvious that the novel is very much affected by the post-war period in which it was written, as well as by Graves's own development of his White Goddess theory. The various classifications of *Seven Days in*

*New Crete* indicate how the problematic generic identity of the text reflects the conflict within Graves's theory. Graves's novel has one aspect which elevates it from a limited plot design. *Seven Days in New Crete* may well follow the rigid conventions of the utopian as well as, paradoxically, the dystopian novel genre, but it is also a novel about poetic inspiration. Defining *Seven Days in New Crete* exclusively as a utopian or dystopian novel is therefore inadequate and this generic instability contributes to the novel's thematic ideological complexity.

In trying to define the novel more succinctly, John Carey's Introduction to *The Faber Book of Utopias* is instructive in shedding light on the novel:

Utopia means *nowhere* or *no-place*. It has often been taken to mean *good place*, through confusion of its first syllable with the Greek *eu* [...]. As a result of this mix-up, another word dystopia has been invented, to mean bad place. But, strictly speaking, imaginary good places and imaginary bad places are all utopias, or nowhere (p. xi).

While the traditional view of utopia is of an ideal society which possesses a seemingly perfect social, political and legal system, according to Carey's definition it can be argued that a 'dystopia' is actually a 'utopia' but seen from a different perspective. It is in fact the case that dystopias are reversals of utopias. To its inhabitants, New Crete, for example, is an ideal land that cannot be bettered; it is not they who have a problem with their existence, it is the Goddess who realizes that conforming to a system, is not enough for a fulfilling existence.

The social conditions in which the utopian novel is written are also relevant to this discussion of Graves's handling of the genre: utopian fiction can be characterized, in its late nineteenth and twentieth century forms, as a critical response to the social change or upheaval associated with industrialization and modernization. The vast changes and social misery that occurred, for example, with and after the First World War had a huge impact on the literary culture and brought about an increase in dystopian novels during the 1920s. At that time, novels also depicted a futuristic landscape, but this was an expression of

disillusionment, of fear and uncertainty, of depression and lack of trust in the security of the future. The conditions under which British dystopian fiction thrived existed during specific periods: at the end of the nineteenth century, and then after the First and Second World Wars, with Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) and *1984* (1949), being the most famous expressions of dystopian dissatisfaction and anxiety.

There is a corresponding connection between *Seven Days in New Crete* and *1984* by Orwell. Apart from both being published in 1949, they are also each concerned with the depiction of a futuristic society in response to post-war conditions. Whilst the beginnings of stricter post-war control of the individual are encapsulated in the figure of Big Brother in *1984*, it is the Mother Goddess in *Seven Days in New Crete* who appears to watch every move of the inhabitants, thus stifling their true sense of autonomy. Carey writes that to 'count as a utopia, an imaginary place must be an expression of desire. To count as a dystopia, it must be an expression of fear' ('Introduction', p. xi). *Seven Days in New Crete* is an ambiguous text in that it is masked as a utopian treatise, New Crete being born of desire. By contrast, Orwell's *1984* is a grim warning about the future based on the demise of individuality through the intervention of the state. Yet the worlds created in both texts are expressions of fear: *Seven Days in New Crete* and *1984* spring up at an identical moment in history to warn the world that 'inspiration' and individual freedom of expression are the only ways in which the artist can be original and thrive even if this means living in the midst of conflict and unhappiness.

#### **Poet-Protagonist in *Seven Days in New Crete***

It is significant that Graves chose a poet for his protagonist; one who is destined to disrupt the equilibrium of New Crete: an unconventional hero or anti-hero. The choice of summoning a poet to this future world, rather than a detective, politician or soldier, is surprising to Venn-Thomas in the fiction (and hence also for the reader), because he



expected someone else to have been chosen, as he puts it, 'with a greater knowledge of contemporary affairs than myself' (p. 3). He declares, 'I am neither a scientist, nor a statistician, nor the editor of an encyclopaedia' (p. 3). Nor is he, as he later adds (as the author of many historical novels as well as *The White Goddess*, Graves writes tongue-in-cheek here) 'even a trained historian' (p. 3). He has chosen a (true) poet as his protagonist because of his belief that only a true poet has the perception and courage to reveal what is false and, as the events of the novel develop, this is exactly what Venn-Thomas does in New Crete. Graves explains in his Foreword to a posthumous book of poetry entitled *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets* by Alun Lewis:

The common people do not understand poetry, are shy of poetry, and though they have been taught to admire the true poets of the past are loath to admit that the race is not yet extinct. This is why very little work by living poets has a wide circulation except what is comfortably third-hand and third-rate. The people are not to be blamed: their difficulty is that despite the poetic profession, an aroma of holiness still clings to the title 'poet', as it does to the title 'saint' and 'hero', both of which are properly reserved for the dead (p. 7).

Through the figure of Venn-Thomas in *Seven Days in New Crete*, Graves reveals that while the poet is not valued in the twentieth century, neither, paradoxically, is the seemingly ideal environment of New Crete the solution. The tension of the novel lies in the realization that the enemy of 'poetic truth' is just such an environment, as it lacks stimulation and is stifling for the poet. It is only in the imperfect world against which New Crete has rebelled that the poet can make a difference.

Graves organizes the text to show that the Mother-goddess, Mari, has trouble in her ideal world and needs the help of a mortal being: a poet. Not only that, but through the integrity displayed in one of his poems Venn-Thomas is considered to be a true poet (and therefore a legitimate surrogate of Graves himself). The novel is a Gravesian fantasy in which the poet seems to have magical powers. Graves writes in Chapter One of *The White Goddess* that 'the great prestige that [...] clings to the name of poet [...] must be rooted in some sort of magic' (p. 13) and this also applies to the plot of the novel. The mysterious

nature of the poet who holds the secret of poetic truth is of great importance to New Crete and is ironically the key to the undoing of its society.

By Chapter Four, Graves makes Venn-Thomas realize that he has been brought to New Crete for a special purpose – to destroy the security and complacency of the New Cretans. As Canary writes, ‘Venn-Thomas is the Goddess’s instrument of change’ (*Robert Graves*, p. 101). He wonders whether those around him are affecting a pose, because of a ‘secret motive – a public, rather than a private one’ (p. 37). Why should the Goddess need to summon him to impart his poetic wisdom, so that chaos would occur in the seemingly perfect New Crete? In Graves’s ideal scenario, the poet, Venn-Thomas, is the hero, chosen by the Goddess to rescue humanity from destruction. Can the world of the future be saved by a poet from the certain death induced by its own complacency? As Graves wrote in a letter to James Reeves on 13 May 1949, the theme of *Seven Days in New Crete* is ‘the problem of evil: how much evil is needed to sustain “the good life”’ (*Between Moon and Moon*, p. 59). It is complacency that is ‘evil’ because it sustains the comfortable good life and is therefore anti-dynamic. Destruction is not evil in such a context, it is necessary for change. The ‘rotten boughs’ of New Crete are complacently anti-life and anti-spontaneity; as the witch Sally, proclaims, there is “no healing without destruction” (*Seven Days*, p. 14). Venn-Thomas’s presence causes chaos, the catalyst that heralds change and a return to the dynamic of his world. The Goddess says: “I will whistle up this seed of wind to blow the rotten boughs from my trees” (p. 202). The poet is therefore summoned to force a revolt against the rationalization of New Cretan codes of conduct. Venn-Thomas emerges as the saviour of their future. The implications of such a change for New Cretan society are far-reaching, because chaos is brought about by a man from the ‘Christian’ epoch, but also someone who is necessarily a true poet; a poet ready to surrender himself for the Goddess’s love.

In *The Golden Fleece* and *King Jesus*, both with first person narrators, Graves identified himself first with Orpheus, and then with the narrator Agabus. Although Graves also saw himself as Venn-Thomas, his preferred identification remains with Orpheus, the singer, poet and seer, who was destroyed in order to be reincarnated (Day, *Swifter Than Reason*, p. 173). This is precisely why Venn-Thomas does not die at the end of the narrative; the Goddess does not finally choose him for her lover. The masochistic drive that compels Graves to write only arises out of his unrequited, unconsummated relations with the muse. Ultimately the poet must be rejected in order for these poems to emerge. Graves's poetic persona resembles that of the tormented protagonist, Severin, in *Venus im Pelz* (*Venus in Furs*) (1870) by Sacher-Masoch, who exclaims to his lover, Wanda:

It is [...] true that the greatest passions rise out of opposites. We are such opposites, almost enemies. That is why my love is part hatred, part fear. In such a relation, only one can be the hammer, and the other, the anvil. I wish to be the anvil. I cannot be happy when I must look down upon the woman I love. I want to adore a woman, and this I can only do when she is cruel towards me (p. 89).

And now Graves, in his essay entitled 'The Personal Muse' (1961), writes

The hairs stand on end, the eyes water, the throat constricts, the skin crawls, and a shiver runs down the spine when one writes or reads a true poem: because this is necessarily an invocation of the White Goddess, or Muse, the Mother of All Living, the ancient power of love and terror – the female spider or the bee whose courtship means murder (*Collected Writings*, pp. 338-39).

The striking resemblance between the dominatrix and slave-lover relationship and Graves's understanding of true poetry, with regard to the poet and Muse-goddess relationship, suggests that the poet must *seem* to be the willing victim in his poetry, to become a slave to the Goddess. Just as Severin contrives his own ordeal, so Graves achieves exactly what he wants by consciously manipulating the Muse-goddess to suit his needs. The Mother-goddess of the novel harks back psychoanalytically to the unconscious memory of perceived female omnipotence, to memories of infancy, helplessness in the mother's arms – when the mother is sometimes experienced as predatory rather than



loving. While *Seven Days in New Crete* shows what would happen if women wielded power, it is more about what happens to the man who is the true poet under such a regime. There is the Goddess represented by Sally and Erica, both of whom attempt to seduce the unsuspecting Venn-Thomas, and also the 'safe' Sapphire, the nymph of the month who seems to be Antonia's New Cretan 'double': the maiden who becomes the mother. Venn-Thomas responds not to New Crete in the abstract but to his relationships with these figures who twist and turn him at will. Even the conclusion is attributed to the Goddess, because when she is undermined by her self-imposed regime in New Crete, Venn-Thomas brings about the change that she ultimately wills. Both the Mistress and the Slave have such power. The Goddess, then, is the dominatrix, the ideal male fantasy, and the poet is her willing acolyte. Canary writes: 'As a poet, he chooses the Erica-Muse and accepts the destruction and suffering entailed by such a choice; as a man, he escapes from the whirlwind and returns to his stable home' (*Robert Graves*, p. 101). The problem with Venn-Thomas is that, displaced from his own time, he does not fit into the role of slave. Only when back in his own time can he play such a role.

### **Poetic Truth**

Like other utopian texts, the creation of this compensatory order, articulating a wish for a better place, is Graves's response to his own dissatisfaction with the present. It is specifically a reaction to the bleak pessimism of the twentieth century, ravaged by two world wars and left with the loss of faith in any prospect of lasting peace. The erosion of belief in a loving god who will reward the good and punish the wicked had given rise to a common perception that God, if he existed, was simply indifferent to humanity. In *The Death of Tragedy*, Steiner writes that

God grew weary of the savagery of man. Perhaps he was no longer able to control it and could no longer recognize His image in the mirror of creation. He left the world to its own inhuman devices and dwells now in some other corner of the universe so remote that his messengers cannot even reach us (p. 353).

Unlike Orwell, who warns his readers of the abhorrent world being created for the future, Graves's pessimism is directed primarily to the situation of the poet, for this reflects the fact that he is unable to find appropriate ways to meet the new conditions of such a world. Already anticipated at the close of the nineteenth century, this artistic anxiety was reflected in the work of the artists of the *fin de siècle*, and affected Graves as well, only to be compounded and confirmed by the First World War a few years later. It impelled writers in particular to seek new forms and ideas, leaving them cynical and disillusioned (Thornton, *Poetry of the 1890s*, p. xxxviii). Attempts to counteract such pessimism in the form of, for example, Georgian poetry and then the Modernist movement, failed to satisfactorily answer the needs of the poet working in the lyrical tradition prized by Graves. *Seven Days in New Crete*, therefore, can also be regarded as an indictment of the work of those poets who emerged after the First World War, who, in Graves's view, believed that finding truth through poetry was a matter of technical virtuosity and meretricious display. Quinn observes that both 'Venn-Thomas and Graves are alienated poets, out of touch with the technological world they inhabit. Both hate being in London, and both are dedicated to the worship of the White Goddess' ('Introduction', p. xxii). Through the Venn-Thomas character, Graves shows his own dissatisfaction with the current state of poetry, especially with those Modernist writers who did not share his search for truth. Graves was highly critical of Modernist poets, who he argued were satisfied merely with making their poetry sound impressive. Ultimately they represented 'a triumph of form over content' and therefore a fundamental obstacle to truth (Alvarez, 'The New Poetry', p. 23). He therefore peopled his works with anti-Modernists like 'Venn-Thomas', to solve his own personal issues with Modernism. *Seven Days in New Crete* is also an outcry against false and uninspired poetry.

The role of the poet that Graves developed is of course retrograde and harks back to an earlier phase of English culture. The forerunner of his destructive muse, or *femme*

*fatale*, can be clearly seen in the muse who inspired the mostly doomed Decadent poets of the 1890s: Dowson, Johnson and Beardsley, for example (Thornton, *Poetry of the 1890s*, p. xxxiv). These three – but there were others – appeared to fulfil the destiny of the ultimate muse-poet. A prescribed utopian paradise where the Goddess rules supreme, such as one finds in *Seven Days in New Crete*, is poetic death to the true poem as represented by these muse-haunted writers. Security and passive acceptance bring about sterility not vision. In order for the true poet to thrive he must withstand the confusion, decay, aggression, imperfection in the world around him, remaining uncorrupted. It is the struggle to win the Goddess's love in such a world that gives a deeper poetic meaning to verse.

It is the decay of civilization which brings about the contemporary world's destruction by the Goddess. The futuristic world depicted in the novel has come about as a consequence of the somewhat bizarre device of an epidemic set off by the White Goddess, 'a white-faced, hawk-nosed, golden-haired woman' (*Seven Days*, p. 40), which resulted in all the logical people (logic being the most 'valued civic quality' (p. 40) of the late Christian epoch) hallucinating and becoming insane. The Goddess 'whipped them round and round as if they were tops and urged them to acts of insane violence' (p. 40). A new ideology was then decided upon in Crete, founded upon a belief 'that a new religion could spring only from primitive soil' (p. 41). After much trial and error, the religious principle was pronounced by the New Cretans to be that 'no product or process was acceptable unless love had a part in it' (p. 44) – in other words, nothing should be produced or perceived commercially or instrumentally. It was affirmed in terms that reversed the Shelleyan formula that only if the poet regained his rightful place as 'the acknowledged legislator[s] of the new world' (p. 44) could this new civilization thrive. However, the new religion created from the 'primitive soil' (p. 41) that one finds in New Crete has certain unforeseen negative implications for the poet, since the Goddess has had the social order



purged of the struggle between good and evil which is essential, according to Graves, to the creative poetic act.

### **Seven Days in New Crete: A Dystopian Text**

This is the dilemma of the utopia that Graves has created: it is built on the potential for limiting and even destroying humanity (Carey, 'Introduction', p. xi). Rather than maintaining its utopian (idealistic) flavour, the novel descends into a dystopian text. Although Graves recognizes and acknowledges the female source of inspiration, he paradoxically discovers that the true poet cannot write poetry in a world in which the Goddess officially reigns supreme; that legislated perfection and stability do not provide the dynamism of the struggle necessary for the muse-poet. Rather, it is the conflict and chaos of modernity which stimulate the poet to create, to communicate. That the true poet can only thrive in a world full of discord and strife suggests that the White Goddess can better serve the poet in such circumstances. In his Introduction to *The Golden Fleece and Seven Days in New Crete*, Quinn writes of the novel: 'In Utopian New Crete, however, despite the reaffirmation of matriarchal values – a world where women appraise men – the White Goddess herself proves to be dissatisfied with the complacent society she has inspired' (p. xxii). Ultimately, *Seven Days in New Crete* is an (unsuccessful) attempt to place the true poet in his ideal world, a world in which the people produce results which are far from ideal, despite its apparent moral and imaginative perfection.

### **Seven Days in New Crete as a Satirical Text**

When examining Graves's style it is important to note that although he employs various genres the principle mode of *Seven Days in New Crete* is satire. In an article discussing *Utopia* (1516) by Sir Thomas More entitled 'Satire in the Utopia', A. R. Heiserman writes that 'some admirers of More's *Utopia* have used the term "satire" to prove that it is essentially a *jeu d'esprit*. Others have used it to contend that *Utopia* is essentially a serious

didactic argument' (p. 163). Although *Seven Days in New Crete* contains humour and seems even light-hearted in places, Graves has in fact a serious message which is consistent with the expectations of the genre. How then can Graves's purpose or 'real intention' be reconciled with the satiric and comedic elements of the narrative? ('Satire in the Utopia', p. 163). He satirizes false poetry but the irony is that this false verse is created under the Goddess's own dominion. Thus, Graves seems self-critical and questioning of the White Goddess theory: there must be something lacking in the quality of inspiration, and he shows that it is not enough to be inspired by the Goddess. Graves ensures that Venn-Thomas's reaction is to implement the destruction of New Crete and then to return to his own epoch. Graves is left with the paradox: how to reconcile his poetic theory of being a true poet with a hostile world that is full of strife and discontent. *Seven Days in New Crete* begins as an evaluation of Gravesian poetics, and the flaws revealed by his theory point to the inevitable outcome that there is no escape from the real world where the poet must endure the struggle to do his duty.

### **Poetry of New Crete**

*Seven Days in New Crete* is crammed with quotations from poetry, familiar poems as well as those ascribed to the 'New Cretan' future. There are references and cross-references to earlier poets, such as Donne, Coleridge and Lear, with extracts from their poems in the novel. The poems are not a decorative addition but are functional in that they contrast with the supposedly 'true' New Cretan poetry by Dodet, Vives and Cleopatra. The fatal flaw of this utopia is that it is legislated, pre-ordained, lifeless: there is no dynamic act of will in creation, no voluntary submission, which makes it impossible for true poems to be written. Graves believes that the power of the poet resembles that of a saviour, and poetry is depicted as a living force. In Graves's determination of the sequence of events, Venn-Thomas is critical and scornful of these works and his didactic role in the novel is to re-

educate the New Cretans and the reader in what it is to be Graves's idea of a true poet, so that they will therefore be less tolerant of false poets and their works.

Graves contended that there have been very few true poets, arguing that in a patriarchal society the false poets have been tainted by the Apolline. In his third lecture as Professor of the Oxford Chair of Poetry, delivered during Michaelmas Term in 1965 and published as 'Lecture Three' in *Poetic Craft and Principle*, Graves said:

One cannot separate [...] poets] from their work: a flaw in character will always reveal itself as a flaw in poetic craft. And the self-satisfaction derived from joining any society, cult or movement, whose laws they consent to adopt, will prevent them from insulating their work against the corrosion of dogma or convention (pp. 156-57).

Consequently, Graves believed it was not for the poet to be politically proactive as were certain poets of the 1930s such as W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender and Ezra Pound, who were rebelling against their political environment. Their writings have a revolutionary flavour as they viewed poetry and their own role in society as a means of bringing about change. Graves was critical of this calling, commenting in his second Oxford Poetry lecture in 1964: 'A poet is often tempted to become a 'do-gooder' by organizing political interference with the mechanarchy' (*Poetic Craft*, p. 147). Such poets, for Graves, were false, and their poetry not real and true. These unorthodox views caused him to dismiss poets such as the above poets, as well as Milton and Wordsworth, to name a few, in a petty and vindictive manner as they were not, for Graves, inspired by the Lunar Muse. Indeed, the rigidity of his views meant that many great poets were dismissed. Ultimately Graves's views do not hold up under scrutiny, as they are unbalanced and expose his egocentric interest in his own work as a muse poet.

Unlike the protagonist of *1984*, who has only a fleeting memory of the contemporary world of the reader, Venn-Thomas finds himself in a distant but unspecified time in the future with a very vivid memory of the world of the 1940s from which he has been summoned, that the New Cretans call the 'Late-Christian epoch' (*Seven Days*, p. 3).



The exact date is not specified, because Venn-Thomas would rather not know how far he has come at first, as it might make him feel 'uncomfortably primitive' (p. 3), and he adds that knowledge of the future distracts 'attention from the present and often deranges people's minds' (p. 8). Later he is led to believe that he is there to teach the New Cretans about existence in the patriarchal period which began with Judaism and 'King Jesus'. New Crete is about the creation of a 'pseudo-archaic civilization' (p. 38) in response to a godless world and as a result of the envy, resentment and hostility (p. 45) of twentieth century civilization. It is, in fact, the destruction of human values in favour of 'mechanization' and 'standardization' (p. 9) that has according to Graves brought New Crete into existence.

The rewriting of history is palpably a Gravesian tendency, evidenced in *The Golden Ass*, *The Golden Fleece*, *King Jesus*, and *The White Goddess*. *Seven Days in New Crete* is no exception. Quant, the English interpreter of New Crete in the novel, who guides and translates for Venn-Thomas, much as Virgil does for Dante, views the destruction of the late Christian epoch as inevitable because the 'Father-god' 'is an artificial concept', the by-product of which is 'unlimited scientific war' (p. 197). All true poets are forced to rebel in the face of this great crisis of the twentieth century. Quant observes:

It seems [...] that a Late Christian poet was committed in the name of integrity to resist, doubt, scoff, destroy and play the fool; it was only when he met with a like-minded fellow-poet, or with a woman on whom the spirit of the Goddess had secretly descended, that he felt all was not yet lost (p. 199).

Here Graves's view of himself and his own personal and poetical choices and practices are defended; his kindred feelings for certain fellow poets, and the encouragement he felt from them. A self-portrait, Graves believed it showed that he held the key to poetic truth, and its price was that as a poet he must stand apart from the world to fulfil his duty toward his craft. It is only by standing alone that the poet's work can remain pure and untainted. However, as Graves continues this argument in his second Oxford Poetry lecture of 1965,

the 'poet need not be a rebel. [...] He must admit his place in the society into which he was born, while tacitly criticizing it by unrebelling but self-assured abstention from routine thinking or acting' (*Poetic Craft*, p. 157). For Graves, the poet's strength lies in his very ability to recognize what is wrong with the world and to realize the anguish of the age in his poetry, not through politics or moral criticism, but through his own humanity. Yet it is his lack of tolerance of other poetic versions of humanity which exposes the essential flaw of Graves's criticism.

The utopian novel, as Carey has said, means nowhere or no-place, and yet in this novel there is a triple presentation of the 'Old' and 'New' Crete. Suppositions may be made about how before and after relate to one another, and there is a level at which New Crete may be read as a goddess-worshipping conception of a futuristic Crete. But there is also a third place, or a triple presentation, and that is Venn-Thomas's world within New Crete. The landscape is recognizable to Venn-Thomas because it is his world, it is the illusion of living a fantasy through creation. To Venn-Thomas, the topography of New Crete bears a resemblance to places in France where he has lived: 'the district was familiar. That rocky headland, the low hill, with the church of Sainte Véronique on the top – except that it was not the same church, and perhaps not a church at all' (p. 2). While the physical surroundings resemble those he has known, the similarity is deceptive, leading him to assume a false sense of security; to believe that he is, indeed, a welcome part of New Cretan society.

The world in which Venn-Thomas finds himself is one in which the muse-poet, and therefore Robert Graves, has long desired to live. For this reason, the familiarity to Venn-Thomas of the landscape of New Crete extends to Graves, because it also forms, in a sense, part of his own spatial memory. New Crete belongs to a part of Venn-Thomas's interior world, of present thought and past memory, making him even closer to Graves and to memory. Going for a walk, he recognizes his surroundings and thinks: 'That's where the

*Coq d'Or* used to be, and the stream is still running, and look, there's a new mill exactly where ours was' (p. 66). This leads Venn-Thomas to fantasize morbidly that he might come across the foundations of his ruined house and even his own grave. During this time of simultaneous dreaming and waking, Venn-Thomas is aware that he has been dead a long time, lending an ethereal and posthumous aspect to his presence. The actual landscape, although altered by time, society and culture is one that he also knows well because he once lived there (p. 66). The landscape consists of such features as the familiar headland, hill and church: 'But the Mediterranean had retreated a mile or more, a broad belt of farmland stretched nearly to the horizon, and the bare hills were now covered with trees. I thought they looked much better this way [...]' (p. 2). New Crete, seemingly so remote, separated from the present by hundreds of years, is actually not so alien. New Crete is an expression of Venn-Thomas's own fantasy which coincides with Graves's, and ultimately, part of that fantasy is to free himself of it, because like Graves, he must face the reality of his poetic theory.

Canary writes that the 'Utopian impulse is a displacement to the future of the myth of the Golden Age; to project a future Utopia is to design one's own Paradise' (*Robert Graves*, p. 99). New Crete is primarily Venn-Thomas's/Graves's ideal society, where the worship of the Goddess conforms to his own convictions as a muse-poet. It first appears to be the embodiment of Venn-Thomas's hopes and ideals, where the poet would no longer be at odds with society, but an integral part of it. However, Graves's creation of New Crete, although at the outset appearing to be an ideal future Paradise, is actually far from it, and the element of familiarity is all the more ironic as the ambience described in the text gradually reveals itself to be starkly different from its first appearance.

Graves juxtaposes two separate worlds – ancient Crete and New Crete – signifying in his own experience of writing the novel, the co-existence of a 'waking' reality and a dream reality, where there is a split in consciousness. While Venn-Thomas is asleep in his



own epoch, he can spend months or years in New Crete 'in a dream lasting no longer than from one breath to the next' (p. 11). In this confused state of consciousness within unconsciousness, the poet yearns to be guided by an idealized muse; yet within the dream of New Crete, it is the Goddess who needs *his* help to create upheaval in this utopia. The unplanned plot of the novel surprised even Graves as it unfolded, as he wrote in a letter to James Reeves on 13 May 1949 five days after beginning (*Between Moon and Moon*, p. 59). The novel may tell of a dream of Venn-Thomas's adventures in an imaginary land in which the Goddess holds sway, but it is the manner in which the writing of it unfolded which is interesting; and it leads to an entirely unexpected conclusion when compared with Graves's previous novels.

### **The Goddess and the Poet**

Venn-Thomas finds that worship of the Mother-goddess – Goddess Mari, Queen of Heaven, in New Crete – has evolved into a new religion similar to the pre-Christian religion of Europe in which agricultural festivals were celebrated. Despite the alien social codes, he feels at first that he has finally returned to the Mother where he is protected and valued. When asked by the Goddess how he finds New Crete, Venn-Thomas/Graves is overcome with bashfulness and reverence. Like a little boy being addressed by his mother and blushing, he asks, 'Why ask me, Mother?' (p. 150). She replies 'Mothers often ask their children questions to which they already know the answers' (p. 151). There is something at once comforting and disarming in the exchange between mother and son, Goddess and acolyte. Yet a tension emerges between what Venn-Thomas wants for himself and what the Goddess wants from him. The poet wants to be acknowledged as a true poet, and the Goddess's dependence on him is an affirmation and confirmation of his own sense of poetic worth. However, her needs cause Venn-Thomas to look critically at himself as a muse-poet, first in the world from which he has come and then in New Crete. He finds the ideal world to which he has come not wholly acceptable, and the ironically

deadening effect of its belief structure provokes him to think more critically about the creative process. In an essay entitled, 'Henry James: The Private Universe', Graham Greene states: 'In all writers there occurs a moment of crystallization when the dominant theme is plainly expressed, when the private universe becomes visible' (*Collected Essays*, p. 21). In Graves's work, the same 'dominant theme' appears in almost every fictional work and poem following *The Golden Fleece*: the White Goddess and Graves's – the poet's – dedication to the muse. Yet it is in *Seven Days in New Crete* that the 'moment of crystallization' occurs as Graves begins to examine his own view of himself as a muse-poet through the character of Venn-Thomas and he uses a futuristic context to analyze his role in his own psychodrama.

Since the relationships between Venn-Thomas and the female characters are all based on sexual attraction, these women are drawn mainly in terms of their desirability, and the reader enjoys this vicariously through the protagonist's relations with each one. Two of them are significant as they resonate with the female figures in Venn-Thomas's waking life in the twentieth century, as they also do in Graves's own life. There is Sapphire with her youthful beauty, who charms Venn-Thomas into feeling an unnatural desire for her, because of her resemblance to his daughter. In the background, in his reality, is Venn-Thomas's wife, Antonia, safely domestic, asleep in their bed. The guilt that accompanies his disloyalty fails to prevent him from committing adultery on several occasions. Finally, there is the Goddess disguised in the form of the anarchic Erica, Venn-Thomas's former lover, who purposely causes mischief by her presence in New Crete.

Reflecting the conflict in Graves's own life, and his own ambivalence towards women and his relations with them as muse figures, Venn-Thomas grapples with his dependence on the likes of Antonia and Sapphire, which runs contrary to his attraction to the more dangerous Erica. This trio of women personifies the triple Goddess: first as the maiden, Sapphire, then as Venn-Thomas's wife in his real life, the gentle Antonia who

symbolizes the mother; and finally, the ruthless Erica who is the crone. Venn-Thomas asks himself,

had I ever loved Antonia, who was a one-man woman, as much as I had loved Erica, a queen-bee if ever there was one? Not as intensely perhaps, not as insanely certainly, and how else can one measure love, except by its intensity and insanity? But then I had never hated Antonia even for a moment, as I hated Erica (p. 165).

While Beryl Graves appears in Graves's biography to encompass the beneficent side of the Goddess, Graves could never bring himself to make the final emotional break from his masochistic fascination with the cruelty of the 'queen-bee':

Antonia had my heart; but it was only fair to admit that Erica had not recently displayed what I used to call her glow-worm light – an almost phosphorescent aura of sexuality that etherealized her not at all faultless features. In the old days she could switch it on and off at pleasure, and when it was in full glow, I was at her mercy [...]. There was peace in my love for Antonia, peace and confidence which I wanted never to be disturbed. Antonia was good, in the simplest sense of the word [...]. Erica was evil (p. 165).

Yet he is dependent and needs both types of women. Graves has defined this mixed desire in the poem called 'Ruby and Amethyst' (*Collected Poems 1961*): 'Two women, one as good as bread, / Faithful to every promise. / Two women: one as rare as myrrh, / Who never pledges faith' (III. 5-8 (p. 35)). The first, Ruby, is the ideal to whom he aspires because of her beauty and constancy; and Amethyst, the second, is the personification of the White Goddess.

There is no doubt that Graves's White Goddess is hostile and ruthless. The poetry he wrote after *Seven Days in New Crete* coincides with the emergence in the early 1950s of his first muse figure, Judith Bledsoe, to whom Graves addressed numerous poems. A mild example of this hostile Goddess is seen in the response to the muse's rejection of the poet-lover in the short poem 'Lovers in Winter' (*Poems 1953*), where the speaker attempts to be philosophically stoical about his pained relations with the 'incarnation' of the Goddess.

The posture of the tree  
Shows the prevailing wind;  
And ours, long misery



When you are long unkind.

But forward, look, we lean –  
Not backwards as in doubt –  
And still with branches green  
Ride our ill weather out (ll. 1-8 (p. 205)).

The poem works on two levels of discourse. Most obviously it can be interpreted as the poet describing the subject of his inspiration and the writing process. However, it can also be read thematically as the depiction of the vicissitudes of love. The tree is a traditional symbol of love, regeneration and creativity, and the wind in line two is a hostile force, forcing the tree to sway. Furthermore, its 'posture', in line 1, is bent by the wind's blows, as the speaker feels he is bent, by his lover's unkindness. Yet instead of responding in anger, the speaker accepts with painful understanding that suffering will cease if only he – the scorned lover – patiently awaits his beloved's return to him. There is in line 5 a hint of a welcome discovery that the poet and his lover are leaning forward, in other words, inclining towards the positive, rather than 'backwards as in doubt'. This new direction is also suggestive of the future, a future where there is reward for suffering. This positivity is reflected in the branches which are still green, a symbol of life and hope that love will prevail. The poem is about the poet's endurance against terrible odds. There is, despite the anguish, optimism in this poem which is indicated by Graves's use of technique. He uses organic metaphors, and associates his own attitude of fortitude with emblems of rooted nature enduring against tempestuous weather conditions. The meaning here is the knowledge that the storm will pass, and so too will the poet's pain.

A later poem, 'The End of the World', from *The Crowning Privilege* (1955), is an example of a world in crisis that reflects the status of the poet. Here, the end of the world is imminent: 'at a sign' (ll. 1 (p. 230)) all will 'plunge', 'From everything to nothing' (9). The world cannot continue as it has been, and there is little consolation for the true poet, as he too will fall with the rest, but 'A buoyant couch will bear you up at last, / Aloof, alone [...] (11-12). Graves has finally arrived, the poem suggests, at a turning point in observing

that the world only reflects the White Goddess's cruelty and hostility. In his current relations with the White Goddess he, the poet, may survive the fall, but he will be alone.

The tension within *Seven Days in New Crete* is that one type, ruby, the ideal, does not override the other, amethyst, the White Goddess type: both are necessary. Sapphire, who fits into the ruby role, in *Seven Days in New Crete* is the archetypal child-woman: she arouses desire with her innocent beauty, her offer of safety from danger. (Erica snipes: 'And you've fallen for her already, haven't you? Cradle-snatching, I call it' (p. 69)). She appears to be 'an improved model' (p. 38) of Antonia: 'younger, brighter-eyed, less sharp-tongued, more energetic, more eloquent, more beautiful even, with a closer resemblance to the ideal Antonia of my love than Antonia herself' (p. 38). She is both untroubled and disconcertingly open in the manifestation of her desire for Venn-Thomas. Ultimately, she is the realization of an ideal that is fixed and miraculously attained by the poet. Sapphire, like ruby and amethyst, represents not only the Desirable Woman, but a sought-after precious jewel. To label women as jewels is to objectify them, to see them as desirable possessions. Graves, and his surrogate in New Crete, Venn-Thomas, want to possess the jewels. Venn-Thomas admits to Sapphire, 'I can't love a woman unless I can convince myself [...] that I'll love her for the rest of my life. So I try to see her as I saw her first' (p. 26); the sparkle and lustre of jewels may remain constant, unlike people who age and develop through time. Sapphire's observation of Venn-Thomas can also be applied to Graves: 'you're content to go on seeing what you first saw' (p. 25), in Sapphire's case, the lover/daughter.

The daughter is simultaneously the soul-mate, the idealized child-bride (and child-whore), female companion, and the good, nurturant mother. She is the girl-woman who is exquisitely responsive to the father's needs of the flesh and the spirit, simultaneously fulfilling his infantile longings and adult desires without making any threatening demands of her own. She is also the father's feminine and, to a male, passive and childish self (Kakar and Ross, *Tales of Love, Sex and Danger*, p.125).

The many muses in Graves's life reflected his inability to see the flesh and blood reality of the woman underlying the muse/image; he saw what he wished to see and this remained fixed until the woman/muse-object of his desire was no longer satisfied with this deception. In contrast to Sapphire, there is Sally who is destructive because she is the sexual aggressor, a role which does not conform to Venn-Thomas's code of conduct. Sally finally rejects the New Cretan moral system and plays by her own rules, only to be destroyed by her non-conformity – since New Crete is a paradigm of conformity and the tension she had created there was her own undoing. New Crete may fail as a utopian prototype, but it can be called dystopia because the characters rebel, like Winston Smith, despite themselves, against their self-imposed rules.

Sapphire, forever fixated on the desire for the father, who fulfils his rising need for the safe intimacy of a lover/daughter-figure, is an example of a woman who – as Irigaray writes in her revision of Freud's ideas – 'remains forever fixated on the desire for the father, remains subject to the father and to his law, for fear of losing his love, which is the only thing capable of giving her any value at all' (*This Sex Is Not One*, p. 86). If Venn-Thomas's behaviour is examined from a psychoanalytic-feminist approach, such as that taken by Germaine Greer, he can be interpreted as reducing woman to an object, into something other than what she is, so that the truth of her being is denied (Greer, *Slip-Shod Sibyls*, p. 2). She no longer resembles a living, earthbound woman but is transformed into a notion of perfection. Inspiration may be taken, therefore, from the woman who, thus transformed, stimulates the possibility of true poetic creation. She is something *other*, sublimated into a loftier ideal. Sapphire escapes with Venn-Thomas from the menace of New Crete once she sees through its sham.

These misgivings about the construction of the female figure in the text can also of course be applied more generally to Graves and his poetics. In the first poem of the volume *Food for Centaurs* (1960), 'Twice of the Same Fever', there is no respite – death and death



again; there is the same excitement and anguish in the pursuit of the Goddess: 'The chill, the frantic pulse, brows burning, / Lips broken by thirst' (III. 5-6 (p. 3)); the passion is felt, yet there is no hope of solace from the cruel muse's hand. His sensation is like that of the cats who the speaker hears on a moonlit night in 'Catkind', from the same volume: "But when we love", they wailed, "alas, we LOVE!" (III. 13 (p. 6)). There is the repetition of rejection in the speaker's agony of familiar self-inflicted suffering (Seymour-Smith, *His Life and Work*, p. 283) – he is, after all, accustomed to the pain – yet there is something new in the poet's voice when he makes the following point in 'Twice of the Same Fever': 'Worse than such a death, even, is resurrection' (9). To be resurrected means he must suffer again and yet again at the hands of the Goddess. As Daniel Hoffman writes in *Barbarous Knowledge: Myth in the Poetry of Yeats, Graves and Muir*: 'the worst of [...the Goddess's] exactions may be not that her servant loses his head over her but that he is condemned to perpetual repetition of the same wheel of feelings, an Ixion-like determinism from which there is no escape' (p. 219). As Hoffman comments, the poems seem to repeat the 'never-ending story', but it is one that is becoming too frustrating to bear. The lack of dignity conveyed in 'Twice of the Same Fever' is pointedly ironic in this poem of three stanzas with its sharp scheme of alternating rhyming lines, for it shows a dissatisfaction with the lack of reward but state of perpetual punishment for his attention, his adoration. The poem ends: 'Do we dare laugh away / Disaster, and with a callous madrigal / Salute the new day?' (10-12). Can the poet ever hope to transcend his ordeals at the hand of the Goddess and be allowed to salute the 'new day'? 'Twice of the Same Fever' seems to work on two levels of discourse as the poem is intrinsically concerned with the poet and the practice of writing poetry. The poet discusses his tortuous relations with the Goddess, which are crucial to his process of writing. In turn, he is bound up with his writing, concluding that he can never hope to be satisfied with his own work.

The poet's pained relations with the Goddess in 'Twice of the Same Fever' parallels those of Venn-Thomas who relates how, in a sense, he has been reborn three times, each time 'developed in relation to a different woman with whom he had been in love' (p. 207). He admits he loves and desires an unattainable ideal, one who will never become 'domesticated', the perpetual 'other woman', necessary and vital for his poetic energy to flourish. While Venn-Thomas acknowledges that this is a self delusion that inevitably sets up any long-lasting relationship for failure, Sapphire, mirroring his feminine self, yet also standing outside the drama as she sees it, observes, 'when the separation comes, it's a sort of death for you. One woman kills; another reanimates the corpse' (p. 26). While Graves is fascinated by the cruelty of love as personified in the White Goddess, he is also desperate to escape her. In a sense, Graves create a corresponding 'myth' as the king dies and is reborn anew. He rejects her in her concrete form and acknowledges the strength of the dependable side of the Goddess as personified in Antonia and Sapphire, which is neither capricious nor cruel. At this point in the narrative, it is the innocent Sapphire who can fulfil the poet's needs. The rigid rules and the strict confines of New Crete are at odds with Sapphire who, like Venn-Thomas, does not fit into the system: her spirit is destroyed because she becomes a dangerous liability to New Crete when she begins to recognize its menace. When she is reborn as Stormbird, she becomes more vulnerable still and dependent on Venn-Thomas, who, at the end of the novel, takes her back to his world as his daughter. The ultimate patriarchal bond is thus consolidated, leaving Venn-Thomas free to worship the Goddess at his writing desk in the seclusion of his study and the elevated realm of his visions.

This ostensibly peace-loving matriarchal society depicted in *Seven Days in New Crete* is eventually exposed as a dystopian one of barbarism and blood-thirsty matriarchs. Seymour-Smith states in his Introduction to *Seven Days in New Crete* that Graves had set out to create a world that was ideal (p. xi). In the female-based future of New Crete, Mari

is worshipped as the usurper of patriarchal dominance and the beliefs of the Christian world. But despite the intention to perfect the society of the future with 'idealized versions of devotion to female figures' (Presley, 'Fox, Vampire, Witch', p. 26), this future fails to provide the solution to so many centuries of problematic patriarchal governance. It seems that although New Crete springs from Venn-Thomas's/Graves's desire for a world of ideal love, the love between the poet and his muse is a wistful hope rather than a pragmatic solution to the problems of patriarchy. The New Cretans discover that Venn-Thomas, like Graves, equates the state of being in love with that of being inspired – the loved woman is transformed into the poet's muse. Sapphire sums up Venn-Thomas/Graves's character by observing that he is a man who holds nothing back when in love, although his devotion is always to that vision of his beloved whom he first beheld (p. 25), continuing ever after to see the woman as she once was, rather than what she has become: 'you're content to go on seeing what you first saw' (p. 25). Sapphire continues: 'you look around for a fresh focus of your love. You focus on me, and I'm pleased by the bright way you see me. But for how long will my pleasure last?' (p. 25). For Venn-Thomas, love itself is unchanging, but it is easily transferable to suit his poetic will. His poetry will be the result of the inspiration given by his lover/muse, whoever she is. And it is only by continually seeking a fresh love-object that beautiful, true verse can be created, always at the expense of the mortal woman who finds herself representing the muse. For example, Venn-Thomas's vision of Erica, which produces a crisis, is reasoned as a part of his life which consisted of 'the misery and desperation of my affair with Erica' (p. 94). Erica is a 'ghost' (p. 94) from Venn-Thomas's past that had lain dormant. Not only that, Erica's appearance resonates with the familiar description of the White Goddess: 'fair, rather curly hair, pointed chin, long upper lip, sparrow's egg-blue eyes' (p. 96), when she is described as a 'triple-faced ash-blond bitch' (p. 72). Erica personifies the cruel and capricious aspect of the Goddess, which Venn-Thomas, in spite of his rational side, very much desires.



During the writing of *Seven Days in New Crete*, it transpires that Graves's theory of poetic inspiration, forged from the pain and anguish endured at her cruel hands, was ceasing to provide him with a creative stimulus (Lindop, 'From Witchcraft', p. 202). In his review of Graves's poetry and criticism entitled, 'The Latest Graves: Poet and Private Eye', Monroe K. Spears asks 'in what sense does Graves believe the White Goddess exists?' (p. 669). Spears finds one answer in Graves's assertion that 'the Muse-goddess [...] is] incarnate in some particular woman, who must be loved and trusted whatever happens' (p. 669), but on the matter of the Goddess as a 'supernatural phenomenon', Spears concludes that Graves is ambiguous (p. 669). The basis of poetic truth for Graves is the relationship between the poet and the Goddess as manifested in a human muse figure. The relationship is conceptualized through the verse in which the mythologized Sacred King is sacrificed for love of the Goddess. The nature of the White Goddess had become too relentless and unforgiving for him, and as such she could no longer serve his poetical needs. Graves's single poetic theme never becomes a poetical reality for him. The poetry of the White Goddess rarely affirms the love of the Goddess for her suitor. The poetry only reiterates the poet's role as the rejected lover. In a sense, the theme is obstructed in its potential, as all the effort is one-sided and incomplete. Poetic truth is sought through the mythic relations between Goddess and poet but as she never rewards him, the symbolic enactment of the theme remains unfulfilled. The muse-poet plays the eternal suitor to the Goddess, never the sacrificed King, so he is never accorded a sense of fulfilment derived from recognition of his devotion to truth. If the poet is to be confined to the role of the unfulfilled lover, there is nowhere else for his poetry to go. The poetry can only repeat the same story and that is of the theme whose potential remains unrealized.

At first glance, *Seven Days in New Crete* seems to reverse conventional patriarchal characteristics by depicting a utopian world where women wield the power instead of men. Women, it appears, are no longer oppressed. Given also the way in which the Goddess is

regarded by the men and women of New Crete, the division of labour and power between the sexes is defined in Engels's terms, since his early theories belong to the wider tradition of 'matriarchal' speculation in nineteenth-century anthropology. Yet unlike Engels's model of an ideal society (Engels, *Origins of the Family*), the whole structure of New Crete's dependence on an economic base has been abolished. Sally's comments suggest harmony and tolerance, yet in this place and at this time it is the women who maintain the system because they 'act on behalf of the Goddess' (p. 18). Graves presents a world where man is subordinate to woman, where a matriarchal order supersedes a patriarchal one at the expense of true equality, provoking the conclusion that New Crete is not so very different from the Christian epoch against which it is rebelling. In setting up his utopia, Graves has created a dystopian world where human relationships are transparent and predictable, actions are controlled and labour and leisure time is regimented and organized around rituals (Fohrmann, 'Literary Utopia', p. 290).

*Seven Days in New Crete* is essentially about a dream which ends apparently in bathos: the failure of the utopian vision. At first understanding, this appears to invalidate the theory of the White Goddess. Yet a deeper analysis reveals that the theory still remains valid despite its apparent failure in New Crete. For all its goddess-orientated ritual and society, the vision fails precisely because of the confines of the utopian genre: the sterile perfection of the country's organization takes the place of inner freedom, hampering all that is genuine and spontaneous, which, ironically, utopias warn against (Fohrmann, 'Literary Utopia', p. 290). There is 'no scope for humour, satire or parody' (p. 12), and Graves has 'done away with congenital idiots, drunkards, stray dogs, policemen, dirt, smells, fist-fights and knee length pissoirs plastered with advertisements for anti-syphilitic compounds' (p. 12). Behaviour is formalized and prescribed, including relations between the sexes; extremes are avoided, and vices prohibited or reduced; even cigarettes are smoked only once a day in the evening (p. 20). In this respect, Graves's work mirrors the

dystopian images created by novelists such as Orwell and Huxley in which all signs of spontaneous life have been stifled by the system. Venn-Thomas observes that the very beauty of the New Cretans hides a fundamental flaw in character. It is their lack of 'ability to overcome suffering: the look of indomitability which comes from dire experiences nobly faced and overcome' (p. 11). They never acquire character-forming attributes because the conditions of their life had not allowed them to develop strength of character (p. 11). The conclusion of *Seven Days in New Crete* takes the reader by surprise, because the ending shows that the utopian vision in New Crete is doomed to failure.

Within the text, Graves articulates the view that humanity can only move forward by accepting the risks and dangers of living with one another in a world without guaranteed hope or sustained values – and here the Goddess herself, in her cruel guise, is found wanting.

Instead, towards the end of Venn-Thomas's stay in New Crete, the Sacred King's death is symbolically re-enacted, recalling Jesus's crucifixion in *King Jesus*. In *King Jesus*, Jesus is the actual sacrificial victim of the Goddess, whilst at the New Crete Royal Playhouse<sup>34</sup> a symbolic sacrifice of the sacred king is 'performed' to the Goddess. Clearly, this is an enactment of the final chapter of *The White Goddess*, 'War in Heaven', which Graves had only recently completed. In the novel, the King who is to be slain is selected by the magicians to perform his duties, only to be sacrificed at the end of the cycle on stage before the New Cretans. He is not replaced by a stronger or more potent king. The sacrifice, however, is real, even though it is performed on stage. It is only at the conclusion of the 'performance' that Venn-Thomas realizes that what he has seen is actually a ritual involving real death and sacrifice, in accordance with Graves's theory of the White Goddess, and symbolizing the cycle of marriage, death and rebirth between the Goddess/Queen and her consort, the king. The male figure who has reigned for a cycle of seven months, is sacrificed to the Goddess in order to be reborn as his other self (p. 253).

<sup>34</sup> (Chapter Twenty One: 'The Wild Women' (pp. 252-266)).



His other self will kill him because: 'The right hand cannot be thrust into the left glove' (p. 98). The king's reign matches the cycle of the moon, because it begins in mid-winter when, symbolically, his other self reigns until the thirteenth month when he dies: 'the left hand to his right hand' (p. 98). The king is not viewed as an individual but as a symbol of the Goddess's willing lover/victim who must die at the end of every cycle. Only then can he be reborn. The ritual is essential because 'without kings there can be no true religion' (p. 14).

Only a dedicated poet of the Goddess can write truly inspired poetry, according to Graves's theory, but the price is the acting out of an ancient mythological drama of the kind witnessed by Venn-Thomas. It is interesting to note by way of comparison that in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, Hughes, a man similarly tormented by the eternal feminine, or by the demons of his unassuaged sexuality, argues that Shakespeare's entire oeuvre is dedicated to a myth or 'dominant theme' influenced by the mythical narrative of Venus and Adonis (pp. 39-40). But crucially, although the hero, Adonis, rejects the Goddess and is punished by being torn to pieces by the boar, he is, according to Hughes, 'restored as a flower between the breasts of the Goddess as she flies to heaven' (p. 40). Within Hughes's theory, then, the Gravesian myth is the reverse of Shakespeare's interpretation of the Venus and Adonis story. While the lover in Hughes's interpretation is accepted by the Goddess and therefore granted the reward of poetic truth, the majority of Graves's poetic works chronicle the Goddess's painful rejection of the poet. She is hostile, perhaps, because he is so willing to be sacrificed. Hughes illustrates that a poet committed to a parallel theory of erotic inspiration could arrive at a subtly different understanding of the role of the poet with regard to poetic inspiration.

The performance, in *Seven Days in New Crete*, is a narrative within a narrative, ultimately structured for excess and rupture, violence and sexuality. In *The White Goddess*, Graves writes: 'No poet can hope to understand the nature of poetry unless he has had a vision of the Naked King crucified to the lopped oak, and watched the dancers, red-eyed

from the acrid smoke of the sacrificial fires' (p. 439). Here, however, Graves focuses not on what happens to the king, but on what happens to the spectator. A sort of inverted catharsis takes place; rather than pitying the man who is to be torn to pieces, the male members of the audience yearn to take his place. The king's identity is appropriated, as each of them identifies with him in their desire to be the one considered worthy of the Goddess's love. This not only confounds the expectations of Venn-Thomas and the reader, but presents both with a compelling spectacle of carnage; a voyeuristic horror. The actions, gestures and ritualized movements of the 'performers' compress, for the spectator/reader, the distance between fear of the king's fate and longing to be the Goddess's beloved victim. Graves writes in *The White Goddess* that the poet

desires one thing above all else in the world: her love. [...] she will gladly give him her love, but at one price: his life. She will exact payment punctually and bloodily. Other women, other goddesses, are kinder-seeming. They sell their love at a reasonable rate – sometimes a man may even have it for the asking. But not [...] the White Goddess: for with her love goes wisdom. And however bitterly and grossly the poet may rail against her in the hour of his humiliation [...] he has been party to his own betrayal and has no just cause for complaint. [...] she abides (pp. 438-39).

Venn-Thomas's torment is to be the detached and excluded observer, as he comes from a world in which importance is no longer attached to the poetic word (the world in which Orpheus was slain by the Thracian women because his songs of poetic truth revealed their mysteries to man (Harrison, *Prolegomena*, p. 460)). The realization that he has been denied the desired role of sacrificial victim, the beloved of the Goddess, fuels Venn-Thomas to utilize the message of his dream of New Crete upon waking into the actual present. Never permitted to be the slain lover of the cruel Goddess, he instead must use Art to become an 'instrument of ritual' (Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', p. 95) and to write poetry about his relationship with the Goddess encapsulated in the muse, thus regaining the power to reveal the mysteries of humanity.

In order to tolerate the external world, the poet must accord himself a special place in his interior world. In the poem 'From the Embassy', from *Poems 1953*, the speaker announces his unique position of being the ambassador of an unspecified land he calls 'Otherwhere' (ll. 1 (p. 217)). Like Venn-Thomas, the speaker is able to 'Enjoy [...] / Extra-territorial privileges' (3-4). In this land, the speaker is accepted despite his foreign appearance: 'Nor is my garb, even, considered strange' (10). Echoing *Seven Days in New Crete*, 'From the Embassy' is an escape into an imaginary world where the poet is sacrosanct. However, contrary to the poet's elevated position in 'Otherwhere', the poem ends with the ambassador stating that although poetry is everywhere: 'shy enquiries for literature / Come in by every post, and the side door' (11-12). It can be inferred that only by retreating into an imaginary world (New Crete), where the poet is finally appreciated, can he live freely and without fear: without needing, 'as once, to sandbag all my windows' (6). Yet although in the novel the poet Venn-Thomas is regarded with great respect, the poets of New Crete may not enjoy personal acclaim, as it is only the Goddess who is 'worthy of admiration' (p. 82). Their poetry may be regarded as an integral part of the New Crete cultural infrastructure because it is apparently dictated by the muse who is the Goddess (p. 19), so there is no joy in personal accomplishment, and true poetry is still endangered. An example of this is the New Cretans' reduction of Shakespeare's works to thirty pages – the purpose of which is to keep 'only what Shakespeare had written when inspired' (p. 82); the rest, he is considered to have written 'as a talented theatrical hack' (p. 82). Only the important poems, that is, those poems thought by the New Cretans to be inspired, are kept and inscribed on gold plates (since paper is no longer used), frozen in time and out of context. At the expense of the true poets, the origins of poems and their creators are distorted and assimilated to suit the New Cretan interpretation of history, which, it transpires, is ultimately corrupt and unable to develop. Thus Graves seems to be indicating that true poetry cannot be written while there is censorship and when history is



interpreted selectively for this is what he strives to prove in *The White Goddess*. For Graves, these were the values that accompanied the Goddess and the poet, which kept the world whole before its dislocation from its true origins.

Ironically, though he tries to present a female oriented worldview, ultimately Graves cannot deny his own preoccupations as a male in search of a muse. He steers the text toward a patriarchal discourse on the subject of inspiration, concluding that without the male poet's submission to the female muse, true poetry cannot be created. Therefore, the Goddess-dominated New Crete faces a crisis which Venn-Thomas, a male poet – like many a classical hero – must be brought in to resolve.

One revealing example of the falsity of the utopian New Cretan vision is when the characters lose consciousness at a music recital. Recalling the idea of ancient Greek theatre, the arts in New Crete are reserved for worship of the Goddess, Mari, on certain religious occasions (p. 100). Venn-Thomas is invited to a performance of the 'Santrepod', explained as a group of three songs demonstrating the triple power of the Goddess (p. 100). The cast drops out of real time, as the *mise-en-scène* induces slumber in all the performers and their audience, suspended in sleep by 'auto-suggestion' (p. 104) with the exception of Venn-Thomas. He takes his state of alertness as an opportunity for critical assessment. According to the New Cretans, true poetry is supposed to move the receiver so that he/she loses his/her rational self. Venn-Thomas begins explaining the difference between true and false music/songs/poems:

Technically it may however have been flawless, yet I felt that it was synthetic. Aysin [a celebrated New Cretan poet], when he wrote the song, had not felt amorously drowsy as Dowland felt lachrymose, or Cleopatra drily humorous – he had been wide awake and industriously deducing from his memory of popular lullabies what combinations of mode, key, time and so on, have a most soporific effect. Doubtless he had invoked the Goddess in the approved style but she was not present in the song as she was in the other two (p. 104).

Here, within his fiction, Graves is clearly expounding the difference between art and artifice, that which is inspired and true compared with that which is controlled and thus

superficial. The reader is meant to perceive the distinction between the two. His criticism of Alysia encourages the reader to reject 'artifice' in everything. As though to underscore the importance of Venn-Thomas's point, the Goddess appears in the guise of Erica, (the audience continues to be frozen in time) to elicit information about the songs. The Goddess needs help because the people of New Crete are trapped in their false sense of security about the very essence of their existence. The paradox of Graves's constructed image of a society in stasis reflects his own state as a 'muse-poet' in turmoil.

With their 'exalted moral standards' (p. 37), the new Cretans are critical of any fault. This is one reason why paper is not used in the quest for perfection, as written mistakes and errors of thought cannot be recorded. There is a sense in which they take themselves too seriously to acknowledge any fault or error, another source of the marked weakness of character among the New Cretans. This deficiency within their general make-up renders them unable to distinguish between true and fake poetry. Quoting a song of the 'Earl of Essex', Erica sings:

'There was a time when silly bees could speak  
And in that time I was a silly bee  
And fed on thyme until my heart 'gan to break'  
(1-3 (p. 106)).

The silly bees may be a metaphor for the foolish and self-deceived New Cretans: they have become 'silly' and when they stopped speaking (the true word of poetry) they glutted themselves on thyme, a negative image suggesting that they have chosen to live, in essence, with a false sense of security. In effect what seems nutritious and life-enriching is actually bland and impoverishing, an illusion which has a detrimental effect on the very structure of New Cretan society. And the Goddess weeps from sadness: her 'heart' is breaking, as the utopia has failed to live up to its matriarchal ideals. The New Cretans have lost sight of the reason for their existence: to live a life of purity and truth under the reign of the Great Goddess. What will it take to prevent the heart of New Crete from breaking –

in other words, to prevent its self-destruction? Unwittingly, it would seem, Venn-Thomas, the worthy poet-protagonist, as Graves's surrogate, provides the answer and the remedy.

The fundamental flaw of New Crete is that its people have deluded themselves into thinking that they have achieved peace and harmony by learning from the materialistic mistakes of history. So, for example, although money has been abolished, war no longer exists in the contemporary sense of the word, and all is peaceful and 'amicable' (p. 135). The New Cretans have created a society based on collective propaganda and erroneous thinking, all without a basis in *truth*. While they boast of tranquility, there is the damaging absence of tension: there is no questioning, no dissent. When Venn-Thomas notes (with hindsight) that the people of New Crete were unusually good-looking, he continues:

I tried to picture them confronted with the problems of our age; no, I thought, they would all be haggard and sunken-eyed within a week [...They] lack character [...] which the conditions of their life had not allowed them to develop (p. 11).

The consequence of life without challenges is, ultimately, the failure of humanity to test its mettle and develop through conflict. Accordingly, Graves argues, the poet is recognized as the one individual who can point out this failure, and it is the Goddess who invokes the poet Venn-Thomas to do so.

In writing *Seven Days in New Crete* Graves realized that a goddess-based utopia was unfeasible. Why, then, did it transpire that it was impossible? First, it is obvious that the circumscribed social roles within this utopia echo those within a patriarchal society – and are equally confining. *Seven Days in New Crete* is, therefore, a deeply pessimistic novel. It offers no solution to the relations between man and woman, implying that there can never be equality between the sexes. In New Crete, there can never be independence while there is belief in the Goddess, for she needs her acolytes as much as they need her. Because men and women are emotionally dependent out of necessity towards the Goddess, rather than existing in a level state of relatedness, there are no emotional guidelines. There is only uncertainty between the sexes, and this makes the creation of true poetry



impossible. Within the New Cretan language, the terminology of the Goddess is employed on occasions when whatever is experienced is not equal in value to the spoken definition of feeling (Hardwick, 'Introduction', p. xiv); this causes the characters and their poetry to exist as caricatures of themselves. While Venn-Thomas tours New Crete (Chapter Five: 'Take a Look at Our World' (pp. 47-64)), for example, he hears his first poem, a story in verse, in a classroom of small children. He apologizes for comparing it to a poem from Blake's *Prophetic Books* (p. 58). Yet for Venn-Thomas it lacks the essence of Blake, of poetry that is true and inspired, and instead emphasizes the reduced value attached to true poetry in the novel and the society it portrays. The poem is a didactic ballad of thirteen stanzas, the longest in *Seven Days in New Crete*, and it tells the story Nimuë, daughter of the Mother-goddess, Mari, who kills the evil Dobeis, thus saving the world from the golden wheels of destruction. The poem begins:

Dobeis was a young man, fat, bald and bad,  
Dobeis did magic with wheels of gold,  
Stamping them with pictures of creatures and men.  
He lay on his bed at the open window,  
He said to the gold wheels: "Out into the world,  
Be the world's ruin!" (1-6 (p. 59)).

Part of their educational programme, the children chant the poem repetitively ('they seemed to be word perfect by the time the lesson was over' (p. 61)). The poem is not, however, about Dobeis and his villainous deeds, but about Nimuë's power and mercy. She gives Dobeis the chance to retract:

"Dobeis, Dobeis, what mischief is this?  
What have you contrived against the five estates?  
Call back your wheels while yet there is time,  
Lest you forfeit the pardon of Mari and Ana" (36-39 (p. 60)).

Dobeis, however, responds with scorn. Therefore, out of a white-flowered branch, Nimuë trims the point and strikes Dobeis's breast 'weeping for sorrow' (54 (p. 60)), 'Since never before had she taken life' (55 (p. 60)). At her bidding, the dying Dobeis recalls the golden wheels, and Nimuë buries him. The poem is pretty, Venn-Thomas decides, but no more.

Venn-Thomas does not describe its merits, and only wonders how much of it the children understood. The poem cannot qualify as art in the broadest possible sense, for it only imparts a lesson. It is, then, no more than a cautionary tale and is used to indoctrinate the children. Indeed, one student child of the magicians' estate weeps in 'sympathy with Nimuë each time that the line recurred: 'Never before had she taken life' (p. 61). The greatest fault of this poem, like all others except for one (by Quant, written, significantly, in English) that Venn-Thomas hears during his stay, is the fact that it is false and pompous. Both Blake – and Graves – would have firmly rejected the poem as uninspired. The poem is dead because it misses the point: the Goddess Mari wants to cause destruction (and change) to her world and thus introduces 'evil' as the male God did long before. The poem celebrates compassion and mercy when it should be encouraging upheaval and tumult (and spontaneity). Because of its outcome, it is certainly not Goddess-inspired in any true sense. The poem is saccharine: not even its sweetness is truthful. While the poems of New Crete have the power to change customs – Venn-Thomas is constantly confronted with a poem as an answer to why something is done, or why a certain rule is enforced – they leave the reader unmoved and are in the end a deadening force on the imagination. This is a deliberate move by Graves to show the limitations of poetry when it is not 'inspired'. The strength of the Goddess has been diminished in New Crete by the very people on whom she bestowed power. The values of the Goddess, though ideal, in the end serve neither her nor her poets.

Yet in New Crete, the women clearly have a role superior to men. What defines the relationship between Venn-Thomas and the female characters is that he is a poet, and as a true poet, he holds the key to poetic truth, which is reflected upon him from the Goddess or muse. Therefore it is only the true poet who is fearless enough, through his relationship with the Goddess, to produce great change, even chaos. As long as one gender tries to assert its superiority over the other, there is bound to be tension between the sexes. This,

however, is part of the dynamic of the human condition. As in *The Golden Fleece*, the overriding presence throughout the novel is the Goddess, who leads both protagonist and reader to the certitude and finality of her irrevocable Will: true perfection is encapsulated in the continual struggle to reconcile opposites, implying a tension between Goddess and Poet, and Graves concludes that only through suffering and his willingness to be sacrificed can the poet prove his love for her.

The traditional definition of womanliness is questioned because the idea of 'feminine' qualities is no longer so easily defined, and this shift in the ordering of gender roles subsequently confuses Venn-Thomas. The Goddess is worshipped with an unquestioning allegiance. With no moral weakness – which pre-supposes superiority in terms of sexual virtue (Warner, *Monuments and Maidens*, p. 53) – she is simultaneously adored and feared. Venn-Thomas explains that the men had 'to address the Goddess with an adoration compounded of love and fear, whereas women addressed her familiarly as a friend, colleague or mistress, according to their estate' (p. 62). The forced difference in terms of the relationship between man and Goddess and woman and Goddess is one which demonstrates inequality between the sexes.

Graves had focused on the decay of civilization since World War One, and his poetic ideas had emerged from this reflection on the state of the times. As early as 1938 he had written in his Foreword to *Collected Poems* published that year that the poems he had produced were a result of 'the age into which I was born [...that] has been [one] of [intellectual...] and [moral...] confusion' (II, p. 308). This thesis confirms this view of Graves in relation to his times as evidenced in his own confusions about the muse, and as outlined in relation to the prose text discussed. Michael Kirkham argues in *The Poetry of Robert Graves* that Graves 'considered it the poet's task [...] to be exposed to, but not to be destroyed by, such confusion' (p. 270). The apparently ideal New Crete fails to become the solution to this confusion, and Graves proceeds to the idea that it is humanity's very



lack of perfection that is the stimulus to poetic truth for the real poet. Venn-Thomas realizes by the end of his stay in New Crete that the difficulties of being a poet in any age lend him strength, possessed as he is with the clarity of an outsider (pp. 9-10). The dreamer-speaker of the poem 'The Window Sill', from *Poems 1953*, also finds that when his beloved Julia unlaces her bodice: 'Each breast a rose, / A white and cankered rose' (ll. 20-21 (p. 225)). The rose symbolizes the world in all its human frailty that exists for the value of love to be appreciated. Through recognition and acknowledgement of this paradox, the poet must take up the role of mediator between the Goddess and humankind. As suggested, while *Seven Days in New Crete* is not a utopian novel, neither is it dystopian, although it has been described as both. Rather, it is a fantasy about the Goddess, a novel about what would happen in a world in which the Goddess, rather than a male god, is the official focus of worship. Yet it is paradoxically patriarchal in the message it relays, suggesting that in spite of aspiring to equal relations with women, the poet must isolate his muse in one compartment of his soul. She is necessarily separate, existing solely to motivate his inspiration.

Graves dismisses the notion of an imposed, orderly and harmonious world, having finally seen this as a false and far from ideal alternative to the chaos and evil of contemporary civilization. Venn-Thomas fulfils his 'mission' (p. 279) by imparting his message to the New Cretans, in the Goddess's name, that 'true love and wisdom spring only from calamity' (p. 279). Venn-Thomas then calls upon the North Wind to:

"Blow away security; lift the ancient roofs from their beams; tear rotten boughs from the alders, oaks and quinces; [...] set the madmen free; end the King flying into the mere; lay the godlings prostrate on their greens!" (p. 279).

The north wind is no ordinary wind but the 'magical breeze' (*White Goddess*, p. 426) that Graves refers to on numerous occasions in *The White Goddess*, where he argues its close connection to the Goddess (p. 426). He states that it is the same north wind that the Nightmare Life-in-Death of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* whistles for in order to save

the Mariner's life. It is also, he adds, the north wind that blows the answer to the final riddle to Gwion in the *Romance of Taliesin* (p. 426). Graves then, according to his own interpretation of the north wind, connects these works to his concept of the White Goddess, adding his own fictional narrative to the myth. The north wind destroys the 'Utopian' New Crete and mysteriously blows Venn-Thomas, along with Stormbird into the present:

I spoke, stretching my hands in supplication: 'Ana, Mother, take me home! Return me to my doorstep!' The roaring died in the distance, I lost consciousness [...and found that] I was standing completely naked on my own door-step (p. 280).

When Venn-Thomas returns to his own epoch, Graves has purged himself of his dilemma: New Crete is an untenable ideal because it offers no real stimulus for the true poet.

Graves is his own harshest critic as he subjects his theory to scrutiny by building up his arguments through the texts discussed in this thesis. However, the theory seems to reach a stumbling block in *Seven Days in New Crete*, where it appears to be unrealizable. According to Graves's poetic theory, the true poet has a mission: that is, to tell the truth. The paradox is that, if everyone knows the truth already (as apparently is the case in New Crete), there is no battle to fight, a deadening complacency sets in, and life becomes a lie. If there is an ideal to fight for, then it provides life (and work) with meaning. The Goddess's overbearing presence and the subsequent complacent submission of the New Cretans to her, mean poetic death to the true poet, leaving her unsatisfied and frustrated so that she orchestrates the destruction of New Crete. *Seven Days in New Crete* ends significantly without any consolation in the prospect of an ideal and harmonious future, and the true poet ultimately chooses to return to the present time of chaos and discontent. Its conclusion, that 'true love and wisdom spring from calamity' (p. 279), might be considered the poet's curse, for it is only through the cruelty of the White Goddess that a true poem can painfully emerge.

## **Conclusion**

In Graves's mythical interpretations of prehistoric and historic events he sought to articulate a poetics about the Goddess as the source of inspiration in *The Golden Fleece*, *King Jesus* and *The Golden Ass*. While he strove to celebrate the irreconcilable opposites in his muse figures – of the Goddess who treads a fine line between cruelty and compassion – he tested and validated his poetic theory in a future of his own making in *Seven Days in New Crete*. Although an apparently failed experiment, the result points to an unspoken conclusion which embraces the notion that the Goddess as a literal, binding and 'ordered' force is a stultifying hindrance to poetic truth, leaving no space for any creative leap of the imagination on the part of the poet, and curtailing his freedom to think and feel. So although the novel can be said to demonstrate the failure of a regime, it actually serves as a final refinement of Graves's theory. This view is strengthened by the development in Graves's writing which followed: namely, that with the completion of *Seven Days in New Crete* he found himself largely able to abandon fiction in favour of critical writings about the nature of poetry which endorse his theory, and the composition of poems inspired by muse figures serving as metaphors for a late and still more enlarged understanding of the Goddess.



## Chapter 6: Conclusion

While most scholarship on Robert Graves's works has been devoted to explicating the relevance of *The White Goddess* to his poetry, this thesis has concentrated on his *prose* writings of the late 1940s. It has provided evidence that they can be read as early stages in the evolution of his theory concerning the Goddess – that the true poet must submit himself entirely to the Goddess, who is manifested in a mortal woman, who then becomes his muse. It has been shown how *The White Goddess* is the culmination of the theorizations and contentions articulated in *The Golden Fleece*, *King Jesus* and *The Golden Ass*, all of which preceded *The White Goddess*. These texts, along with *Seven Days in New Crete* influence and interweave with the arguments set out in *The White Goddess* and its theory contains elements taken from all four of them.

This conclusion briefly summarizes the impact of the White Goddess theory, as developed in these texts, following the publication of *The White Goddess*. In particular it examines the influence of the White Goddess myth on the poetry written after *The White Goddess* in order to elucidate Graves's poetical development. It will conclude by commenting on his transition to embrace the theory of the Black Goddess, when the White Goddess theory no longer fulfilled his needs.

### **What this thesis has shown: The texts that comprise *The White Goddess***

Although Graves viewed himself first and foremost as a poet, this dissertation argues that the fiction he was writing while he was carrying out his research for *The White Goddess* provides crucial intellectual clues and allusions necessary for a deeper understanding of the theory of poetic inspiration and its ambiguities. The focus on the fictional prose texts that Graves was writing alongside *The White Goddess* text, *The Golden Fleece*, *King Jesus* and *Seven Days in New Crete*, along with the translation of *The Golden Ass* has led to the

hypothesis that together these reveal more about Graves's poetic theory than *The White Goddess* itself.

Though research and study of the biographical, literary and intellectual influences on *The White Goddess* is extensive, little research has been done on the generic instabilities of the texts written in that period. This thesis has therefore focused on the different genres Graves employed in writing this seminal work because paradoxically they constitute the unifying factor in his desire to prove his thesis about muse-poetry. So although the thesis examines his investigations into, and analysis of, the literary background of the Goddess, it has also focused on obvious idiosyncrasies in his methodology: the questionability of his sources, his use of different genres to blend the strands of autobiographical material with historical, his propensity to skew the argument to match his desired conclusion.

In *The Golden Fleece*, for example, Graves exploited and distorted the genre of historical fiction to write a story which advances traditional interpretations of the myth. The thesis has shown how the myth of Jason is manipulated to endorse a view about the Goddess that later becomes crucial to Graves's arguments concerning the poetic vision described in *The White Goddess*.

*King Jesus*, which followed *The Golden Fleece*, is not only the story of Jesus's life but a continuation, according to Graves, of the mythic narratives from *The Golden Fleece*, and both constitute progressive steps to *The White Goddess*. Audacious and controversial in its rendering of the historical and biblical genres, *King Jesus* became a narrative that Graves infused with matriarchal import, dictating through it a poetic ideological discourse on his own terms.

Graves's own translation of the Latin story *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius is crucial to an understanding of his theory of the White Goddess. It is argued in the thesis that, through a proper comprehension of the translation, the origins of Graves's muse-like rendering of the Egyptian Goddess, Isis, can be traced in several works written prior to the

composition of *The White Goddess*. Thus it is concluded that, at least implicitly, Graves's interest in the Goddess as poetic muse was already partly formed at the point when he finally came to write *The White Goddess*. Furthermore, the idiosyncratic translation of Apuleius's text was a means of clarifying and substantiating the argument that the Isis of *The Golden Ass* was the original prototype of the White Goddess, which is demonstrated in his translation. Crucially, Graves's translation prefigures the final draft of *The White Goddess* and offers certain proof of the Goddess as poetic muse within his evolving schema. Graves's translation is also compared with other translations and found wanting; because his rendering of the Goddess of *The Golden Ass* is a forerunner to the White Goddess, elements of his translation were deliberately shaped to endorse this theory. Hence he used *The Golden Ass* as a vehicle to provide further popular 'evidence' of the 'Goddess as muse' after the publication of *The White Goddess*. The fiction and translations from the mid 1940s onwards, and their calculated expression in certain genres, were a didactic means of communicating his theory. In summary, this dissertation shows how Graves used the writing of these fictions and translation as a way of working out and articulating his ideas with reference to several classical, mythological, biblical and historical narratives.

The thesis then proceeds to examine how the consequent theory of the White Goddess was tested in *Seven Days in New Crete*, following the completion of *The White Goddess* text, with the author himself as poet also being openly self-questioning and self-critical. *Seven Days in New Crete* differs from the previous texts in relation to the understanding of Graves's poetic ideology. Its purpose, which Graves does not explicitly state, appears to be to show the conditions which ensure poetic truths functioning as a set of laws or rules. In this fictional setting, Graves proves his own severest critic in the scrutiny of his poetic theory. With *Seven Days in New Crete* the causes of the theory's collapse emerge and this marks the beginning of a shift in Graves's perception from that of a cruel Goddess towards a kinder one, the figure who eventually became the Black



Goddess. The conflict of the poet himself, in having to choose between the harsh and the benevolent version of the goddess figure, is subsequently worked through in the poetry.

### **The Evolving Face of the Muse-Poet**

Graves called his poetry a form of spiritual autobiography, but it could be argued that the poetry following the publication of *The White Goddess* is not so much about Robert Graves the man, but about his self created mythical persona, the muse-poet of ancient times that he describes in *The White Goddess*. This thesis has argued that Graves aligns himself with certain poets whom he views as muse-poets. Previous to *The White Goddess*, Graves writes of his reactions to his experiences to war, philosophic wanderings and his criticism of the limitations of the Modernist movement. The post-White Goddess poems are different in that they are mostly lyric pieces dedicated to one theme – that of relations between the poet and the Muse-goddess. After *The White Goddess* his poems aimed to reinterpret the world, and his experience of it, through her; she provides the unifying ‘philosophy’. Therefore everything is viewed from the standpoint of Graves’s position as the Goddess’s muse-poet. It has been emphasized that the White Goddess does not simply appear as a new phenomenon he had dreamed up; rather, in addition to her historical basis, as he saw it, she had already been prefigured in his actual life: in his relationship with his strong mother; in his marriage to the feminist, Nancy Nicholson; and then in his relationship with the domineering Riding. The poems that most clearly foreshadow the White Goddess are those describing his tortuous relationship with Riding. These autobiographical influences all contributed to the creation of his poetic vision. The Goddess becomes a tool, a device, for his personal survival as a hero in the modern world.

### **Graves pre-*The White Goddess***

The crucial benefit to Graves in consolidating his theories of the Goddess was that she endowed him with a sense of favour, if not of grandeur. The poetry he composed before he

had articulated and written *The White Goddess* was marked by a sense of 'collapse'. Most evident in the poetry of this earlier period is his sense of frustration in his relations with Riding. One well known example is 'Down, Wanton, Down' from *Poems 1930-1933* in which the speaker disparages his member for not controlling its sexual desires: 'That at the whisper of Love's name, / Or Beauty's, presto! up you raise / Your angry head and stand at gaze?' (ll. 3-5 (p. 68)). Unrequited desire forces the speaker to try desperately to hide his lust, but his member exposes and humiliates him. The poem, though witty, belies the underlying shame and humiliation of the speaker who must repress his desires. Another poem from the same volume demonstrates the result of this repression. The speaker's negative psychological state and sense of shame or even degradation is displayed in 'The Succubus', which is both a nightmarish and erotically charged poem transforming the desired into a predatory demon. The speaker both abhors and desires the 'devil-woman', the use of an oxymoron exemplifying the sense of chaos: 'Thus will despair / In ecstasy of nightmare / Fetch you a devil-woman through the air, / To slide below the sweated sheet' (ll. 1-4 (pp. 69-70)). The 'sweated sheet' intimates one who in tormented fantasies craves to be locked in desperate sexual union with his lover. The speaker has projected his distorted sexual longing, now unshackled, into a predatory devil-woman. The 'ecstasy of nightmare' conveys a triumphant fulfilment, however repulsive; in this projection a punishment is embodied in the form of the devil-woman's 'paunched and uddered carcase' (14). The speaker's mixed emotions lead to his confusion and the poem ends by questioning, 'is the fancy grosser than your lusts were gross?' (18). He cannot be sure which is worse: the intensity of his sexual frustration or the extreme and repulsive nature of his 'fancy'.

The invention of the White Goddess as a real phenomenon therefore enabled Graves to elevate his experience of himself as a victim into an heroic context within his own myth. On one level his need to be the chosen as Sacred King compensates for his own

helpless fear of exclusion and humiliation at certain periods of his life – such as in his relationship with his persecutory mother and in his subjugation to Riding. By sublimating those feelings of torment and humiliation into the glorious notion of the White Goddess, he justifies and rationalises his pain, reinforcing his heroic status in another projected guise. While Graves did not seem entirely conscious of the enormity of his concept of the White Goddess as poetic muse when he first wrote about the Goddess in *The Golden Fleece*, it was through his prose, and the fiction in particular, that he realised the concept of the White Goddess in Her splendid entirety. Graves was therefore only able to articulate the White Goddess myth *through* fictions from which she emerged gradually, seen from different angles and through a range of genres, finally ‘allowing’ the poems to be created.

### **The Impact of *The White Goddess* on Graves’s Poetry**

The direction of his poetry changed with the writing of *The White Goddess* as Graves sought to orientate himself as a true poet towards what he felt to be the truth revealed by his account of poetic inspiration. *The White Goddess* was a treatise for poets and a condemnation of false poetry. Thus there are poems such as ‘Instructions to the Orphic Adept’ from *The Golden Fleece* and ‘Advice on May Day’ from *Poems and Satires* which instruct the true poet to purge his ego and humble himself, making him open to poetic truth through his relations with the muse.

With his personal theory of poetics in place after writing *The White Goddess*, Graves in his imagination became the archetypal muse-poet or the Sacrificial King ready to die for love of the Goddess. Now sure of his message, he wrote few novels after *Seven Days in New Crete* and instead concentrated his efforts on writing poetry and critical essays. Early poems were revised and published in *Collected Poems (1914-1947)* (published a month before *The White Goddess* in 1948 (Graves and Ward, *Complete Poems*: II, p. 333)) with a view to propounding the poetic theme; one example is ‘The Last Day of Leave (1916)’. This is an important poem because it shows Graves incorporating



his earlier poetry into his poetic theory of the White Goddess. 'The Last Day of Leave (1916)' was first published in November 1947 (Graves and Ward, *Complete Poems*: II, p. 336) but is placed in the section of poems from the late 1920s and 1930s. This suggests that it was written earlier, so its inclusion in a text at approximately the same time as *The White Goddess* is clearly significant, because it has now become a 'Goddess' poem. The poem anticipates, in a quite blatant restaging, the White Goddess: five friends in an idyllic setting are all in love except the speaker who is, 'the odd man out, / As deep in love with a yet nameless muse' (II. 11-12 (pp. 161)). Here, 'yet' suggests that later, the speaker learns the name of his muse, it being the White Goddess. While the shadow of war, indicated by the 'last day of leave', is constant throughout the seemingly idyllic picnic it is only in the eighth stanza that the war is actually mentioned: 'The basket had been nobly filled: / Wine and fresh rolls, chicken and pineapple – / Our braggadocio under the threat of war' (22-24). Now the poem takes a new direction focusing not on the picnic but on their 'uncertain destinies' (30). The poem's ending contrasts starkly with the innocence of the opening stanzas, bringing the reader back to the harsh realities of existence, and it also ends without resolution as to the identity of the nameless muse. But most tellingly, the speaker who is the muse-poet, does not share the fate of his friends as on that idyllic day. There was: 'Not one yet killed, widowed, or broken-hearted' (39). Instead, the speaker stands apart: 'Four pairs of eyes sought mine as if appealing / For a blind-fate-averse afterword' (35-36). The idyllic setting of innocent love is changed forever by a world war; yet despite this strife, Graves the soldier and muse-poet survives. Graves has been altered by the experience, and his 'afterword' reflects this change, in a sense, as the creation of a poetic theory celebrating Poetry. The 'revised' 'The Last Day of Leave' shows the transformation of Graves's own image of himself as a poet, through his survival of the two world wars and his destructive relationship with Riding.

Graves uses poetry to make sense of the world. It is from the pain and suffering of existence that wisdom and what Thomas Hardy describes as 'loving kindness' (Hardy, *The Complete Poems*, pp. 556-57) grow. The White Goddess poems immediately following *The White Goddess* describe the poetic theme in these terms are full of expectation that the muse-poet will be the Sacred King.

### **Celebrating the Goddess**

The poetry written after *The White Goddess* shows Graves's development of the Goddess theme and, in particular, illustrates the ways in which his chosen persona of the muse-poet viewed his relationship with her. The poetry often conveys a new confidence, as realized in the poem 'Return of the Goddess', which formed part of the concluding argument of *The White Goddess* and was also the final poem of *Collected Poems (1914-1947)*. Marking Graves's understanding of the role of the muse-poet, it is a poem which, he claims in an article in *A Critical Supplement* (April 1948) (and like all his poems subsequent to the White Goddess) is 'written for poets' (Graves and Ward, *Collected Poems*: II, p. 342). From this point on, Graves regarded himself as the spokesman for true poets, warning others to be, in 'Return of the Goddess', 'In terror of your judgement day, / Loud with repentance there' (II. 4-5 (pp. 174-75)). The poem's allegiance to the Goddess is a warning to all supposed poets who have placed their trust in falsity. That the speaker places himself apart from these false poets is recognizable by his acknowledgement that he knows her 'too well for fear' (13); he accepts her judgement in his readiness to die for her. The poems of this period are mostly concerned with the poet's painful and tormented relations with the women whom Graves viewed as muse figures. Graves suggests through his poetry that the poet can only find poetic truth in the anguish of existence, in which the Goddess will appear to him and guide him.

### **Understanding Gravesian Poetics**

Through the utopian and dystopian genres, Graves subjects his theory to intense scrutiny only to be confronted with the ultimate failure of the theory when it is carried out in practice. *Seven Days in New Crete*, set in the future, deals with the relations between the Goddess working through a muse figure and the poet. Thus Graves begins by presenting Goddess rule as an ideal environment for the poet. Yet paradoxically the poet is unable to thrive in a matriarchal setting, because the ideal is untenable owing to its flawed and legislated 'perfection'. The conclusion is that the poet can only fulfil his mission when he is *in conflict* with a world dislocated from its spiritual source. Now that Graves's utopia has been exposed as unworkable and actually a dystopia, he has no choice but to immerse himself as a lone true poet in a world at odds with his beliefs. The harshness of the Goddess and the futility of his attempts to satisfy her seem respectively to reflect both the world and his unequal battle against its values.

### **The Theory made Untenable**

The poetry written following *Seven Days in New Crete* marks the beginning of a tension in the portrayal of the Muse-goddess theme. 'The Portrait' from *Poems and Satires* displays a loyalty to the Goddess encapsulated in a muse figure, who is immeasurably superior, though misunderstood: 'She is wild and innocent, pledged to love / Through all disaster; but those other women / Decry her for a witch or a common drab / And glare back when she greets them' (ll. 9-12 (pp. 188-89)). The muse is unlike other women, being a law unto herself, and unbound by social convention, in her uniqueness she is apart and separate from them. Her very essence is to love and be loved: she is 'pledged to love / Through all disaster' (9-10). She desires and wishes to be acknowledged, recognized and through this, adored. The poem seems to be classically Gravesian, in that it is devoted to the Goddess. But there is one telling line: the muse asks, "'And you, love? As unlike those other men / As I those other women?'" (15-16). She challenges the speaker's worthiness of her love; is



he a match for her implacable demands? At this, Graves the muse-poet begins to falter; he is no longer confident that he will win his place as the Goddess's chosen lover. The poems of the early 1950s, such as 'Darien', are by an adoring acolyte uncritical of the muse figure. Yet their singular difference is that the poet-lover is beginning to question his own role, and this reaches a crisis in 'To a Poet in Trouble', the final poem of *Poems and Satires*:

Cold wife and angry mistress  
And debts: all three?  
Though they combine to kill you  
Be grateful to the Goddess,  
(Our cruel patroness),  
For this felicity  
Your poems now ring true (II. 1-7 (p. 97)).

Because Graves views himself first and foremost as a poet, the title, rather than being addressed 'to a *man* in trouble' refers to a poet, who is undoubtedly Graves himself. Though the poem acknowledges the Goddess for her inspiration, his gratitude appears to be tinged with sarcasm. The poem harks back to Graves's poetry of the 1930s in which he employed the sceptical or quizzical question and answer approach, however, there is a bitterness here as he assumes a cruelly detached stance towards himself and his poems. The ironizing tone of the earlier poetry also re-emerges here as the poet mocks his stance of the adoring acolyte. The recognition, though, still remains that only through pain and suffering will the hostile Goddess reward the poet. The concluding line, implying that all is well with the true poem, is at odds with the title, which suggests a plea for help.

'Friday Night' from *5 Pens in Hand* (1958) is unexpectedly lacking in reverence for the Goddess and its tone is undeniably cynical: The White Goddess is justified in lying 'Without which love's exchange might prove defective, / Confirming hazardous relationships / By kindly *maquillage* of Truth's pale lips' (II. 4-6 (pp. 241-42)). Yet she lies not for 'Love' but for her own selfish ends. In other words, the Goddess is deceiving her suitor-poet, playing with his emotions, and most importantly, is toying with the concept

of Truth. How can the true poet trust such a Goddess? Cynically, the speaker compares his current plight with Jove who was also deceived by the Goddess. Jove thinks that he has reached the height and perfection of love with the Goddess, and to all outward appearances it would seem so, and he is enamoured of her. Yet the poem ends: "If this be not perfection," Love would sigh / "Perfection is a great, black, thumping lie...." / Endearments, kisses, grunts, and whispered oaths; / But were her thoughts on breakfast, or on clothes?" (15-18). The fickle Goddess is not thinking of truth but of superficial fancies. But more damning is that she is no longer a deity but a mortal woman who cares only for herself, 'breakfast' and 'clothes'. The cracks in his poetic theory emerge in these poems which criticize his devotion to the Goddess and are thus symptomatic of his waning adoration of her. From the late 1950s until the emergence of the Black Goddess, the poems show a poet whose faith in the White Goddess is faltering.

Yet the sheer brutality of the poet's experience at the hands of the Goddess during this period is at odds with his evolving definition of the relations between the poet and his muse. 'Symptoms of Love' from *More Poems 1961* continues to describe the poet's anguish. Graves uses a metaphor which serves to exemplify his pessimistic view of love, which comes before the discovery of the Black Goddess. Here the poet likens his idea of love to a painful migraine which is 'A bright stain on the vision / Blotting out reason' (III, 2-3 (p. 18)). Unable to see the world and all around him clearly as all reason eludes him, the lover is no longer himself but one controlled by the object of his love. 'Symptoms of Love' goes on to describe the symptoms as the muse-poet becomes more and more enamoured: 'leanness, jealousy, / Laggard dawns' (5-6). In characteristically Gravesian fashion, love at the hands of the Goddess is not kind but exacting in the pain it inflicts upon the lover. So, predictably, in the final stanza the speaker consoles the victim by urging him to: 'Take courage, lover! / Could you endure such grief / At any hand but hers?' (13-15). Yet there is no consolation for the victim, only the increasingly challenging

duty to endure at her hand. A neighbour asks in 'Troughs of Sea' (*More Poems 1961*): "Do you delude yourself" [...] / Dismayed by my abstraction' (III.1-2 (p. 21)). The Goddess's love is almost likened to a prison sentence, and so the poet is deserving of pity (5). Like many of the poems of this period, the poet strives to understand why she has chosen him. Graves writes in 'The Visitation' from the same collection, 'I quake for wonder at your choice of me: / Why, why and why?' (III. 14-15 (p. 19)). There is a sense of awe, yet also dread, for he can never be sure of her; can never be certain that he and his verse will ever be worthy of her. He continues in 'The Falcon Woman' that the poet accepts that the muse may be capricious and cruel, for 'When he builds on a promise / She lightly let fall / In the carelessness of spirit' (III. 4-6 (p. 20)). The suffering, the pain is justified for it is not she who must be judged or found at fault but he who is her choice. For is it easy 'to be born such a woman / With wings like a falcon / And in carelessness of spirit / To love such a man?' (11-14). The Goddess here is likened to a bird, but not a soft, gentle bird such as the dove, but here a raptor, the falcon, a bird of majesty and grace whose prey has no escape. Though he feels himself undeserving of her love and wonders at her choice of him, by likening the muse to a falcon, he suggests that her choice of him is conscious and calculated – and predatory.

'Around the Mountain' can be read as an example of a poem which shows the poet has realised that his relationship with the implacable White Goddess is becoming untenable, with 'Her too-familiar face that whirls and totters / In memory, never willing to stay set' (II. 19-20 (pp. 255-56)). In this poem the Goddess is reflected in the imagery of nature. Like nature which, though majestic in its beauty, is unpredictable and ever changing, the Goddess is inconstant and unfaithful. The poet can never hope to win her, just as nature can never be ultimately tamed. Thus, he comes to the realization that 'being assured / Of the truth, why should he fabricate fresh lies?' (25-26). The poet begins to accept a certain truth in his relations with the Goddess: his devotion and suffering at the



hands of the White Goddess with her wilful cruelty have rendered him exhausted by the late 1950s and early 1960s. He has a sense of crisis, and a process of disengagement from the White Goddess begins.

### **The Black Goddess as Poetic Theory**

By the end of the 1950s Graves's theory of poetic inspiration, which was forged from the pain and anguish endured at her cruel hands, was ceasing to provide him with a creative stimulus (Lindop, 'From Witchcraft', p. 202). The nature of the White Goddess was too punishing, and as such she could no longer serve the poet's poetical needs. So Graves's single poetic theme never becomes a poetical reality for him. While the theory of the White Goddess does not become redundant for Graves, he seems to reach towards another source of inspiration. The basis of poetic truth for Graves had been the relationship between the poet and the Goddess as manifested in a human muse figure. He had conceptualized the relationship through his verse, in which the mythologized Sacred King is sacrificed for love of the Goddess. The poetry dedicated to the White Goddess, however, was rarely rewarded by the love of the Goddess for her suitor. The poetry only reiterates the poet's role as the rejected lover. In a sense, the theme becomes exhausted of its potential, as all the effort is one-sided and unrequited poetic truth is sought through the mythic relations between Goddess and poet. But as she never rewards him, symbolic enactment of the theme remains incomplete. The muse-poet plays only the eternal suitor to the Goddess, never the sacrificed King, so he is never accorded a sense of fulfilment derived from recognition of his devotion to truth.

The verse from the mid 1950s to the early 1960s displays anxiety and fear. If Graves the poet is to be confined to the role of the unfulfilled lover, there is nowhere else for his poetry to go. The poetry can only repeat the same story and that is of the theme whose potential remains unrealised. In order to accommodate the ageing poet, the theme needs to be adjusted. Fulfilment must be found if he is to survive and overcome his

suffering. Older (and more worn out) than in the days of ardour when he sought to be a suitor to the merciless Goddess, Graves reverted to a variation of his earlier poetic theory of the White Goddess. In his search for an alternative, he turned to a westernised version of Sufism, redeveloping the ideology of the muse figure in the early 1960s. As Robert Davis writes, the 'escape from the burden of the one story' ('The Black Goddess', p. 100) announces the end of the White Goddess's hold on the poet, and heralds the arrival of her substitute: the Black Goddess of Wisdom.

How did Graves arrive at this solution? Idries Shah was influential in this new direction Graves was taking, to develop a new aspect of the Goddess's nature from a dimension already present in Sufism. Ever the maverick and 'true to his earlier working methods', Graves chooses to substitute Allah, the beloved and subject of Sufi poetry for the cult of the female who is the beloved. The Black Goddess, mysterious sister of the White Goddess (*Mammon*, p. 162), her twin but also her opposite, is the more benevolent side of the Goddess. Graves attempts to give a sense of historical foundation to the Black Goddess by stating in the important lecture, 'Intimations of the Black Goddess' (1965) that the 'Provençal and Sicilian 'Black Virgins' are Sufic in origin' (*Mammon*, p. 162), blackness being the colour of wisdom.

In a three-lined poem simply entitled 'Black' in *Love Respelt* (1965) Graves claimed:

Black drinks the sun and draws all colours to it.  
I am bleached white, my truant love. Come back,  
And stain me with intensity of black (III. 1-3 (p. 130)).

The speaker explains that black here is more powerful than white and by absorbing all colours, encompasses all of them. The speaker reverses the traditional Western concept of white being illuminating. Instead, 'bleached white' suggests an allusion to bones bleached white, fleshless, dead. Graves is without life or colour, and yearns for the colour that is the summation of all colours to bring him back to life. In the place of white Graves perceives

black from an Eastern perspective as a 'concentration of all the colours of the rainbow' (*Poetic Craft*, p. 186) and as the colour of virtue. Unlike Western thinking, black here signifies goodness and wisdom. The poet has now changed his orientation, and no longer looks to the 'White' Goddess for inspiration but to the 'Black' Goddess. The second line begs for the favour of the Black Goddess because the muse-poet is still tainted by his 'apprenticeship' (*Poetic Craft*, p. 164) to the White Goddess. The poet is no longer fulfilled by the unpredictable White Goddess. He has become a poet who knows what he wants; he is hollow with striving for the unattainable and longs for a salvation within his grasp: the wisdom of the Black Goddess that comes with being a true poet. He is in consequence tenacious in his grip on his new-found love, which gives him new hope and a new voice as the muse-poet of the Black Goddess.

In 'Intimations of the Black Goddess', Graves characteristically backs up his evolving theory by using vague historical references, and then justifies it by alluding to its imagined origins in Sufism. There is a conscious distinction drawn between the White Goddess and the Black Goddess. Patrick Grant writes in his article, 'The Dark Side of the Moon: Robert Graves as Mythographer', that 'the Black Goddess marks a transition [...] from the opposition between fluctuating moonlight and the challenging sun, to the dark side of the moon' (p. 163). The dark side is secret, hidden from view. But the mysteries that lie in the darkness are so wonderful and vast that the true poet, who is able to go beyond the moonlight and the sunlight, is rewarded with the secret knowledge of the Goddess who awaits him. The Black Goddess is the wisdom that lends meaning to the experience of the White Goddess. It is only through the tribulations experienced at the hands of the White Goddess that the 'certitude of love' (*Mammon*, p. 164) of the Black Goddess can be reached and the poetic truth which is found in that part of the moon hidden from view can be discovered. Only a select few may have access to the deep mysteries of the Goddess to unveil the secrets of poetic truth. For Graves, the Black Goddess is the



creation of a new poetic myth derived from his interpretation of Sufism. The Goddess of Wisdom is mysterious, Graves claims, because she is hidden, only to be recognized by the poet after his long and painful journey. Graves writes, 'This Black Goddess [...] ordained that the poet who seeks her must pass uncomplaining through all the passionate ordeals to which the White Goddess may subject him' (*Mammon*, p. 162). But more importantly, the Black Goddess fills a *private* need in the poet to accept his own mortality and his state as an aging poet.

### **The Changing Face of the Muse**

According to Graves's second Oxford lecture of 1964, Sufism shows that 'Rare and hidden correspondences between the souls of a poet and a Muse woman are what matter in poetry: they give him courage not to die while still alive' (*Mammon*, p. 134). The source of Graves's ideas about the White Goddess came through the real-life muse figures whom he felt were essential to his creative process. His various relationships with women enabled him to mythologize himself into the persona of the valiant muse-poet, and his muse into the Goddess: first, Riding, followed by Beryl Graves and various muse figures from the 1950s on. His belief in the poetic theme falters in his stable relationship with Beryl Graves even before the period of disengagement from the White Goddess. A poem that foreshadows the Black Goddess is 'Counting the Beats' from *Poems and Satires*. It can be argued that Beryl Graves is a precursor of the Black Goddess as the poem depicts a mutual and genuine love between a man and woman, between Robert and Beryl, between muse-poet and Black Goddess. And in the poem Graves seems to accept the muse's more gentle face and his own role in such a union:

You, love, and I,  
(He whispers) you and I,  
And if no more than only you and I  
What care you or I? (II. 1-4 (p. 180)).

The world only contains this couple and their love, emphasized by the repetition of 'you and I' in each line. Their love is all-sustaining and needs nothing but each other's complement. This lyrical poem seems to describe an all-accepting love that is given and received. And yet, can such an innocent, delicate love survive in the world? Can the poet accept his own destiny as the muse-poet in which there is no need to die for the Goddess? A destiny which ordains that it is enough to live to love one another so completely? The second stanza contrasts with the romanticism of the first verse. It is also significantly repeated in the final stanza:

Counting the beats,  
 Counting the slow heart beats,  
 The bleeding to death of time in slow heart beats,  
 Wakeful they lie (5-8).

The grimness of the third line suggests that juxtaposed with the harmony of the union lies a stifling tension, a fear of stagnation exists. There is no conflict here, and conflict was ever the magnet drawing Graves to give his utmost (as seen previously in the destruction of New Crete). Death is slow coming because he suspects that harmony is not enough, that death is harboured in harmony's evenness, and bloody in coming, which causes the couple to lie restless, marking time to death. The muse-poet is, it seems, not quite ready to accept the Goddess in a gentler and less demanding role. While he comforts his love in answer to her question, 'When death strikes home, O where then shall we be' (15), by answering, 'Not there but here, / [...] / As we are, here, together, now and here' (17-19), the beauty and peacefulness of their relationship, which is likened to the 'Cloudless sky' (9), cannot last as it will suddenly be replaced by '[...] the huge storm [that] will burst upon their heads one day / From a bitter sky' (11-12). That the union cannot survive is inevitable, because the world, like the White Goddess, is cruel and hostile. Graves, here, is not ready to embrace the Black Goddess and the line 'wakeful they lie' hints at apprehension and fear. 'The White Goddess', not 'Counting the Beats', is the poem that opens the volume *Poems and*

*Satires*, suggesting Graves's stance in life and art and the contrast between the two sides of the Goddess-muse-poet relationship.

While Graves's loyalty to the White Goddess continues for some time after writing this poem, it is apparent that it is a struggle for him to maintain it, in the face of his deep yearning for a more forgiving and conciliatory demeanour. It may be argued that Graves needed the Goddess to be real, rather than a figment or mythological figure, to save him from mediocrity: that his self-esteem as a hero hinged on her reality. However, the poem shows that Graves considered the Goddess not as a mere theory but as a living, dynamic force, and his changing relations with her were a signal of his own development as a poet.

### **The Reinvention of the Goddess**

The various female muses who figured largely in Graves's poetic development during the late 1950s and 1960s had an immeasurable influence on the poet's concept of the Goddess. Graves did not always faithfully describe his relations with them, but reinvented them in a mythological poet – and – Goddess guise. An example of this can be seen in the poems of the Aemilia Laraçuen period of the early 1960s.

Despite the joyful verse Graves wrote in this period, he (and his family) suffered terribly at the hands of Laraçuen. The poems chronicle an idealized relationship between the mythologised muse-poet and the Muse-goddess to suit Graves's developing theories of the Black Goddess. He is no longer the ardent lover, as by now he has tired of the chase. The lyrical song, 'The far side of your Moon', in which alternate lines rhyme, is addressed to the Black Goddess. The poet here focuses on the side of the moon which is unseen by the sun and therefore black: 'The far side of your moon is black / And glorious grows the vine' (III. 1-2 (p. 113)). Though unseen, the 'far side' is treated by the speaker as the most wondrous part of the moon: unseen – the vine, a potent force which needs no light to grow, has been allowed to grow abundantly – therefore in undiscovered secrecy. Again Graves uses imagery that contains the familiar symbolism of Christ. In a parable of the vine Christ



says, 'I am the true vine' (John 15, 1-7) (Hall, *Dictionary*, p. 322). But here the Goddess has replaced Christ as the 'true vine' to be worshipped. Yet the vine is hidden. Here, that which is hidden from view, is in a sense secret, and only the privileged can see it and share in its mysterious magic. The poet, desperate to be the one chosen, is ready to give of himself: 'anything of me you lack, / But only what is mine' (3-4). The familiar persona of Robert Graves prevails as the devoted muse-poet who is ready to sacrifice himself for his love – but the tone is softer, of one who is in love. The Goddess has almost everything, she represents the universe: the moon, the sun and the sky: 'Yours is the great wheel of the sun; / And yours the unclouded sky' (5-6), but this cosmological view is incomplete; so the muse-poet offers her his stars to share her universe, but suggests that if she takes them, she does so only with pride and without regret: 'Then take my stars, take every one, / But wear them openly' (7-8). In this allegory the stars symbolizes what is integral to the very sexual being of the muse-poet: he offers the muse consummation of their relationship in order to complete their union. Consummation will immortalize the relationship. The union is balanced through the sexual act which will intertwine and connect them. The musicality of the final verse is 'orgasmic' in its rapture – the love between the couple is sublime.

Walking in splendour through the plain  
For all the world to see,  
Since none alive shall see again  
The match of you and me (9-12).

The poet cannot act alone, nor can the Goddess exist alone in the dark side of the moon: they fuse together as one. 'Splendour' best captures the richness of their union and their pride in displaying it – as Goddess and her consort – for all the world to wonder at. The poetic theme can be concluded only when the Goddess accepts the poet's 'stars' from 'The Far Side of Your Moon'. With this there is fusion, of poet and muse, and Goddess and Lover. Poetic truth now comes from the love and acceptance of the Goddess, which in turn is reflected in the acceptance of the realities of both the faults of matriarchal and patriarchal civilizations and Graves's own role as the muse-poet. The culmination is the

nature of love as a unification process, a love of the Beloved. The focus of the poetry is the fulfilment of a love both given and received, the reward for what has been suffered at the hands of the White Goddess. Indeed, the remaining poetry of Graves can be seen as a continuing exploration of this theme with varying degrees of success.

The embrace of the Beloved is the climax of Gravesian poetic ideology, seen in the emergence of the Black Goddess as realized in the person of Julia (Juli) Simon, Graves's final muse. Seventeen-year-old Julia Simon, whom Graves had known since birth, having been closely acquainted with her family, suddenly and unexpectedly announced her love for him. Simon, with her youth and innocence provides solace as the Black Goddess. One late poem, which encapsulates the concept of poetic truth through the poet and muse relationship is 'Bodies Entranced' from *Deyá: A Portfolio* (1972):

Where poems, love also;  
Where love, likewise magic  
With powers indomitable,  
Powers inexpendable,  
Seasoned in love.

Whence come all true poems,  
Their power and their magic  
Of two souls as one?  
From slow recognition  
Of bodies entranced.

Which entrancement of bodies  
Will rise from no impulse  
To blind propagation,  
But claim recognition  
Of truth beyond love (III. 1-15 (p. 379)).

This entrancing poem celebrates the final union of the Black Goddess and muse-poet, muse and poet, and of woman and man. The physicality of the poem is striking, as there is no mythological context, but a sensual earthiness describing the union of two bodies in a deep and sincere love. There is a 'recognition' of 'two souls' as one that is powerful and lasting. Finally Graves has reached the height of poetic truth, which goes beyond mortal love of

man and woman and emerges with a new awareness of the Goddess's enduring power as muse to the true poet.

This thesis does not suggest that the Black Goddess theory replaces or abandons that of the White Goddess. Rather, the theory of the White Goddess – over-arching and influential – extends far beyond the Black Goddess. Yet critics such as Seymour-Smith and Bloom either ignore the presence of the Black Goddess in Graves's work or attribute this figure to the advent of senility. It seems clear that the creation of the Black Goddess is not a new conception of love, but an inevitable outcome of the poet's awareness of his own mortality and sense of failure as a poet – rather than senility – and to that extent it can be identified as a private path instigated and opened up by his own needs for comfort and peace of mind. Always latent in the White Goddess, the Black Goddess emerges organically from her. However, the invention of the Black Goddess is yet again an appropriation of the Female by Graves with his damaged sexual identity, in order to repair the self inflicted damage caused by his creation of the White Goddess in an impossible act of self-healing.

### **The Goddess Evaluated**

This dissertation has sought to contribute to Gravesian studies by analysing *The White Goddess* in relation to Graves's other prose works of the period, and arguing that there is evidence of the development of a poetic theory in *The Golden Fleece* and *King Jesus* out of which emerged at least in part, the writing of *The White Goddess*. It has been suggested in particular that the translation of *The Golden Ass* was manipulated by Graves in order to endorse his theory. Finally, with *Seven Days in New Crete* the theory is examined by Graves himself and seen to be untenable. Questions of genre in *The White Goddess* have been addressed throughout this thesis – for this is partly a theory of poetic inspiration and in part an 'historical' argument – and the discussion has emphasized Graves's choice of a variety of genres in the writing of fiction, notably the mythological, historical and



utopian/dystopian genres. The interconnectedness of the four prose works with *The White Goddess* deserves as much serious attention as Graves's poetry and it is hoped that this will become a more central object of enquiry in Gravesian studies in the future, because of the fact that his work during and after the completion of these fictions became increasingly concerned with reiterating and developing his ideology of the muse and poet relationship, as has been argued here. This aspect of his relationship to his art was for Graves more than merely autobiographical. Rather, the theory informed his life's work and gave it a coherence and consistency. It may of course be asked whether Graves was, in fact, a romantic idealist, escaping the truth of the world around him. He may well have been an idealist, yet this idealism needed the real world to create the necessary tension between it and the inspiration afforded by his vision of the White Goddess. The White Goddess served as a metaphor for true poetry, so that prophet-like Graves could strive to tell the poetic truth, which for him meant the truth about the world. Through his own mythical persona and his relation with the Goddess, Graves viewed poetry as a means of creating a better world, one without war and strife, where the place of poetry would be valued, and where it would actually have a beneficial influence in the world. While there is in this aspiration an idealized intention that was impossible to realize, as is shown by the consequent transition to the Black Goddess, the foundation of the theory is evident, however, throughout the texts discussed in this thesis.

Any final appraisal of the literary value of Graves's encounter with the muse must acknowledge his invention of her as the White Goddess, her development and her consequent rejection by him – which leads to her transformation into the Black Goddess. Through the prose texts discussed here, a story is told which is just as valid and relevant as the poetry, and which runs parallel with it. These texts give a description of the transformative nature of the muse and Graves's own development as a writer moving between different genres and mediums. The texts offer an interpretation of the power of

erotic love, set in an alternative understanding of history, with the White Goddess standing as a remedy against male aggression and hubris. The invention of the Black Goddess is Graves's personal salvation, for in her hands he is permitted (he always needs permission from his muses/Goddesses and this is part of his masochism) to experience and celebrate intimacy as a redemptive property of human relationships.

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## Unpublished Letters of Robert Graves

The letters of Robert Graves to Colin MacFadyean and T. S. Matthews are currently housed at The Robert Graves Trust. St John's College, Oxford.

## Film

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