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‘The Moon’s my constant mistress’: Robert Graves and *The White Goddess*

***The White Goddess* and the critics**

‘I have been worried about 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,’ the poet and novelist Robert Graves wrote to a friend from his cottage in the Devonshire village of Galmpton during the wartime English summer of 1943. He continued:

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 threes ... which is the chief characteristic of the Moon Goddess – Triple Goddess – ritual; and the 17th-century *Loving Mad Tom* poem, which is generally regarded as the most ‘purely poetic’ of all anonymous English compositions is a perfect compendium of Ashtaroth-Cybele-Hecate worship – not a single element omitted.¹

Graves goes on to suggest that the history of English poetry has been ‘the modifying of the original moon-poetry ... with sun-poetry (intellectual, Apollo poetry)’. ‘I find myself,’ he concludes, ‘making the bards into Moon-men and the minstrels into Sun-men. Help!’ This is the earliest reference in Graves’s published writings to what would become one of this century’s most unusual works of literary theory by a major English-speaking author, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*. The letter is significant, too, on other counts. It offers a clear snapshot of Graves’s main argument in *The White Goddess*, unobscured by the daunting mass of conjecture about medieval Welsh poetry and druidic tree alphabets that occupies such a large part of the book. It provides also a prime example of his methodology, the mode of thought that is so characteristic of the book, which connects seemingly unrelated events remote from one another in time and space by a single intuitive leap of ‘poetic logic’. Finally, it chips away a little of the myth that Graves himself built around the writing of *The White Goddess*. The book, he claimed, emerged from a ‘sudden overwhelming obsession’ that gripped him as he re-read a thirteenth-century Welsh poem in a translation of *The Mabinogion* and during which he wrote the 70,000-word first draft in just three weeks.² Since his letter of July 1943 pre-dates his ‘sudden obsession’ of the winter of 1943–44 by several months, it shows that *The White Goddess* cannot have been entirely so spontaneous an act of creation.

The White Goddess is a very odd, deeply polemical book. It announces itself as a universal theory of poetic language before plunging into a bizarre, 150-page long cryptological analysis of two early medieval Welsh poems; it digresses to decipher a tree alphabet and to answer a series of mythical puzzles such as ‘What song the Sirens sang’; it concludes as a savage attack on Christianity, science and commerce in which Graves makes it plain that he regards the development of Western civilization during the past two-and-a-half millenia as an enormous, ghastly mistake. Literature as such does not figure all that largely in the book

– Graves’s remarks on English poets occupy less than a chapter. However, his theory of poetry is basically very simple. All true poetry is, he claims, inspired by the goddess of the moon, the White Goddess, or Muse. ‘The function of poetry’, Graves declares, ‘is religious invocation of the Muse I cannot think of any true poet from Homer onwards who has not independently recorded his experience of her’:

My thesis is that the language of poetic myth anciently current in the Mediterranean and Northern Europe was a magical language bound up with popular religious ceremonies in honour of the Moon-goddess, or Muse, some of them dating from the Old Stone Age, and that this *remains* the language of true poetry ... (pp. 9–10)

The religion of the Goddess was, according to Graves, the earliest religion of mankind – a religion that has been systematically suppressed since the thirteenth century BC when a race of patriarchal invaders conquered the matriarchal culture which worshipped the Goddess in what is now Greece, overturned her shrines, and replaced them with those of their own male god, the Olympian Zeus. (In Graves’s view, the Hebrew Yahweh and the Christian Jehovah are similar usurpers.) However, the *prisca theologia* of the Goddess, Graves maintains, survived for centuries in the mystery cults of late classical antiquity, the medieval Welsh and Irish bardic schools, and the witch cult of early modern Europe, until each of these was suppressed in its turn by the Christian Church. Driven ever further underground, the ‘moon-magical’ language of the ancient rites performed in honour of the White Goddess maintains a tenuous link to our own era through poetry – principally through anonymous English popular ballads, Shakespeare, and the Romantics.

The White Goddess has attracted little critical attention since its publication in 1948, no doubt partly due to a suspicion that Graves must be either a crank or a charlatan (or both). The commentators it has attracted have tended to focus, understandably, on those qualities which set the book apart from the mainstream of literary thought: its eccentricities, its intensely personal nature, its singularity. *The White Goddess* is ‘a very difficult book’, as Graves warns his readers at the outset (p. 9). T. S. Eliot, after persuading his fellow-directors at Faber and Faber to publish after the typescript had already been rejected by two other firms, described it as a ‘prodigious, monstrous, stupefying, indescribable book’.³ *The White Goddess* is not only hard to read, it is difficult to categorise. Textually, it is dense (some might say impenetrably so); bristling with allusions to often obscure Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Irish and Welsh sources; infuriatingly digressive; labyrinthine in its pursuit of seemingly absurd trains of thought. All these characteristics – those of the antiquarian author – it shares with the literary work to which it has most often been compared: Robert Burton’s eccentric classic of the English Renaissance, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621).⁴ Other critics, notably Northrop Frye, have placed *The White Goddess* in the almost equally esoteric category of works of personal poetic mythology that includes William Blake’s ‘The Mental Traveller’ (c. 1803) and W. B. Yeats’s *A Vision* (1937), without venturing into deeper analytical waters.⁵

One of the first sustained attempts to come to grips with *The White Goddess* came in 1956 from the American poet-critic Randall Jarrell, who chose to read the book essentially as a personal fantasy projected by Graves upon the world in an effort to (psycho)analyse it in the terminology of Freud and Jung. Jarrell believed that the Jungian notion of the anima,

the supposed female presence that is said by Jungians to mediate between the unconscious and conscious elements of the male psyche, held the key to understanding Graves's book:

Anyone familiar with what Jung has written about the *persona* and the *anima*, and what happens when a man projects this *anima* upon the world and identifies himself with it, will more than once give a laugh of astonished recognition as he goes through *The White Goddess*.⁶

Jung's writings – particularly a recently published set of his seminar papers – are relevant, I believe, to a discussion of *The White Goddess*. But not as Jarrell uses them to provide a ready-made interpretation of the book, or because Jung himself can be regarded as an influence on Graves, rather because they contain some striking parallels with the themes Graves explores in *The White Goddess*, including the tradition of the Muse and the nature of poetic inspiration. Jung also, it must be added, illustrates the limitations of applying a psychoanalytic term as a literary-critical tool, since the Jungian anima is itself no more 'objective' or 'scientific' a concept than Graves's White Goddess, or for that matter the classical Muse. This is clear from Jung's own account of how his notion of the anima originated – not in inductive reasoning based on clinical observations, but in an entirely subjective encounter with a disembodied female voice:

While I was writing once I said to myself, 'What is this I am doing, it certainly is not science, what is it?' Then a voice said to me, 'That is art.' I don't know why exactly, but I knew to a certainty that the voice that had said my writing was art had come from a woman.⁷

Randall Jarrell saw not only a shadowy Jungian archetype embodied in Graves's White Goddess but also a living flesh-and-blood prototype, pointing the way for later biographical interpretations of *The White Goddess*. These have become more persuasive with the publication since Graves's death in 1985 of more detailed information about his thirteen-year relationship with the remarkable and disturbing figure of Laura Riding, the American poet with whom he lived and wrote in England and Majorca from 1926 to 1939. Riding appears to have been a truly extraordinary woman who apparently regarded herself as more than human and encouraged Graves and others of their circle to think of her, literally, as a goddess. (In a prose-poem of 1932, Graves does indeed address her as an incarnation of the goddess Isis.⁸) Moreover, Riding was credited by Graves and by others with possessing paranormal powers and, according to his nephew and biographer, Richard Perceval Graves, she actually performed 'cabbalistic' and 'black magic' rituals.⁹ (In photographs of the 1930s, Riding also bears an alarming physical resemblance to the classic Grimms' fairy-tale stereotype of a witch.) After her relationship with Graves had ended, Riding herself lent currency to the idea that she had played a crucial role in the shaping of *The White Goddess*, denouncing the book when it appeared in 1948 as 'a whorish abomination ... a Frankenstein pieced together from the shards of [my] life and thought'.¹⁰ Very seldom, it may seem, can there have been such a clear-cut example of biographical influence upon a work of literary theory.

These, then, are some of the factors that set *The White Goddess* apart from the English literary-critical tradition and some of the attempts to explain its atypical nature. Nevertheless, *The White Goddess* remains an odd, refractory kind of book and even the argument that it

can be accounted for largely in terms of Graves's own personal life is not as straightforward as it may seem. Indeed, one of Graves's lesser-known critics demonstrates from an analysis of his earliest published writings that – whatever Laura Riding's subsequent influence upon him – virtually all the key elements of *The White Goddess* had taken shape in his mind *before* the two met in 1926.¹¹ Graves's first exposure to many of the ideas that later went into his theory of the White Goddess appears to be traceable to the years 1921–25, when he was studying at Oxford and reading deeply in the works of the anthropologist Sir James Frazer, author of the monumental and massively influential *The Golden Bough*, and those of Frazer's followers, the Cambridge Ritualists. Since it is well known that Frazer 'influenced profoundly', in T. S. Eliot's words,¹² the generation of writers that included Eliot himself, W. B. Yeats, D. H. Lawrence and James Joyce, Graves was certainly not atypical in this respect. Eliot's comment leads one to ask if it may be possible to see *The White Goddess* as less of a literary curiosity and as more of a product of shared intellectual and creative influences than a narrowly psychological or biographical reading of the book would indicate. Might it, from another point of view, be regarded as one text among many that make up a much broader 'discourse of primitivism'?¹³

Before turning to *The White Goddess* itself, it is necessary to outline briefly how such a discourse might function. The term 'primitivism' is not intended to signify 'naive' or 'unsophisticated' as it does in the visual arts, nor an 'uncivilised' mode of life or behaviour in the world. I use it to denote that aspect of modern Western thought which deals with *myth*, specifically with re-reading (or re-imagining) ancient myth in ways that relate it directly to the contemporary world. At least initially, 'primitivism' signifies a re-reading that is concerned with myth as a repository of earlier religious beliefs and practices ('primitive religion'), and also with a search for origins: the origins of aesthetic forms such as drama and poetry, of social institutions such as the established religions, and, ultimately, of the roots of human behaviour itself. Formative early texts would include Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Frazer's *Golden Bough* (1890–1915), and the *Collected Works* of Freud and Jung. These and the multitude of other texts which draw from them deserve, I believe, to be styled a 'discourse' since many of their key ideas have undergone a process of popularisation to such a degree that their expression is no longer entirely, or perhaps even primarily, literary. So thoroughly assimilated into popular Western culture have some of these ideas become, they can operate below the threshold of our conscious awareness unless it is purposely directed at them. A cinematic example of this occurs in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), which, as is widely known, is a film based on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902). But once its river-journey is complete, the film's literary model changes and its climax – the killing of Colonel Kurtz – becomes a representation of a 'dying-god' ritual, a sacrifice of the sacred king as envisioned by Sir James Frazer. (For the *literati* among his audience, Coppola shows in a close-up that the Colonel's bedside reading in his ruined-temple hideout in the Cambodian jungle includes Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* and *The Golden Bough*.¹⁴) Perhaps another non-literary example of the same 'discourse' at work can be observed in the current Australian Channel Ten television series, *Charmed*, which chronicles the adventures of three young witches in present-day San Francisco. One supernatural being who aids the neophyte witches is a goddess-figure – a contemporary re-imagining, in a sense, of the Hecate invoked by Ovid's Medea and by the witches in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.¹⁵ But she is a Hecate mediated for our own times

through the Frazerians, Jung, and Robert Graves: ‘You won’t believe me,’ says one of the characters as she describes the figure to her fellow-witches, ‘but it was Mom’.

Graves and the Elizabethans

Towards the end of 1927, Robert Graves received a visit from the Australian writer Jack Lindsay, who was running a small private press in London. Lindsay asked Graves if he would write the introduction to a collection the Fanfrolico Press intended to publish of versions of the anonymous seventeenth-century English popular ballad ‘Tom o’ Bedlam’s Song’. Lindsay, who remembered the afternoon largely from the inability of Graves’s companion Laura Riding to cook even a meal of corn-on-the-cob, writes in his autobiography that Graves agreed with enthusiasm, adding that he ‘already had ideas’ about the ballad.

Graves’s essay appeared at the end of the year as the foreword to *Loving Mad Tom: Bedlamite Verses of the XVI and XVIIth Centuries*.¹⁶ Graves also edited the ballad from a transcript provided by Lindsay from a manuscript of 1614, and concluded his essay on a dramatic note by suggesting that this text of ‘Tom o’ Bedlam’s Song’ was nothing less than an unattributed work of Shakespeare’s – a lost song from *King Lear* (1604–5). Whatever its provenance, the ballad occupied a privileged place in Graves’s poetic thinking for many years thereafter. We know, from the letter quoted earlier, that he came to regard it as ‘the most “purely poetic” of all anonymous English compositions’ and as a ‘perfect compendium’ of moon-goddess worship. Graves writes of the ballad in *The White Goddess*: ‘Anonymous English balladists constantly celebrate the Goddess’s beauty and terrible power. *Tom o’ Bedlam’s Song* is directly inspired by her’ (p. 433). The following year, when Graves reprinted his *Loving Mad Tom* essay in the first collection of his writings on poetry, *The Common Asphodel*, he returned to the ballad in the introduction to the title essay:

The poetic education given in the modern English literature class is meagre and wholly unpractical: it does not include a course in primitive religion, without a grounding in which such poems as *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, *The Ancient Mariner* and *Tom o’ Bedlam’s Song* yield only a small part of their sense ...¹⁷

‘Tom o’ Bedlam’s Song’ can be regarded, through the high opinion Graves held of its literary merit and the associations with ‘primitive religion’ it evoked in his mind, as a quintessential White Goddess poem. The ballad itself is one of a group of anonymous compositions that appear in seventeenth-century manuscripts and popular anthologies that reflect the Elizabethan and Jacobean fascination with madness,¹⁸ often expressing a manic poetic energy and a savage kind of poignancy. The ballads are written in the persona of the Bedlam beggar or Abraham-man – the same ‘Poor Tom’ character Edgar assumes in *King Lear* (hence Graves’s identification of the ballad with the play) – or his female counterpart, Bess of Bedlam. They naturally reflect popular contemporary notions of the causes of insanity – lovesickness, drunkenness, the influence of the moon – and they share also a common stock of classical imagery, expressed mainly through bawdy, knockabout parodies of the myths of Venus-Mars-Vulcan and Diana-Actaeon-Endymion. Of the surviving examples, as Graves points out, ‘Tom o’ Bedlam’s Song’ is easily the most accomplished technically, both in its

metrical control and in the sophistication of its wordplay, which revolves around a word rich in associations for the poets of the period: ‘horn’.¹⁹

But is ‘Tom o’ Bedlam’s Song’ a ‘perfect compendium’ of moon-goddess worship? The ballad does contain references to planetary deities: Apollo, Venus, Mars, and the moon. But it seems to lack not just a sense of religious invocation, but references to religious ritual of any kind. With the exception of the memorable line ‘The Moon’s my constant mistress’, which can be read simply as a statement of the folk-belief that lunatics are ruled by the moon, precisely *which* elements of pagan goddess worship Graves sees in the ballad are not at all obvious. Does he regard popular superstition about the moon in seventeenth-century England as a survival of primitive religious ritual? Quite possibly, but, unfortunately, he does not elucidate. However, Graves’s basic premise – that the poetry of moon-goddess worship was being written during the English Renaissance – is incontestably correct. There exists a substantial body, a sub-genre, of English poetry from the period that deals explicitly with precisely this theme. Yet curiously, Graves refers to these poems only obliquely in *The White Goddess*.

The English Renaissance moon-poetry that Graves seems so unaccountably to overlook was generated by the cult of Queen Elizabeth I as goddess of the moon. This cult eulogised Elizabeth under various names – Cynthia, Diana, Belphebe – and was instituted by Sir Walter Raleigh during his period as the ageing Queen’s favourite in the 1580s. What Raleigh the courtier-poet began as a personal and private mode of celebration, his friend Edmund Spenser introduced to the Elizabethan public, and the figure of the moon goddess became during the 1590s the most popular of all the symbols employed by the poets and painters who allegorised the Virgin Queen.²⁰ Raleigh wrote more than twenty ‘poems to Cynthia’, mostly unpublished during his own lifetime, culminating in the *XIth and last Book of the Ocean to Cynthia* (1593–94?). Only a few of these poems employ lunar imagery directly; those that do fuse the figures of Elizabeth, the classical goddess Diana-Cynthia (Mount Cynthus was the legendary birthplace of Diana),²¹ and the moon into a single image. At times, the language is plainly that of religious invocation, as in the sonnet:

Prais’d be Diana’s fair and harmless light,
Prais’d be the dews wherewith she moistes the ground;
Prais’d be her beams, the glory of the night,
Prais’d be her power, by which all powers abound.²²

Raleigh’s cult of Queen Elizabeth as Diana-Cynthia-the moon extended beyond the written word. Several artists portrayed the Queen as the virgin huntress Diana, complete with bow, arrows and hunting dogs, and Raleigh himself appears in a well-known portrait of 1588 in an elaborate costume of silver doublet and black cloak decorated with silver rays and pearls. The object of this black-and-silver cult, the moon, is shown in the top left-hand corner of the painting.²³

Edmund Spenser adopted Raleigh’s ‘excellent conceipt’ of Elizabeth as moon goddess and popularised the cult in his *Faerie Queene* (1590–96), in which the Queen appears allegorised as Gloriana and Belphebe. In the letter to Raleigh that accompanied the first three books of the *Faerie Queene*, Spenser makes clear that he is following his friend’s example:

In that Faery Queene I meane glory in my generall intention, but in my particular I conceive the most excellent and glorious person of our soueraine the Queene, and her

kingdome in Faery land. And yet in some places els, I do otherwise shadow her. For considering she beareth two persons, the one a most royall Queene or Empresse, the other a most vertuous and beautifull Lady, this latter part in some places I do expresse in Belphoebe, fashioning her name according to your owne excellent conceipt of Cynthia, (Phoebe and Cynthia being both names of Diana.)²⁴

Spenser employs lunar imagery extensively in the *Faerie Queene*. He links it especially with the female knight Britomart, the central character of Book III, who is likened to 'faire Cynthia' – the moon – appearing from behind a cloud when she reveals her face by lifting the visor of her helmet (III.i.). Later in the poem, when Britomart visits the temple of the Egyptian goddess Isis, the priests wear '... Mitres shaped like the Moone / To shew that *Isis* doth the Moone portend' (V.vii.). In the later 'Mutabilitie Cantos' (c. 1598), the goddess of the moon appears in person, in her heavenly aspect as Cynthia and in her earthly guise as Diana, as a central figure in both the major and minor narratives. A notable feature of Spenser's use of lunar imagery is that it is almost invariably associated with feminine beauty and benevolence. Cynthia is always 'faire', Isis represents 'That part of Justice which is Equity', and the extended lunar image that recurs in the *Faerie Queene* is that of a light that guides the lost and weary traveller.

George Chapman was among the last of the major Elizabethan poets to take up the moon-goddess theme in his heavily allegorical *The Shadow of Night* (1594). This poem, which Frances Yates describes as 'the quintessence of the Cynthian cult',²⁵ is in two parts: a hymn to the night ('Hymnus in Noctem') and a hymn to Cynthia, or the moon ('Hymnus in Cynthiam'). Towards the end of the first part, Chapman describes the moon rising in magical splendour from the blackness of the night in a way that seems to combine classical allusion, the imagery of a Renaissance processional triumph, and verbal echoes of the biblical Song of Songs:

See now ascends, the glorious Bride of Brides,
Nuptials, and triumphs, glittering by her sides,
Iuno and Hymen do her traine adorne,
Ten thousand torches round about them borne:

....

... with a brase of siluer Hynds,
In Iuorie chariot, swifter than the winds,
Is great Hyperions horned daughter drawne
Enchantresse-like, deckt in disparent lawne,
Cirkled with charmes, and incantations ...²⁶

Not all the Elizabethan poets who adopted the imagery of the moon-goddess cult achieve the impassioned melancholy of a Raleigh or the dense allusiveness of a Chapman. In the hands of a lesser poet such as Richard Barnfield, an imitator of Spenser, the allegory becomes formulaic and banal:

Thus, sacred Virgin, Muse of chastitie,
This difference is betwixt the Moone and thee:
Shee shines by Night; but thou by Day dost shine:
Shee monthly changeth; thou dost nere decline:
And as the Sunne, to her, doth lend his light,
So hee, by thee, is onely made so bright ...²⁷

If a poem such as this represents the public, officially sanctioned aspect of lunar symbolism for the Elizabethans, the same iconography may well have held a deeper spiritual meaning for a persecuted minority of the Queen's subjects. In Roman Catholic emblem books of the period, the moon symbolises the Virgin Mary: 'Now what may this *Moon* denote and signify to us, but the glorious *Queene of Heaven?*' the Jesuit Henry Hawkins writes in his 'Discourse of the Moon' in the emblem book *Partheneia Sacra*.²⁸ Such a clear association between lunar symbolism and the cult of the Virgin in Roman Catholic devotional literature of the English Renaissance is highly suggestive. Not only does it impart a deeper, explicitly religious – and a potentially politically subversive – Christian dimension to the literary usages of lunar imagery in the period, it finds a strange and surprising echo in the poetry of Sir Walter Raleigh, who, in one of the most moving of his poems to Cynthia, 'As you came from the holy land of Walsingham', links the cults of the Protestant Virgin Queen and the Virgin Mary.²⁹

Yet Graves makes no reference to Raleigh's poetry in *The White Goddess*. This is puzzling, especially given the fact that Raleigh's 'As you came from the holy land' is an adaptation of the traditional ballad 'Holy Land of Walsingham', which Graves quotes alongside 'Tom o' Bedlam's Song' as an example of poetry that is 'directly inspired' by the White Goddess (p. 434). What makes the omission yet more remarkable is that Raleigh's adaptation is among the fullest extant versions of the ballad and must, one may suppose, have been familiar to Graves, who published an anthology of traditional English ballads in the 1920s.³⁰ As for Spenser, Graves makes two passing references to the poet's *View of the Present State of Ireland*, but only one to his poetry: 'Spenser's White Goddess is the Arthurian "Lady of the Lake" ...' (p. 439: a reference here to the enchantress Nimue, who appears as a very minor character in Book II of the *Faerie Queene*). Of Chapman and *The Shadow of Night*, Graves makes no mention at all. However, while he may not discuss actual examples of the poetry of the cult of Elizabeth as moon goddess, Graves does briefly acknowledge its existence:

Queen Elizabeth ... was popularly regarded as a sort of deity: poets not only made her their Muse but gave her titles – Phoebe, Virginia, Gloriana – which identified her with the Moon-goddess, and the extraordinary hold that she gained on the affections of her subjects was largely due to this cult. (p. 406)

Shakespeare 'knew and feared' the White Goddess, Graves tells us.³¹ But, he goes on:

One must not be misled by the extraordinary mythographic jumble in his *Midsummer Night's Dream*, where Theseus appears as a witty Elizabethan gallant ... and, most monstrous of all, the Wild Ass Set-Dionysus and the star-diademed Queen of Heaven as ass-eared Bottom and tinselled Titania. (p. 426)

In his apparent insistence on reading *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595) as a religio-mythic drama shrunk like a mystery play to the level of popular entertainment, Graves seems oddly insensitive to the fact that this play, more than any other of Shakespeare's, is literally saturated with the imagery of the moon and its goddess, Diana-Cynthia. It is a commonplace that the influence and presence of the moon are to be felt throughout *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, from Theseus's opening lines to Puck's closing speech. The word

‘moon’ occurs twenty-eight times – more than three times more often than in any other of Shakespeare’s plays.³² Moreover, the play’s lunar imagery operates at every dramatic level – from the cosmic (Diana, goddess of chastity) to the comic (Moonshine and his lantern). Shakespeare, too, Frances Yates has shown, assimilates the imagery of the cult of Elizabeth into his play:

Cupid all arm’d: a certain aim he took
 At a fair vestal, throned by the west,
 And loos’d his love-shaft smartly from his bow
 As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts.
 But I might see young Cupid’s fiery shaft
 Quench’d in the chaste beams of the watery moon;
 And the imperial votress passed on,
 In maiden meditation, fancy free.

II.i.157–64³³

The ‘fair vestal, throned by the west’ is Elizabeth, represented here as Vestal Virgin and the central figure in a Petrarchan ‘triumph of chastity’.³⁴ The theme of chastity seems to have exercised Shakespeare’s imagination a great deal since it reappears so often in his drama both during and after the lifetime of the Virgin Queen herself. Oberon’s description of the ‘defeat of Cupid’ from a *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is echoed, for example, in a corresponding ‘defeat of Venus’ described by the goddess Ceres in the wedding masque of *The Tempest* (1611). It is no surprise, therefore, that Diana, goddess of chastity, should be the most prominent classical goddess in Shakespeare’s plays. Two of his heroines are votaries of the goddess, and ‘Celestial Dian, goddess argentine’ presides over the action of *Pericles* (1608). All told, the goddess is named more than forty times in the plays – twice as often as her nearest rival, Venus, goddess of love.³⁵

However, not all Shakespeare’s allusions to the moon-goddess cult of the 1590s are as conventional and eulogistic as Oberon’s speech from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In *Henry IV Part I* (1597), the dramatist gives its symbolism a subversive comic twist when, *apropos* the attractions of a life of crime, Falstaff says to Prince Hal:

Marry, then, sweet wag, when thou art king, let not us that are squires of the night’s body be called thieves of the day’s beauty: let us be Diana’s foresters, gentlemen of the shade, minions of the moon; and let men say, we be men of good government, being governed as the sea is, by our noble and chaste mistress the moon, under whose countenance we steal.³⁶

Why does Graves ignore, or so casually dismiss, the poetry of the cult of Elizabeth in *The White Goddess*? We know that he cannot simply have been unaware of it. A possible answer, I suggest, lies in a combination of two factors. First, by relying on anonymous compositions such as ‘Tom o’ Bedlam’s Song’, Graves can successfully evade the issue of source-criticism in order to attribute supposed traces of moon-goddess worship in a traditional English ballad to a presumed underground ‘tradition’.³⁷ In the case of major poets such as Shakespeare, Spenser and Chapman, scholarship has identified their literary sources, whether they be Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (Shakespeare) or a Renaissance mythological dictionary such as Natali Conti’s *Mythologiae* (Chapman). The second, and perhaps the decisive factor is that for Graves the White Goddess is *not* the regal and chaste figure of

Elizabeth-Diana who – despite Raleigh’s complaints of her cruelty – is essentially benign. Graves’s White Goddess is the darker side of the moon. And it is significant that, after dismissing *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in a sentence, he should turn to Shakespeare’s more ‘sincere’ portrayal of the White Goddess as Hecate, goddess of the witches in *Macbeth*, the ‘magnificent and wanton’ Cleopatra, and the ‘damn’d witch’ Sycorax of *The Tempest* (p. 426). These figures, together with Graves’s interpretation of the otherworldly *belles dames* of the English Romantic poets, will be the subject of the next section.

In questioning Graves’s interpretation of ‘Tom o’ Bedlam’s Song’ and looking beyond the ballad for evidence of ‘primitive moon-worship’ in the poetry of the same period, a curious irony emerges. For not only *was* such poetry being written by English poets, the corpus of verse that can quite legitimately be described as moon-goddess poetry is actually much larger than Graves himself would apparently have us believe. While other poems – Raleigh’s ‘Prais’d be Diana’s fair and harmless light’, Chapman’s ‘Hymnus in Cynthiam’ – may have stronger claims than ‘Tom o’ Bedlam’s Song’ to be Graves’s ‘perfect compendium’ of moon-goddess worship, the connection he makes between the religious rituals of pagan antiquity and English Renaissance poetry is actually far less fanciful than it may appear. Indeed, it could be argued that the poetry of the cult of Queen Elizabeth – the poetry of Sir Walter Raleigh, Edmund Spenser and George Chapman – constitutes an unwritten chapter of *The White Goddess*.

One of Graves’s own White Goddess-inspired writers, the nineteenth-century English rural labourer-poet John Clare, made a similar observation about Samuel Johnson’s *Lives of the English Poets*. Clare complained in his journal in 1824:

I never take up Johnsons lives but I regret his beginning at the wrong end first & leaving out those beautiful minstrels of Elizabeth – had he forgot that there had been such poets as Spenser Drayton Suckling &c &c but it was the booksellers judgment that employd his pen & we know by experience that most of their judgments lie in their pockets – so the Poets of Elizabeth are still left in cobwebs & mystery.³⁸

Graves, Shakespeare and the Romantics

Robert Graves’s White Goddess has many names. So many, in fact, that to a contemporary reader some passages of *The White Goddess* might sound (to borrow a phrase from Ted Hughes) like ‘a basement betting shop in the Tower of Babel’.³⁹ Excluding enchantresses, demonesses, muses and nymphs, the names of a hundred and sixty-six goddesses from Acca to Yngona are listed in the index. Some goddesses, of course, are more central to the book’s argument than others, and it helps to keep in mind Graves’s belief that the ancient religion of the Goddess survived in the mystery cults of late classical antiquity (Isis, Demeter, Cybele), the medieval Welsh and Irish bardic schools (Cerridwen, Celtic goddess of poetry), and the early modern European witch cult. Graves also refers repeatedly to the ‘triple’ nature of the White Goddess, or Muse, and in this he is following – and in a sense attempting to rehabilitate – a long-established literary tradition. The figure of the moon goddess as a triple deity is a common poetic trope in classical Latin literature and it is one that reappears in the writings of virtually all the major English poets from Chaucer to Keats. By following classical literary example and drawing on Virgil, Ovid and medieval and Renaissance mythographers,⁴⁰ these poets imported into English verse the pre-Christian notion of

a multiform moon goddess possessed of three separate aspects: on earth Diana, in heaven Luna, and in the underworld Hecate.

One of the earliest examples of the triple-goddess trope in English vernacular literature appears in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1386–1400), in which the character Emilia concludes her prayer to the goddess Diana in 'The Knight's Tale' with the words:

Now help me, lady, sith ye may and ken,
For tho thre formes that thou hast in thee.⁴¹

The identity of the moon goddess's other 'formes' is made explicit in these lines from John Skelton's *Garlande or Chapelet of Laurell* (1523):

Diana in the woddis grene,
Luna that so bryght doth shene,
Prosperina in hell.⁴²

In *Paradise Lost* (1667), John Milton, the poet of the Puritan revolution, banishes the moon goddesses Astoreth-Astarte and Isis to the fiery pit of hell with the fallen angels. Yet in describing the moon later in the poem, he cannot divest it entirely of its pagan associations when he writes of 'her countenance triform'.⁴³ For most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in England, the goddess of the moon is in poetic eclipse until she reappears with the Romantics.⁴⁴ Keats – who ranks alongside Raleigh in terms of the intensity, variety and volume of his moon-goddess poetry – employs the time-honoured triple-goddess trope, for instance, in the closing couplet of his sonnet 'To Homer' (1818):

Such seeing hadst thou, as it once befel
To Dian, Queen of Earth, and Heaven, and Hell.⁴⁵

To the modern mind, the notion of a deity who can be the goddess of chastity and child-birth and yet also the patroness of black magic and queen of the dead, may appear somewhat strange. A historian of religion might explain this primarily as an example of the syncretic tendencies of pagan religious beliefs in late antiquity. A psychologist might argue that it symbolises the totality of the feminine principle: woman in her three life-phases of maiden, mother and crone. From a literary standpoint, it is perhaps significant that the figure of the moon goddess contains inherent ambiguities. Any poet who takes her as his Muse, so to speak, has a choice among apparently contradictory attributes. Robert Graves is not, as I have indicated, greatly concerned, as the Elizabethan poets are, with the moon goddess in her earthly and heavenly aspects of Diana and Luna. She is, for him, essentially the goddess in her infernal aspect of Hecate, goddess of magic and of witches. This becomes very clear in Graves's selection of the figures who embody for him the most 'sincere' portrayals of the White Goddess in English literature – the Hecate of *Macbeth*, the queen of *Antony and Cleopatra*, the witch Sycorax of *The Tempest*, Coleridge's female Life-in-Death of the *Ancient Mariner*, and Keats's La Belle Dame Sans Merci.

Any discussion of Hecate and *Macbeth* (1606) must acknowledge that most editors and critics regard her two appearances in the play (III.v. and IV.i.) as later, non-Shakespearean interpolations.⁴⁶ Setting the issue of authenticity apart, however, Hecate does figure in the

only text of the play that we have and she is presented, following classical and medieval tradition, as queen of the witches. Indeed, the witches are the only characters in the play to whom she appears: firstly to admonish, and finally to congratulate them on the damnation of Macbeth. Although Graves suggests that it is the spirit of Hecate which ‘takes possession’ of Lady Macbeth (p. 426) this is not really supported by the text. Lady Macbeth calls upon ‘you Spirits’ and ‘thick Night’ in her well-known ‘invocation’ speech (I.v.37–54), but, perhaps surprisingly, it is Macbeth himself and not his wife who explicitly invokes the goddess when he speaks of ‘Pale Hecate’s off’rings’ (II.i.52) and ‘black Hecate’s summons’ (III.ii.41).

Antony and Cleopatra (1606–7) contains several references to Cleopatra having witch-like powers. Antony calls her a ‘witch’ (IV.ii.37, IV.xii. 47), a ‘spell’ (IV.xii.30), and an ‘enchancing queen’ (I.ii.128) who makes him ‘the noble ruin of her magic’ (III.x.19).⁴⁷ Pompey describes the queen’s power over Antony in terms that combine sexual attraction with a more calculated magic:

Salt Cleopatra, soften thy wan’d lip!
Let witchcraft join with beauty, lust with both,
Tie up the libertine.

(II.i.21–23)

Shakespeare also employs lunar imagery in the play. Antony, in his despair when he believes himself betrayed by the queen, likens her to the moon:

Alack, our terrene moon
Is now eclipsed, and it portends alone
The fall of Antony!

(III.xiii.153–55)

As she prepares for her own suicide, Cleopatra renounces the moon:

... now from head to foot
I am marble-constant: now the fleeting moon
No planet is of mine.

(V.ii.238–40)

Both these references, some editors of the play have suggested, allude to Cleopatra’s identification with the Egyptian moon goddess Isis. It has also been argued that some of the characteristics of Shakespeare’s queen – including her association with witchcraft – ‘closely resemble those of the goddess Isis, and may have been suggested by her’.⁴⁸ Shakespeare was certainly aware from his principal source for the play, Plutarch’s ‘Life of Antony’, that the historical Cleopatra did indeed identify herself with the goddess:

Now for Cleopatra, she did not onely weare at that time (but at all other times els when she came abroad) the apparele of the goddesse Isis, and so gave audience unto all her subjects, as a new Isis.⁴⁹

The fullest account of the myth of Isis and Osiris by a classical author appears in another of Plutarch’s works, the essay ‘De Iside et Osiride’, which first appeared in English in 1603

in Philemon Holland's translation of the *Moralia*. Michael Lloyd argues that Shakespeare drew heavily upon this essay and upon the other major classical source for the worship of Isis, Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*, for his portrait of Cleopatra.⁵⁰ *The Golden Ass* (which one critic labels 'Shakespeare's favourite novel') contains the only surviving first-hand account of an initiation into an ancient mystery cult.⁵¹ It is a significant text for Graves, who writes in *The White Goddess*:

The most comprehensive and inspired account of the Goddess in all ancient literature is contained in Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, where Lucius invokes her from the depth of his misery and spiritual degradation and she appears in answer to his plea ... (p. 70)

Graves goes on to quote the passage from William Adlington's 1566 translation⁵² in which the goddess responds to Lucius' prayer to the rising full moon:

Behold, Lucius, I am come ... I am she that is the natural mother of all things, mistress and governess of all the elements, the initial progeny of worlds, chief of the powers divine, queen of all that are in hell, the principal of them that dwell in heaven, manifested alone and under one form of all the gods and goddesses ... my name, my divinity is adored throughout the world, in divers manners, in variable customs, and by many names. (p. 72)

The goddess explains to Lucius that among the 'many names' by which she is worshipped are those of the goddesses of the Olympian pantheon: Juno, Minerva, Venus, Diana, Prosperine, Ceres and Hecate. But it is the Egyptians, she concludes, 'who do call me by my true name, Queen Isis' (p. 73).

The 'foul witch' of *The Tempest*, Sycorax, mother of Caliban, is not, strictly speaking, a character in the play, but rather an offstage presence represented only through the words of Prospero. Indeed, her function seems to be essentially that of a dramatic foil: a witch whose black magic represents the antithesis of the white magic of Prospero himself. Sycorax was, he says:

... a witch; and one so strong
That could control the moon, make flows and ebbs,
And deal in her command, without her power.

(V.i.270–72)⁵³

Hecate, goddess of witches, is not mentioned by name in *The Tempest*, but she is present in the play in one sense. It is to Hecate that Medea addresses the invocation in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which provides Shakespeare with the raw material for Prospero's famous 'Ye elves of hills ...' speech in which he abjures his 'rough magic' (V.i.33–57). It is worth noting also that Prospero's island is inhabited by goddesses of a different aspect – whether real or imaginary. Miranda is twice mistaken at first sight for a goddess – by Ferdinand (I.ii.424) and by his father Alonso (V.i.92–93) – while Prospero conjures up the 'spirits' of Iris, Juno and Ceres to celebrate the betrothal of Miranda and Ferdinand with a triple-goddess wedding masque (IV.i.60–138).

Witchcraft figures largely in Shakespeare and in *The White Goddess*.⁵⁴ Graves refers several times in his book to the ‘witch cult’, describing it as a ‘Triple Goddess cult which ... survived secretly in many parts of the British Isles’ (p. 407) until it was finally eradicated in the late seventeenth century. He also equates ‘witch’ with ‘Muse’ as in the following passage:

Spenser addresses the Muses as ‘Virgins of Helicon’; he might equally have called them ‘witches’, for the witches of his day worshipped the same White Goddess – in *Macbeth* called Hecate – performed the same fertility dances on their Sabbaths, and were similarly gifted in incantatory magic and knowledge of herbs. (p. 386)

Graves’s view of sixteenth-century English witches as goddess-worshipping adherents of a surviving pagan religion is not, for its time, particularly unorthodox. It is actually a variant of a post-Romantic view of witchcraft that can be traced back to German folklorists of the 1830s and is fully formulated by the English archaeologist Margaret Murray, a disciple of Sir James Frazer, in *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (1921). Murray’s theory that witchcraft was an ancient fertility religion was not seriously challenged until the 1970s, when it was effectively demolished by the historian Keith Thomas, whose exhaustive study of legal documents from English witch-trials found ‘very little evidence to suggest that accused witches were either devil-worshippers or members of a pagan fertility cult’.⁵⁵ Thomas concludes there never *was* a ‘witch cult’ of the type envisaged by contemporary demonologists, Margaret Murray, or Robert Graves: ‘The absence of any organisation, co-operation, continuity or common ritual among witches makes it impossible to speak with Miss Murray of a “witch cult”, leave alone of the “old religion”.’⁵⁶ Thomas also points out that witches were not persecuted to extinction in England – from the late seventeenth century onwards educated people, most importantly the country’s legislators and judges, simply ceased to believe in them. This is a factor that may have significance when we turn to the last of the English poets Graves discusses in *The White Goddess*, Coleridge and Keats.

According to Graves, Coleridge provides in his depiction of the woman dicing with Death in the phantom ship in *The Ancient Mariner* (1799) ‘as faithful a record of the White Goddess as exists’ (p. 433):

And is that woman all her crew?
Is that a Death? and are there two?
Is death that woman’s mate?

Her lips were red, her looks were free,
Her locks were yellow as gold:
Her skin was as white as leprosy,
The Nightmare Life-in-Death was she,
Who thicks man’s blood with cold.⁵⁷

Two striking features emerge from this passage. The first is that Coleridge seems to achieve an effect of the uncanny through combining conventional images of female sexual attraction (‘red lips’, ‘free looks’, ‘yellow locks’) with those of corruption and death (‘skin ... as white as leprosy’). The second, which reinforces the ambiguity of this nightmarish, otherworldly female who is imbued with such conflicting qualities of attraction and repulsion, is

the realisation that Life-in-Death herself is essentially a *benevolent* rather than a destructive figure. Her function within the poem is to help redeem, not destroy, the Ancient Mariner. Coleridge himself obviously felt obliged to underscore this point when he added a marginal gloss to the 1817 edition of the poem in order to explain that ‘Death and Life-in-Death have dined for the ship’s crew, and she (the latter) winneth the ancient Mariner.’

Two years later, Coleridge’s description of Life-in-Death is echoed in another ballad that comprises forty-eight of perhaps the most haunting, elusive and complex lines of verse in the language, ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ (1819):

I met a Lady in the Meads
 Full beautiful, a faery’s child
 Her hair was long, her foot was light
 And her eyes were wild.⁵⁸

Keats, according to Graves, ‘saw the White Goddess as the Belle Dame Sans Merci’ (p. 427). In his most extensive discussion of an English poem in *The White Goddess*, Graves lists some of the many literary sources which contribute to Keats’s ballad, concluding that ‘... the most important source of all is the *Ballad of Thomas the Rhymer*’ (p. 430).⁵⁹ In the figure of La Belle Dame herself, Graves sees ‘Love’ (an ‘elfish Fanny Brawne’), ‘Death by Consumption’ (an intimation of Keats’s own approaching death by the disease), and ‘the spirit of Poetry’ (p. 431). This seems a fairly conventional reading of the poem, but critics have found it hard to accept that La Belle Dame may also be the White Goddess. The American critic Harold Bloom protests:

For Graves, La Belle Dame is consumption, poetry, Fanny Brawne, love, death, and finally the Triple Goddess herself, the blue-white hag who mothers, marries and buries poets. This is an undeniable and terrible vision akin to Blake’s Shadowy Female, though it takes towards her an attitude opposed to Blake’s. Graves has made a separate career as the most persuasive of modern misreaders of texts, and assuredly he is misreading here, though his misreading is more imaginative than any of the other published readings of the ballad.⁶⁰

More recently, Andrew Motion, in his critical biography of Keats, writes: ‘It has become a commonplace for critics to associate the pale knight with the ailing poet, and the lady with Fanny, or with Keats’s mother, or with love, or with death.’⁶¹ ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ clearly is concerned with death: the line in the third stanza ‘I see a lily on thy brow’ ran ‘I see *death* on thy brow’ in Keats’s first draft. But beyond that it is a poem of multiple ambiguities. The title of the ballad is itself ambiguous.⁶² There are uncertainties, too, of time scheme, of the transition between waking and dreaming, of precisely what ails the knight at arms, and of the nature of La Belle Dame herself.⁶³ Graves identifies her unequivocally with the fairy enchantress of the *Ballad of Thomas the Rhymer*, who is ‘the Queen of Elfland, or Elfhome ... the contemporary incarnation of Hecate, goddess of witches’ (pp. 431–32).

The fairy enchantress who lures a mortal lover to join her in the Otherworld is a stock feature of many Celtic tales and Arthurian romances and we may prefer to agree with Stuart Sperry that ‘La Belle Dame’ is ‘remarkable ... by analogy not with any single tale or romance but with the whole tradition of the fairy mistress’.⁶⁴ However, Graves’s assertion that an aspect of the moon goddess is present in the poem is worth investigating. If we look

for prefigurations of ‘La Belle Dame’ in Keats’s earlier poetry we find a striking number of parallels of both imagery and theme in his earlier verse epic *Endymion* (1818). The theme in both poems is the same: the union of a mortal male dreamer with an otherworldly more-than-mortal female, who, in the earlier work, is the goddess of the moon in her Diana-Cynthia aspects. In *Endymion* we witness a repeated movement of the dreamer from states of enchantment to those of abandonment that is finally resolved in a state of union; in ‘La Belle Dame’ the dreamer is arrested in the state of abandonment from which he recalls his earlier state of enchantment. *Endymion*, as much as it is a failed Romantic epic, is an extended hymn to the goddess of the moon. Although Graves does not mention the poem in *The White Goddess*, it certainly seems to perform what he regards as the function of true poetry: ‘religious invocation’ of the lunar Muse. Keats’s poem contains a remarkable passage of more than forty lines in which Endymion addresses the moon in a speech that blends eroticism, mysticism and a boyish sense of wonder:

‘What is there in thee, Moon! that thou shouldst move
My heart so potently?

....

Pardon me, airy planet, that I prize
One thought beyond thine argent luxuries!’⁶⁵

If Keats’s ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ is, as Sperry suggests, ‘almost a reworking in miniature of the romance between Endymion and Cynthia in darker, northern colours’,⁶⁶ then perhaps the ambiguous, otherworldly female of the poem is actually not as unfamiliar as she appears.

The Elizabethan poets, including Shakespeare, chose to invoke Diana-Cynthia as *their* lunar Muse. The alternative may simply have been unthinkable. As we have seen, these aspects of the moon goddess had been appropriated by both sides – English Protestant State and continental Roman Catholic Church – of the great political and religious divide of the age. Witchcraft was considered a real and imminent threat within society and to have declared oneself a ‘minion of Hecate’ was probably not, even for a poet, considered wise (although Chapman might perhaps have been edging in this direction). For the Romantics, the situation is altered. In the England of ‘Mad King George’, the goddess of the moon is no longer a highly ideologically-charged symbol for Church or State, and most educated English people had stopped believing in witches long ago. As a result, perhaps, all *three* aspects of the pagan lunar Muse have become fully available to poets such as Coleridge and Keats and, as Graves suggests, La Belle Dame is indeed ‘the contemporary incarnation of Hecate’.

Graves, Frazer and Jung

Working tirelessly for more than twenty-five years in which he hardly ventured beyond his comfortable rooms in Trinity College, Cambridge, a Scottish classical scholar produced one of the twentieth century’s most influential books. James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* first appeared in 1890 as a comparative study of the cult of the goddess Diana in classical Rome. By 1915, it had grown in size to a monumental twelve volumes and purported to offer a de-

finitive theory of the origins of religion among primitive man. Frazer, by then knighted for his intellectual labours, was elevated to the status of international literary celebrity when, in 1922, T. S. Eliot referred to *The Golden Bough* in a footnote to 'The Waste Land'. After first acknowledging his debt to Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*, Eliot writes:

To another work of anthropology I am indebted in general, one which has influenced our generation profoundly; I mean *The Golden Bough*; I have used especially the two volumes *Adonis, Attis, Osiris*. Anyone who is acquainted with these works will immediately recognise in the poem certain references to vegetation ceremonies.⁶⁷

By 1922, however, Frazer's standing as an anthropologist was already poised on the brink of its ultimate decline. His 'comparative' method, which relied almost totally on secondary, literary sources, had begun to be regarded as fundamentally unsound, his arguments as tainted by an unexamined rationalism that viewed myths as the 'mistakes' made by primitive man in trying to understand the natural world. Frazer came to be regarded by later generations of anthropologists, members of the discipline he himself had helped pioneer, as 'an embarrassment.'⁶⁸ Yet whatever its status as a work of anthropology, *The Golden Bough* had a remarkable impact on early twentieth-century Anglo-Irish literature. In the words of the American critic Lionel Trilling 'perhaps no book has had so decisive an effect upon modern literature as Frazer's'.⁶⁹ The pervasiveness of the influence of *The Golden Bough* on the literary giants of Modernism – including W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence and James Joyce – has been traced in detail by the critic John Vickery who describes Frazer's book as 'one of the most influential works of the twentieth century'.⁷⁰ One writer who felt that influence even more strongly than most was Robert Graves.

Graves read Frazer while he was studying at Oxford between 1921 and 1925 when the anthropologist's reputation stood at its zenith. It seems he read deeply in the volumes of *The Golden Bough* and 'more or less uncritically'.⁷¹ The central theme of *The Golden Bough* is the myth and ritual of the 'dying god'. This widely distributed myth, according to Frazer, originated in the central religious ritual of all primitive societies: the sacrifice of the sacred king. This figure, who in Frazer's words 'embodied the powers of fertility in general and of vegetation in particular',⁷² was sacrificed in person, or later in the form of a substitute, to ensure the fertility of his people and the annual regeneration of their land. Frazer illustrates this theory at exhaustive length through the examples of the eastern Mediterranean gods Adonis, Attis and Osiris and the Norse god Balder. When we turn to *The White Goddess*, we find that Graves clearly identifies the poet with Frazer's 'dying god'. In his chapter, 'The Single Poetic Theme', Graves writes:

The Theme, briefly, is the antique story, which falls into thirteen chapters and an epilogue, 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 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 ... (p. 24)

This leads us one of the most radical ideas put forward by Graves in *The White Goddess*: his notion that mankind originally worshipped a female deity before there were any male

gods. Although some commentators seem to assume that Graves drew on Frazer for the idea of an original goddess-worshipping matriarchy, this is not the case. Frazer speculates that *matrilineal* societies may have given rise to the worship of mother goddesses such as the Egyptian Isis, but he makes it plain that he does not believe that a truly *matriarchal* society ever existed (or indeed that the ‘female mind’ is capable of conceiving of a deity who is other than male).⁷³ For the notion of an original matriarchy Graves went to one of Frazer’s followers, the brilliant female classicist Jane Ellen Harrison, author of *A Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903), who, in a chapter appropriately entitled ‘The Making of a Goddess’, writes:

In the Homeric Olympus we see mirrored a family group of the ordinary patriarchal type, a type so familiar that it scarcely arrests attention But when we come to examine the local cults [of the Greek city states] we find that, if these mirror the civilization of the worshippers, this civilization is quite other than patriarchal. At Delphi in historical days Apollo held the oracle, but Apollo, the priestess knows, was preceded by a succession of women goddesses Gaia the Earth was first, and elsewhere Aeschylus tells us that Themis was but another name of Gaia.

In historical days in Greece, descent was for the most part traced through the father. These primitive goddesses reflect another condition of things, a relationship traced through the mother, the state of society known by the awkward term *matriarchal* ... Our modern patriarchal society focusses its religious anthropomorphism on the relationship of the father and the son; the Roman Church with her wider humanity includes indeed the figure of the Mother who is both Mother and Maid, but she is still in some sense subordinate to the Father and the Son.⁷⁴

This passage contains practically all Harrison has to say in her book about *matriarchal* religion in Ancient Greece, but it may have been sufficient to provide Graves with the basic premise of what later became his theory of the White Goddess. Harrison, a member of the group of classical scholars known as the Cambridge Ritualists and a friend of Virginia Woolf, provides a strikingly simple (though highly reductive) definition of myth itself. Myth is nothing, she argues, but the verbalisation of ritual: ‘the spoken correlative of the acted rite’.⁷⁵ There can, according to this view, be no myth without ritual. Although time may have erased the ritual itself, a record of the act survives as myth or in one of the debased forms of myth, such as legend, folktale, romance, or song. This brings us very close indeed to Graves’s main argument in *The White Goddess*, his notion that the language of true poetry is a survival of the language used in ancient religious ceremonies performed in honour of the goddess of the moon.

The American poet Randall Jarrell was the first literary critic to write of *The White Goddess* in psychological terms in 1956. However, the first Jungian interpretation of Graves’s poetic theory had appeared a year earlier in a passage in a book by one of Jung’s followers, the psychologist Erich Neumann. Writing of the transformative power of the feminine principle (the ‘Archetypal Feminine’), Neumann theorises that at an early point in human history, woman, ‘as repository of positive as well as negative magic, as priestess and witch’, became the source of the poet’s inspiration:

Because the ecstatic situation of the seeress results from her being overpowered by a spirit [the Archetypal Feminine] that erupts in her, or rather chants rhythmically from her, she is the center of magic, of magical song, and finally of poetry. She is the

source from which Odin received the runes of wisdom; she is the Muse, the source of words that stream upwards from the depths; and she is the inspiring anima of the poets.⁷⁶

Although this passage reads almost as if it were from his own book, Graves may well have balked at the Jungian terminology in the last line, since his opinion of both Jung and Freud was one of undisguised contempt. When he replied in 1957 to Randall Jarrell's psycho-analytic critique of *The White Goddess*, Graves protested at being regarded as 'a triumphant vindication of Freud's and Jung's psychological theories':

The truth is that I read Freud as long ago as 1917 – critically, too, and found him most unscientific. Freud, indeed, never realised to his dying day that he was projecting a private fantasy on the world, and then making it stick by insisting that his disciples must undergo prolonged psycho-analytic treatment until they surrendered and saw the light. Much the same goes for Jung.⁷⁷

Graves's friend and biographer Martin Seymour-Smith gives this account of his antipathy towards Jung:

Many have ... tried to compare his work [on the White Goddess myth] with that of Jung; but he himself refused to take Jung seriously. When asked to write on him, he rudely dismissed Jung as his own self-styled 'wise old man' ... In conversation he always showed the utmost contempt for him.⁷⁸

However, another of Graves's biographers, Miranda Seymour, writes:

References to Jung's theory of archetypes have proved hard to avoid. Graves denied ever having read a word of Jung, but Jung's description of the female anima (the male image of the female) as a woman who is both unobtainably erotic and possessed of an ancient and superior wisdom leads us directly towards Graves's concept of the Goddess.⁷⁹

But is the Jungian anima a meaningful concept by which to interpret *The White Goddess*? Jung wrote a detailed account of how his notion of the anima originated that is so remarkable it is worth examining in detail. In 1913, he tells us, he began recording his own dreams and waking fantasies as a 'scientific experiment'⁸⁰ into the nature of the unconscious mind:

While I was writing once I said to myself, 'What is this I am doing, it certainly is not science, what is it?' Then a voice said to me, 'That is art.' This made the strangest sort of impression upon me, because it was not in any sense my conviction that what I was writing was art I don't know why exactly, but I knew to a certainty that the voice that had said my writing was art had come from a woman.⁸¹

Several interesting points emerge from this passage, which is from a seminar paper by Jung, any one of which would have been sufficient to provoke (to paraphrase Randall Jarrell) a sardonic 'laugh of astonished recognition' from Robert Graves. Firstly, Jung *recognised* the woman's voice, although he does not mention this to his seminar audience. In his autobiography, he writes: 'I recognized it as the voice of a patient, a talented psychopath who

had a strong transference to me.’⁸² The woman described – rather unchivalrously – as a ‘talented psychopath’ has been identified as Sabina Spielrein,⁸³ who during this period was not only Jung’s patient, but also his mistress and his student. Secondly, based on comments by Spielrein in her medical degree dissertation, it has been suggested that Jung may have deliberately misreported what the woman’s voice actually said to him: ‘It may well be that the voice Jung heard ... said: “It is not science. It is *poetry*” [my emphasis].’⁸⁴ Finally, Jung’s account of the mysterious female voice is remarkably similar to a well-known sixth-century description of an encounter with a goddess. The philosopher Boethius, musing in his prison cell on his impending execution by order of the barbarian Emperor Theodoric in 524 AD, writes:

While I was quietly thinking these thoughts over to myself and giving vent to my sorrow with the help of my pen, I became aware of a woman standing over me ...⁸⁵

The ‘woman’ then speaks to Boethius, who identifies her as ‘Philosophy’, or the Gnostic goddess, Sophia. Although Jung says that his mysterious female voice ‘came through with a long statement’, he declines to divulge its content. Jung’s account of his encounter with the anima goes on:

I was much interested in the fact that a woman should interfere with me from within. My conclusion was that it must be the soul in a primitive sense, and I began to speculate on the reasons that the name ‘anima’ was given to the soul. Why was it thought of as feminine? it seemed to me if I could find such definite ideas about the anima, it was quite worthwhile to try to formulate a conception of God. But I could arrive at nothing satisfactory and thought for a time that perhaps the anima figure was the deity. I said to myself that perhaps men had had a female God originally, but, growing tired of being governed by women, they had overthrown this God.⁸⁶

This account, which was circulated privately but did not appear in print until 1989, is the basis for a section of Jung’s autobiography which follows the text of the seminar almost verbatim, except that the passage relating to the ‘female God’ is missing. In its place, Jung writes: ‘Later I came to see that this inner feminine figure plays a typical, or archetypal role in the unconscious of a man, and I called her the “anima”.’⁸⁷

Frazer and Jung exemplify the two dominant approaches to myth in the first half of the twentieth century: the ritualistic and the psychological.⁸⁸ Both approaches are concerned with a search for universally applicable patterns of human behaviour and share a decontextualizing attitude towards the myths with which they deal. They differ, however, in the way in which they define myth temporally and relate it to the contemporary world. For the Frazerian ritualist a myth is a memory of a long-vanished but once-practised ritual that survives, like a relic, into the present; for the Jungian psychologist a myth is a timeless, ever-present product of the collective unconscious of the human psyche. Robert Graves, in embracing the theory and methods of Frazer and his followers and uncompromisingly rejecting those of Freud and Jung, clearly allies himself with the ritualists. Yet, as apparently with much else with *The White Goddess*, there is irony. Ritualism seems to have been a spent force intellectually well before Graves published his book in 1948, although its creative influence can be traced up to the present, for example, in the novels of William Golding and the poetry and criticism of Ted Hughes.⁸⁹ Jungian mythographers and analysts have become the pres-

ent-day votaries of Graves's White Goddess since it is they who are the most prominent contemporary popular writers on goddess myth.⁹⁰ The final irony is that it should have been not Graves the poet, but Jung the 'scientist' – a *poet manqué* in a white coat – who recorded one of the most startling modern accounts of a personal encounter with a Muse, perhaps even with the White Goddess herself.

'The chief Holy Book': the legacy of *The White Goddess*

In the English summer of 1948, a 17-year-old grammar school boy in the South Yorkshire coal-mining town of Mexborough, Ted Hughes, won *The White Goddess* as a school poetry prize. At about the same time, one of England's foremost female poets, Kathleen Raine, was so deeply affected by the book she wrote to Robert Graves: 'Your words enlighten my way.' The poet-novelist Lawrence Durrell also sent Graves a letter of 'unqualified praise', as did many practising, modern-day goddess-worshippers, including the pastor of the New York Church of Aphrodite.⁹¹ In the fifty or so years since its publication, *The White Goddess* has proved remarkably diverse in its influences: on poets such as Hughes and Sylvia Plath, novelists such as Durrell and Thomas Pynchon, the feminist movement in the United States, and the present-day practitioners of witchcraft. It is a legacy that seems to endure. One can walk into almost any bookstore today and find at least some evidence of this: in New Age self-help books with titles like *The Goddess in Everywoman*, in a novel such as the Australian Larry Buttrose's *The Maze of the Muse* (1998), and in a volume of poetry such as Hughes's *Birthday Letters* (1998).

Ted Hughes took Graves's book with him to university where, as an undergraduate at Cambridge in the early 1950s, he immersed himself in a private cult of the White Goddess: years later he was to tell Robert Graves that he regarded *The White Goddess* as 'the chief Holy Book of my poetic conscience'.⁹² The Goddess makes her first appearance in his poetry in Hughes's 'Cleopatra to the Asp' (1960):

The bright mirror I braved: the devil in it
Loved me like my soul, my soul:
Now that I seek myself in a serpent
My smile is fatal.

Nile moves in me, my thighs splay
Into the squalled Mediterranean;
My brain hides in that Abyssinia
Lost armies foundered towards.

Desert and river un wrinkle again.
Seeming to bring them the waters that make drunk
Caesar, Pompey, Antony I drank.
Now let the snake reign.

A half-deity out of Capricorn,
This rigid Augustus mounts
With his sword virginal indeed; and has shorn
Summarily the moon-horned river

From my bed. May the moon
 Ruin him with virginity! Drink me, now, whole
 With coiled Egypt's past; then from my delta
 Swim like a fish toward Rome.⁹³

Such a poem must, inevitably, have literary antecedents: Cleopatra's address to the asp is an episode in the final act of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* and a reader might expect to find echoes of the play within the poem – yet these are largely absent. Hughes's Queen of the Nile is a dramatic mask, a mouthpiece, through which speaks a goddess who personifies the land of Egypt itself: Isis.⁹⁴ Shakespeare's Cleopatra – although Antony may style her 'Egypt' (e.g. III.xi.51) – is more human in the face of death than she is represented in Hughes's poem. In the corresponding scene in the play, she wishes the asp might speak in order to 'call great Caesar ass' (V.ii.306), but she does not curse Augustus as an indestructible goddess of earth and moon. Hughes may borrow the dramatic monologue form of his poem from Shakespeare, but for its content he must have looked elsewhere.

It is possible, I believe, to identify two sources for 'Cleopatra to the Asp', each testifying to the influence of Robert Graves. Some of the poem's imagery, including the puzzling description of Augustus as a 'half-deity out of Capricorn', seems to be drawn from a single passage in *The White Goddess* where, on the same page, Hughes would have found references to the depiction of the constellation Capricorn in the Egyptian zodiac with a fish tail (as half-goat, half-fish) and to the deification of Augustus (p. 319). A second, pictorial source may have suggested the central idea of the poem. This is a woodcut illustration of the goddess Isis from a late Renaissance work of Egyptology by the Jesuit Neoplatonist Athanasius Kircher, *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (Rome, 1652–54).⁹⁵ It depicts Isis as a giantess striding across a river, presumably the Nile, which flows behind her to the sea (*Illustration I*). It is a baroque European, desexualised image. But, with her sexuality imaginatively restored, this goddess could suggest a Cleopatra-Isis whose 'thighs splay / Into the squalled Mediterranean' and whose 'delta' is both the alluvial mouth of the Nile and the *mons veneris* of the queen-goddess. Evidence exists to support a connection between the poem and the woodcut since when Hughes and his wife, Sylvia Plath, moved to London in 1959 they decorated a wall of their flat with 'a poster depicting the goddess Isis enlarged from an astrology book'.⁹⁶ It is this poster which seems to figure in the last Goddess poem Hughes published, 'Isis' (1998), in which the Indian midwife who delivered his wife's first child is invested with the titles and symbols of the Egyptian goddess:

Our Black Isis had stepped off the wall
 Shaking her sistrum –
 Polymorphous Daemon,
 Magnae Deorum Matris – with the moon
 Between her hip-bones and crowned with ears of corn.⁹⁷

The Kircher illustration fits this description in almost every detail – each of the Latin epithets appears in it, as do pictorial representations of the 'sistrum', the 'moon / Between her hip-bones' and the 'ears of corn'. As its title '*Isidis ... Apuleiana descriptio*' indicates, the woodcut is based on Lucius' vision of Isis in Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, discussed earlier. Hughes would have known, of course, from Graves's comments in *The White Goddess*,

that this passage provides ‘the most comprehensive and inspired account of the Goddess in all ancient literature’ (p. 70).

Critics have long recognised the influence of *The White Goddess* in Hughes’s poetry: ‘The myth that has most consistently inspired Hughes is the subject of Robert Graves’s *The White Goddess*: the nature goddess in her three aspects of maiden, mother and crone,’ write Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts.⁹⁸ They add that while the Goddess is ‘implicit’ in his work from the beginning, she becomes increasingly prominent in *Crow* (1970), *Gaudete* (1977) and *Cave Birds* (1978). But the full extent of Hughes’s debt to Graves becomes apparent later, in his massive critical study *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1992), an adaptation of the basic premise of *The White Goddess* to a close reading of Shakespeare. Hughes claims that Shakespeare formulated the ‘Tragic Equation’ of his mature plays by combining the myths of the Great Goddess (represented initially by Venus in the narrative poem *Venus and Adonis*) and the Goddess-destroying god (who first appears as Tarquin in *The Rape of Lucrece*) in all the plays from *All’s Well That Ends Well* (1604) to *The Tempest*. While passionately and ingeniously argued, Hughes’s book suffers by demanding the reader’s acceptance that a previously undiscovered ‘master key’ to Shakespeare not only exists, but has now been revealed. Hughes relegates his acknowledgment to Graves, surprisingly, to a footnote in the final chapter, in which he refers to *The White Goddess* (in a slipshod metaphor for a poet) as ‘a rich primer for the genetic tributaries that enrich the bloodstream of Shakespeare’s Goddess and hero’.⁹⁹

The influence of *The White Goddess* is also apparent in the poetry of Sylvia Plath. When Ted Hughes introduced Plath to *The White Goddess* shortly after they first met at Cambridge in 1956, the book had, in Hughes’s words, ‘a terrific effect’ upon her. Graves’s influence on Plath’s poetry is the subject of a full-length study by Judith Kroll and so I shall glance at it only briefly here. The moon is a central image in Plath’s poetry, as Kroll points out, arguing that Plath identified herself with the White Goddess myth through the ‘witch-goddess aspect of her Muse’, a Muse who ‘resembles the goddess Hecate’.¹⁰⁰ While it is impossible to read Sylvia Plath today without the foreknowledge of her suicide, her later poems do possess an eerie, foreboding quality – Hughes calls it an ‘unalterably spot-lit vision of death’ – unlike anything to be found in the male poets discussed in this study (except possibly, and more impersonally, in Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*). Their strangeness is intensified by their apparent, childlike simplicity:

The moon is ...
White as a knuckle and terribly upset.

.... She is bald and wild.

The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary.
Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls.¹⁰¹

Plath, however, is not the only American writer whose work displays the influence of *The White Goddess*: it has been detected, for example, in the figure of Mara in Thomas Pynchon’s first novel, *V.* (1961),¹⁰² and it may be present, too, in Pynchon’s depiction of the character Katje as ‘Mistress of the Night’ in his later novel, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973). Another aspect of the influence of Graves’s book in the United States that cannot be overlooked is its reported impact on the ‘neo-pagan’ movement, particularly the modern witch-

craft, or ‘Wiccan’, revival. The chronicler of modern paganism in America, Margot Adler, writes:

Robert Graves has been very influential in the Witchcraft revival. *The White Goddess* and some of Graves’ lesser-known works, particularly such novels as *Watch the North Wind Rise* [English title: *Seven Days in New Crete*] and *King Jesus*, had an enormous impact on people who later joined the Craft.¹⁰³

Adler points out that while Graves himself has often been viewed as ‘a sexist’, *The White Goddess* ‘has had an enormous influence on women ... [and] is one of the few books by a male author that is easily found in most feminist bookstores’.¹⁰⁴ Feminists, of course, have not been blind to its limitations, not least to Graves’s assertion that the Goddess reserves her favours exclusively for heterosexual male poets. The renegade feminist critic Camille Paglia takes Graves to task over this:

Male homosexuals, he claims, cannot write great poetry, since their indifference to women severs them from the Muse or White Goddess. Women poets are crippled for the same reason: ‘Woman is not a poet: she is either a Muse or she is nothing.’ He denies Sappho was a lesbian, blaming the idea on ‘the malevolent lies of the Attic comedians’. Added by homophobia, Graves fails to follow his interesting theory to its necessary conclusion: Sappho is a great poet *because* she is a lesbian, which gives her erotic access to the Muse.¹⁰⁵

Paglia is quite right – at least about Graves’s homophobia. (Milton – ‘the Thunder-god’s own Laureate’ (p. 407) – is similarly denied Muse-poet status by him partly, I suspect, on the grounds of supposed sexual deviancy.)¹⁰⁶ However, it seems pointless to condemn Graves now for political incorrectness since in his attitudes towards homosexuals and women (at least other than muses), he was a man of his time. Perhaps he may have reflected a spirit of the age in a more profound sense.

Of Graves’s near-contemporaries, W. B. Yeats and James Joyce are perhaps the major writers most concerned with mythological aspects of the feminine.¹⁰⁷ Yeats indeed might appear to be the ideal Gravesian Muse poet. He had a remarkable Muse – Maud Gonne – whom he regarded as a goddess (although a Minerva rather than a Hecate) and a mediumistic wife whose automatic writings supplied him with poetic raw material. He wrote of Celtic goddesses and Frazerian dying-gods, constructed a personal poetic mythology based on the cycles of the moon, and produced a series of poems – *A Woman Young and Old* (1929) – that might have been dictated from the lips of Graves’s ‘capricious, all-powerful’ White Goddess herself:

What if I look upon a man
As though on my beloved,
And my blood be cold the while
And my heart unmoved?
Why should he think me cruel
Or that he is betrayed?
I’d have him love the thing that was
Before the world was made.¹⁰⁸

But perhaps, for Graves, Yeats is simply *too* close a rival Muse poet. He is not mentioned by name in *The White Goddess*. But, although Yeats was then ten years' dead, Graves's derisory sneer at the end of his chapter on 'The Single Poetic Theme' is aimed directly at him: 'Nowadays poets seldom use ... artificial aids to inspiration But a good many of the charlatans or weaklings resort to automatic writing and spiritism' (p. 441).

Joyce fares better in *The White Goddess*. After discussing the wide distribution of the name 'Anna' among goddesses of different cultures, Graves writes: 'James Joyce playfully celebrates Anna's universality in his *Anna Livia Plurabelle*. And indeed if one needs a single, simple, inclusive name for the Great Goddess, Anna is the best choice' (p. 372). *Anna Livia Plurabelle* (1928) is an early draft of the first chapter of what became *Finnegans Wake* (1939) and Anna Livia is the figure who connects the end of Joyce's circular novel with its beginning. As the River Liffey, she is the 'riverrun past Eve and Adam's' that brings us 'by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs'. She is also a distinctly Joycean goddess – a section of the *Wake* opens with this brilliantly subversive, blasphemous parody of the Lord's Prayer:

In the name of Annah, the Allimaziful, the Everliving, the bringer of Plurabilities,
haloed be her eve, her singtime sung, her rill be run, unhemmed as it is uneven!¹⁰⁹

In seeking later evidence for a 'Goddess' *Zietgeist*, we must be aware that Graves devoted most of his literary output in the 1940s and 1950s to popularising his theory of the White Goddess and that this included two historical novels with a Goddess theme which pre-date *The White Goddess: The Golden Fleece* (1944) and *King Jesus* (1946). Graves continued to propogate his views through a third novel, *Seven Days in New Crete* (1949), a translation of *The Golden Ass* (1950), his footnotes to *The Greek Myths* (1955) and, not least, his own poetry and the (young, attractive) Muse-obsessed Majorcan lifestyle which inspired it. However, two influential books that appeared almost contemporaneously with *The White Goddess*, and so presumably are free of any direct influence, do contain very similar themes: Gertrude Rachel Levy's *The Gate of Horn* (1948) is a pioneering study of the archaeological evidence for the worship of a mother goddess in Neolithic Europe,¹¹⁰ while Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) offers a Jungian interpretation of the classic hero-quest in which the hero's ultimate goal becomes a mystical union with the 'Queen Goddess of the World'.¹¹¹

Let me now attempt to summarise the main points of my argument. This study began from a conviction that psychological and biographical interpretations of *The White Goddess*, which dominate published commentary on the book, are inadequate. Both approaches tend to be 'diagnostic' in their aims and ultimately tell us little other than that Robert Graves was an unusual man (which he was) who led an extraordinary life (which he did). The psychological approach, particularly, seems to be fettered by its own circular logic. In reading *The White Goddess* perhaps we need to look less towards Graves's own life, the Freudian personal subconscious, or the Jungian collective unconscious (what Jorge Luis Borges calls 'our own woeful mythology'), and more towards those texts Graves actually deals with in his book and to the others, sometimes unacknowledged, that inform or have a bearing upon his argument. Once we do so, some unexpected aspects of *The White Goddess* begin to emerge.

The first is that Graves is an unreliable guide to his own subject: the invocation of the lunar Muse by fellow-English poets. This is not, however, because he exaggerates the case for a connection between ‘primitive moon worship’ and English poetry, but because he *understates* it. There is, as I have indicated, a great deal more ‘moon-goddess’ poetry in the English poetic canon than a casual reader of *The White Goddess* might suppose. This is a genuinely perplexing feature of Graves’s book: that he should dismiss (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*), ignore (Raleigh, Spenser, Chapman, Keats’s *Endymion*), or ridicule so much material he might presumably just as easily have produced in support of his argument. Unreliable though he may be, Graves did *not* invent the White Goddess. He draws upon a two-thousand-year-old literary tradition which represents the moon goddess as a triple deity: Diana on earth, Luna in heaven, Hecate in hell. Perhaps the reason Graves disregards so much Elizabethan and Romantic poetry that invokes the lunar Muse is simply that for him the White Goddess is neither Diana nor Luna: she is Hecate.

The second point to emerge is that *The White Goddess* is surprisingly *orthodox* in its anthropology. This becomes evident from even a cursory study of Frazer’s *Golden Bough* and Jane Ellen Harrison’s theory of a matriarchal stage in the development of religion in Ancient Greece. Even Graves’s view of English witches as Goddess-worshipping muses is not, in the context of the writings of the Frazerian archaeologist Margaret Murray, beyond the pale of what was, until the 1970s, an academically respectable view of witchcraft. Present-day mythographers agree that two approaches to myth characterise the first half of this century: the psychological and the ritualistic. As I have tried to show, Graves is a ‘ritualist’ who looks to the practices of ‘primitive religion’ for the origins of a particular type of poetry, in much the same way that Nietzsche and the Cambridge Ritualists do in their search for the origins of Greek tragedy. From this perspective, we can see that while *The White Goddess* is indeed an odd book, it is not *quite* as strange as it may seem. As I have suggested, it might even be possible to regard it as an example – perhaps extreme but not atypical – of a much broader twentieth-century ‘discourse of primitivism’.

My final point is a really a question to which there is no verifiable answer. Is the impulse behind *The White Goddess* essentially religious? After all, for Graves ‘the function of true poetry is *religious* [my emphasis] invocation of the Muse’ and so perhaps his attempt to rehabilitate the lunar Muse is a response to the modern Western desacralisation not simply of literature, but of culture, society, and the natural world. If T. S. Eliot’s response was to join the Anglican Church, then Graves’s was less conventional. But even within the secular context of the history of ideas, his poetic theory obviously has deeper roots than Frazerian anthropology. It incorporates a Romantic ‘golden age’ view of myth which regards primitive man as living in a closer relationship than modern man to the divine, a view that looks back to the Neoplatonists’ notion of a *prisca theologia*, and back further still to Plato’s doctrine that poetry is divinely inspired.¹¹² Critical opinion as to whether Graves actually believed in the literal existence of the White Goddess is fairly unanimous: ‘No,’ most commentators conclude, ‘the White Goddess is a poetic metaphor or shorthand for an element of the poetic personality.’ I disagree. While we can never know for certain, since nowhere is Graves explicit on this point, I think there is sufficient cumulative, implicit evidence to show that he did. Such a belief is implicit when Graves writes in *The White Goddess* of the ‘return’ of a vengeful Goddess angered by ‘man’s irreligious improvidence’ towards the earth’s natural resources (p. 486); in the story of the West African brass figurines that appears in the book’s ‘Postscript 1960’ (pp. 488–90); and in almost *everything*

else Graves published from the mid-1940s to the end of his writing career in the 1970s – at a conservative estimate well over half a million words with a Goddess theme. On the single recorded occasion on which Graves discussed whether the Goddess was metaphor or fact, a sell-out public lecture entitled ‘The White Goddess’ in New York in 1957, he was evasive. We have to draw our own conclusions since what he told his audience was then, and still represents for us now, his final word:

Do I think that poets are literally inspired by the White Goddess? That is an improper question. What would you think, should I ask you if, in your opinion, the Hebrew prophets were literally inspired by God? Whether God is a metaphor or a fact cannot be reasonably argued; let us likewise be discreet on the subject of the Goddess.¹¹³

Notes

- 1 Graves to Alan Hodge, 13 July 1943, in Paul O’Prey (ed.), *In Broken Images: Selected Letters of Robert Graves, 1914–1946* (London, Hutchinson, 1982), pp. 315–16.
- 2 *The White Goddess: a Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London, Faber, 1948; 4th edn, 1961), p. 488. All subsequent page references are to this edition and appear in parentheses in the main body of the text.
- 3 Quoted in Miranda Seymour, *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* (New York, Henry Holt, 1995), p. 324.
- 4 Martin Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves, Writers and Their Works* No. 78 (London, 1956); George Steiner, ‘The Genius of Robert Graves’, *Kenyon Review*, 22 (Summer 1960), p. 356; J. M. Cohen, *Robert Graves* (Edinburgh, Oliver & Boyd, 1960), p. 96.
- 5 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 323; George Stade, *Robert Graves, Columbia Essays on Modern Writers* No. 25 (New York, Columbia University Press, 1967), p. 40.
- 6 Randall Jarrell, ‘Graves and The White Goddess’, *Yale Review*, XLV (1956), pp. 474–75. Although the English poet-critic Kathleen Raine wrote a favourable two-page review for *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1950, Jarrell’s article set the tone for most subsequent commentary on *The White Goddess* until the mid-1990s.
- 7 C. G. Jung, *Analytical Psychology: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1925* (London, Routledge, 1990), p. 42.
- 8 ‘As It Were Poems III’, in *Poems 1930–1933* (London, Arthur Barker, 1933).
- 9 Richard Perceval Graves, *Robert Graves: The Years with Laura Riding, 1926–1940* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1990), pp. 78, 81, 82, 191, 303, 307.
- 10 Richard Perceval Graves, *Robert Graves and The White Goddess, 1940–1985* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1995), p. 150.
- 11 Sydney Musgrove, ‘The Ancestry of The White Goddess’ (University of Auckland, 1962), Bulletin No. 62, English Series No. 11, p. 21.

- 12 'Notes on the Waste Land', in *Collected Poems, 1909–1962* (London, Faber, 1963), p. 80.
- 13 I have borrowed the term 'discourse of primitivism' from Richard Halpern, 'Shakespeare in the Tropics: From High Modernism to New Historicism', *Representations*, 45 (1994), pp. 82–83. Halpern uses it in the context of T. S. Eliot's introduction of anthropological methods and themes into Shakespeare criticism during the 1920s.
- 14 Books cited by Eliot in his 'Notes on the Waste Land'.
- 15 *Metamorphoses*, VII.94.
- 16 Martin Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* (London, Hutchinson, rev. edn, 1995), p. 151; Jack Lindsay, *Fanfrolico and After* (London, The Bodley Head, 1962), p. 78.
- 17 'The Common Asphodel', in *The Common Asphodel: Collected Essays on Poetry, 1922–1949* (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1949), p. 327. Graves's 'Loving Mad Tom' essay is also reprinted in Paul O'Prey (ed.), *Robert Graves: Collected Writings on Poetry* (Manchester, Carcanet Press, 1995).
- 18 Duncan Salkeld, *Madness and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* (Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 25–26. Other ballads include *Mad Maudlin* and *Bess of Bedlam*, in W. H. Logan (ed.), *A Pedlar's Pack of Ballads and Songs* (Edinburgh, William Paterson, 1869), pp. 172–88, and *Old Tom of Bedlam*, in Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, vol. II (London, 1765; rpt London, Routledge/Thoemneses Press, 1996), pp. 344–46.
- 19 Several meanings seem to be present: as verb – 'to cuckold' and possibly 'to gore' – and as noun – rhinoceros horn, drinking horn, the 'horns' of the moon. 'Horn' in the sense of 'an erection' may also be apt, but according to the *OED* the word did not acquire this meaning until the eighteenth century.
- 20 Roy Strong, *The Cult of Elizabeth: Elizabethan Portraiture and Pageantry* (London, Thames & Hudson, 1977), p. 48; Frances Yates, *Astraea: The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 76.
- 21 Virgil, *Aeneid*, I.498–500.
- 22 'Prais'd be Diana's fair and harmless light', in *Selected Writings*, ed. Gerald Hammond (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1986).
- 23 Yates, *Astraea*, p. 216 and *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (London, Routledge, 1979), p. 206. The Raleigh portrait appears, for example, as the cover illustration to the Penguin *Selected Writings*.
- 24 Letter to Sir Walter Raleigh, in *The Faerie Queene*, vol. I (London, The Scolar Press, 1976), p. 593.
- 25 Yates, *Astraea*, p. 76.
- 26 'Hymnus in Noctem', lines 384–96, in *The Poems of George Chapman*, ed. Phyllis Brooks Bartlett (New York, Russell & Russell, 1962).

- 27 'Cynthia' (1595), lines 172–77, in *Richard Barnfield: The Complete Poems*, ed. George Klawitter (London and Toronto, Associated University Presses, 1990).
- 28 Rosemary Freeman, *English Emblem Books* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1948), p. 190.
- 29 Jean Wilson, *Entertainments for Elizabeth I* (Woodbridge, Kent, D. S. Brewer, 1980), pp. 21–22.
- 30 *The English Ballad: A Short Critical Survey* (London, Benn, 1927).
- 31 In Graves's utopian novel *Seven Days in New Crete* (London, Cassell, 1949) a New Cretan remarks that Shakespeare 'climbed painfully by night up a broken stair lighted only by the Goddess's cruel smile; he loved her, though against his will' (p. 82).
- 32 Caroline Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery and What it Tells Us* (Cambridge University Press, 1935), pp. 259–60.
- 33 *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. Harold F. Brooks (London, Methuen, 1979).
- 34 *Occult Philosophy*, p. 149; *Astraea*, p. 77.
- 35 *Pericles*, V.i.238–49, ed. F. D. Hoeniger (London, Methuen, 1969). The 'rankings' of the six principal Olympian goddesses in the plays are: Diana-Cynthia (42), Venus (21), Juno (19), Hecate (7), Ceres (4), Minerva (2).
- 36 *Henry IV Part I*, I.ii.
- 37 If such a tradition *did* exist, perhaps it should be looked for not, as Graves does, in the so-called witch-cult, but in Renaissance Neoplatonism: Raleigh, Spenser and Chapman each show strong Neoplatonic influences in their poetry.
- 38 John Clare, journal entry for October 10, 1824, in *The Journal, Essays, The Journey from Essex*, ed. Anne Tibble (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1980), p. 41.
- 39 *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (London, Faber, 1992), p. 17.
- 40 For example, Virgil, *Aeneid*, VI.247; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VII.177; Natali Conti, *Mythologiae*, III.xvii. 'De Luna' (Venice, 1567; rpt New York, Garland, 1976), pp. 79–82.
- 41 'The Knight's Tale', ll. 2312–13, in *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson (Oxford University Press, 1966).
- 42 *Garlande or Chapelet of Laurell*, ll. 1357–59, in *John Skelton: The Complete English Poems*, ed. John Scattergood (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1983). Prosperina was regarded as synonymous with Hecate in England during this period.
- 43 *Paradise Lost*, I.438–39, 478; III.730, in *Poetical Works*, ed. Douglas Bush (Oxford University Press, 1969).
- 44 Perhaps not entirely: Douglas Brooks-Davies, *Pope's 'Dunciad' and the Queen of the Night: A Study in Emotional Jacobitism* (Manchester University Press, 1985), suggests that 'Dulness' in the *Dunciad* (1728) is a parody of the goddesses Isis and Demeter.

- 45 'To Homer', in *The Complete Poems*, ed. John Barnard (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 2nd edn, 1976).
- 46 For example, Kenneth Muir in his Arden Shakespeare *Macbeth* (London, Methuen, 1962), pp. xxx–xxxiii. More recently, Gary Wills, *Witches and Jesuits: Shakespeare's 'Macbeth'* (Oxford University Press, 1995), argues for the Hecate scenes' authenticity.
- 47 All quotations are from the Arden Shakespeare *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. M. R. Ridley (London, Methuen, 1965).
- 48 Michael Lloyd, 'Cleopatra as Isis', *Shakespeare Survey* 12 (1959), p. 88.
- 49 Plutarch's 'Life of Antony', trans. Sir Thomas North, in the Arden *Antony and Cleopatra*, Appendix V, p. 259. Shakespeare's Cleopatra is described as appearing 'in the habiliments of the goddess Isis' (III.vi.17).
- 50 Lloyd, 'Cleopatra as Isis', pp. 88–94.
- 51 J. J. M. Tobin, *Shakespeare's Favourite Novel: A Study of 'The Golden Asse' as Prime Source* (Lanham, University Presses of America, 1984); Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 6.
- 52 It is, in fact, S. Gaselee's heavily revised 1915 Loeb Classical Library version of Adlington's original.
- 53 All quotations are from the Arden Shakespeare edition of *The Tempest*, ed. Frank Kermode (London, Methuen, 1964).
- 54 All the plays contain one or more references to witchcraft: Wills, *Witches and Jesuits*, p. 267.
- 55 Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971), p. 514.
- 56 *Ibid.*, pp. 516, 525.
- 57 *The Ancient Mariner*, lines 187–98, in *The Complete Poems*, ed. William Keach (London, Penguin, 1997).
- 58 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', in *The Complete Poems*; quoted by Graves (p. 428).
- 59 For literary echoes in the poem, see Andrew Motion, *Keats* (London, Faber, 1998), pp. 373–74 and Barnard's notes to 'La Belle Dame' in the *Complete Poems*, pp. 661–62.
- 60 Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry* (London, Faber, 1962), pp. 375–76.
- 61 Motion, *Keats*, p. 374.
- 62 'It can signify the fairy's lack of pity for the mortal she lures from the world or her own deprivation since she exists without hope of divine grace', Barbara Fass, *La Belle Dame*

- Sans Merci: The Aesthetics of Romanticism* (Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1979), p. 43.
- 63 For the poem's multiple ambiguities, see Francis Baudry, 'A Dream, a Sonnet, and a Ballad: The Path to Keats's 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'', *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, LV (1986), 69–98.
- 64 Stuart Sperry, *Keats the Poet* (Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 235.
- 65 *Endymion*, III.142–185.
- 66 Sperry, *Keats the Poet*, p. 240.
- 67 'Notes on the Waste Land', *Collected Poems, 1909–1962* (London, Faber, 1963), p. 80.
- 68 Robert Ackermann, *J.G. Frazer: His Life and Work* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 1.
- 69 *Beyond Culture* (New York, Viking, 1965), p. 14.
- 70 John B. Vickery, *The Literary Impact of 'The Golden Bough'* (Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 3. Although Vickery does not mention *The White Goddess* specifically, he notes that Graves displays 'a great and detailed familiarity with all volumes [of *The Golden Bough*]', p. 38.
- 71 Martin Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* (London, Hutchinson, rev. edn 1995), p. 111.
- 72 Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 3rd edn, Part IV *Adonis, Attis, Osiris*, vol. II (London, Macmillan, 1914), p. 201.
- 73 'If women ever created gods, they would be more likely to give them masculine than feminine features', *Adonis, Attis, Osiris*, p. 211.
- 74 Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 1903), pp. 260–61.
- 75 Jane Ellen Harrison, *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 1912), p. 328.
- 76 Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1955), pp. 293, 296.
- 77 Robert Graves, 'The White Goddess', in *STEPS: Stories, Talks, Essays, Poems, Studies in History* (London, Cassell, 1958), p. 94.
- 78 Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves*, p. 391; Graves wrote: 'It is obvious that Jung has been misled by his experiences in the consulting-room, where the "wise old man" of his patients' dreams is not an archetype at all, but a flattering portrait of Jung himself', 'Jungian Mythology', *Hudson Review*, V, no. 2 (Summer 1952), p. 257.
- 79 Miranda Seymour, *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* (London, Doubleday, 1995), p. 303.

- 80 C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (New York, Vintage Books, 1989), p. 178.
- 81 C. G. Jung, *Analytical Psychology: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1925* (Princeton University Press, 1989; London, Routledge, 1990), pp. 42, 44.
- 82 *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, p. 185.
- 83 *Analytical Psychology*, footnote to p. 46. Spielrein went on to become one of Russia's leading Freudian psychoanalysts until her execution by a Nazi death squad in 1942.
- 84 John Kerr, *A Most Dangerous Method: The Story of Jung, Freud and Sabina Spielrein* (London, Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994), p. 507.
- 85 Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1969), p. 35.
- 86 *Analytical Psychology*, p. 46.
- 87 *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, p. 186.
- 88 Jaan Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology* (Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 15.
- 89 Golding seems to have had an affinity for the 'scapegoat' ritual, the subject of a volume of Frazer's *Golden Bough*, since it appears not only in *Lord of the Flies* (1954), but also in the first volume of his *Rites of Passage* (1980) trilogy. Hughes argues in his criticism that Shakespeare, Keats, W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot are latter-day Western equivalents of the shaman, basing his idea on the work of Mircea Eliade in *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton University Press, 1964).
- 90 For example, the neo-Jungian mythographer Joseph Campbell's often-reprinted *Masks of God* series and the encyclopaedic survey of goddess myths by the Jungian analysts Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* (London, Viking Arkana, 1991).
- 91 Miranda Seymour, *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* (London, Doubleday, 1995), p. 328; Martin Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* (London, Hutchinson, rev. edn 1995), p. 419. Interestingly, both Raine and Durrell were keen students of Neoplatonism.
- 92 Ted Hughes to Robert Graves, 20 July 1967, quoted in Richard Perceval Graves, *Robert Graves and The White Goddess, 1940–1985* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995). p. 441.
- 93 'Cleopatra to the Asp', *Lupercal* (London, Faber, 1960).
- 94 Hughes is historically accurate in this. Plutarch writes: 'As they [the Egyptians] regard the Nile as an effusion of Osiris, so they hold and believe the earth to be the body of Isis, not all of it, but so much of it as the Nile covers, fertilizing it and uniting with it', 'Isis and Osiris', in *Moralia*, vol. V, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt (14 vols., London, Heinemann, 1936), p. 93.
- 95 The woodcut is reproduced in Jurgis Baltrusaitis, *La Quete d'Isis: Introduction a l'egyptomanie* (Paris, Olivier Perrin, 1967), p. 16, and in Joscelyn Godwin, *Anathasius*

- Kircher: A Renaissance Man and the Quest for Lost Knowledge* (London, Thames & Hudson, 1979), p. 58.
- 96 Judith Kroll, *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (New York, Harper & Row, 1976), p. 40.
- 97 'Isis', in *Birthday Letters* (London, Faber, 1998).
- 98 Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study* (London, Faber, 1981), p. 19.
- 99 Ted Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (London, Faber, 1992), p. 458. Hughes suggests that Shakespeare's 'attitude to myth' was influenced by personal contact with the Italian Neoplatonist Giordano Bruno. But the only example of such influence he offers – elements of the Isis-Osiris myth in *King Lear* that were supposedly unknown in England at the time – is dubious since Shakespeare could easily have found this material in Holland's 1603 translation of Plutarch's *Moralia*.
- 100 Kroll, *Chapters in a Mythology*, pp. 21, 39, 40, 43, 219.
- 101 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' (1961), in *Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London, Faber, 1981).
- 102 Robert D. Newman, 'The White Goddess Restored: Affirmation in Pynchon's *V*', *University of Minnesota Studies in English*, 4 (1983), 178–86. I have been unable, unfortunately, to locate a copy of this article.
- 103 Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers and Other Pagans in America Today* (London, Penguin Arkana, rev. edn 1997), p. 59.
- 104 Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, p. 208.
- 105 Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (Yale University Press, 1990), p. 672.
- 106 Graves believed that Milton had a sexual fetish concerning women's hair and wrote a historical novel, *Wife to Mr Milton* (London, Cassell, 1943), to illustrate this unusual theory.
- 107 'Much of Yeats' work is a series of variations on the relationship of the poet and muse, and Joyce's displays an obsession with the positive and negative aspects of the Female', Patrick J. Keane, *Yeats, Joyce, Ireland and the Myth of the Devouring Female* (University of Missouri Press, 1988), p. xii.
- 108 'Before the World was Made' (1929), in *W.B. Yeats: The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London, J.M. Dent, 1990).
- 109 *Finnegans Wake* (London, Faber, 1939), p. 104. I agree with the feminist critic Bonnie Scott Kime that Joyce's later work is 'more subversive than preservative of patriarchal order,' *James Joyce* (Sussex, Harvester Press, 1987), p. 78.
- 110 Gertrude Rachel Levy, *The Gate of Horn: A Study of the Religious Conceptions of the Stone Age and their Influence upon European Thought* (London, Faber, 1948).

- 111 Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton University Press, 1949; rpt London, Fontana, 1993), pp. 109–20.
- 112 Plato, *Phaedrus*, 265 and *Ion*, 534, in *Five Dialogues of Plato Bearing on Poetic Inspiration* (London, Dent, 1920).
- 113 Robert Graves, 'The White Goddess', in *STEPS: Stories, Talks, Essays, Poems, Studies in History* (London, Cassell, 1958), p. 101. The 'Postscript 1960' to *The White Goddess* is a condensed version of this lecture.