

Graves' Myth of Skelton

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I

Robert Graves' frequent references to John Skelton, always made in the context of Graves' own poetic theories, deserve more attention than they have received. Every full-length critical study of Graves' poetry lists Skelton in its index, but offers no more than passing comment to the effect that Graves admired his work and was instrumental in reviving interest in the Tudor poet. So, for example, Douglas Day finds evidence in Graves' early poems of what he calls the "sprightly iconoclasm he got from John Skelton (Day 19); while Michael Kirkham describes *The Marmosite's Miscellany* (1925) as "a Skeltonic satire on the literary world" (Kirkham 123), and claims that it was the qualities of "modesty, spontaneity, gaiety [and] wit" which particularly attracted him to Skelton (Kirkham 33).

None of this is especially illuminating; but Day's use of the word "sprightly" is interesting, and his choice of a Germanic rather than a Latinate form—for example "spirited" or "animated"—to convey the idea in question reflects the semiotics of Graves' own poetic language. The poem "Tilth" (first published in *Collected Poems* 1970-1972) is a good illustration of Graves' conscious decision to adopt a vocabulary, and therefore a cultural politics, which is unambiguous in its preference for what he interpreted as representing poetry "cut wholly from native cloth" ("The Dedicated Poet," *On Poetry* 296) as opposed, for example, to Chaucer's implementation of an "artificial French tradition" (295):

Gone are the drab monosyllabic days
When 'agricultural labour' still was tilth;
And '100% approbation', praise;
And 'pornographic modernism', filth -
Yet still I stand by tilth and filth and praise

and this bias is, in turn, closely connected to Graves' reading of Skelton. It is the claim of the present paper that his reading is essentially flawed.

At the root of the problem lies the notion that there is indeed a "wholly native cloth" from which English poetry might be fashioned.

This is demonstrably false: the simple fact that the "English language" itself was already a conglomerate of various others long before Skelton's birth, is enough to remind us of the diversified cultural background against which his poetry must be read. As for Graves' jingoistic comments on "foreign" influences, it hardly needs pointing out that the "English tradition" is more or less synonymous with the history of translation into English, without which it is difficult to see how there could be any English poetry at all. The cultural influence exerted by translated texts could only be denied if it were possible to translate syntactical constructions without also translating their "meaning", their cultural relevance, for example, and this is clearly an absurd idea.

Graves used the phrase in question to describe "Speke Parott":

He also wrote the teasing, inconsequential, passionate "Speake Parot!"—its rolling stanzas liberally sprinkled with polyglot pseudo-learning ... Yet it is cut wholly from native cloth, in native fashion, and makes perfect sense to the informed reader—none of which things can be said of twentieth-century Anglo-American modernism.

The difficulty here is one of definition: what is a native tradition? And what is an informed reader? If Graves' understanding of "native" was one which excluded any cultural, i.e. linguistic, interference from mainland Europe, then he could only have been referring to a poetic or bardic tradition that existed before the Roman invasions of Britain—according to this reading, Anglo-Saxon poetry must be excluded from any native canon. In fact, Graves was talking about a tradition "back in neolithic times" ("The Crowning Priviledge," *On Poetry* 13ff.), in other words, an imagined or assumed tradition for which "no written records survive" (13). This can be clearly disregarded as fantasy. He did however feel able to admire an Anglo-Saxon tradition within which "anyone might compose poems to the harp, if he could" (15). Yet this, as Graves was certainly aware, was an oral tradition of narrative verse whose function was social—the preservation in collective memory of actual historical events—as well as aesthetic—the reproduction of those events in an idealized and idealizing form. The only information a reader needs in order to make "perfect sense" of this poetry is the ability to read Old English; it is certainly not poetry whose intelligibility—or production—is dependent upon an initiation into the rites of Muse-worship.

Even if Graves' "wholly native cloth" refers to something which might vaguely be called cultural fabric, rather than to actual language, his phrase remains misleading since cultural fabric and language are, of course, inseparable: Graves' attempt to deny outside cultural influence is rendered futile by the referentiality of Skelton's own poetry.

Both Skelton and Graves wrote poems on the Muse Calliope. Skelton's "Calliope" is a reply to the question, which forms a subtitle to the poem, concerning his wearing a cloak embroidered with the Muse's name:

Why were ye Calliope, embrawdred with letters of golde?
Skelton Laureate, Orator Regius, maketh this aunswere etc.

Calliope,
As ye may se,
Regent is she,
 Of poetes al,
Whiche gave to me 5
The high degre
Laureat to be
 Of fame royall;

Whose name enrolde
With silke and golde 10
I dare be bolde
 Thus for to were.
Of her I holde
And her housholde;
Though I waxe olde 15
 And somedele sere,

Yet is she fayne,
Voyde of disdayn,
Me to retayne,
 Her serviture. 20
With her certayne
I wyll remayne
As my soverayne
Moost of pleasure.

Maulgre touz malheureux¹

Skelton adds an eight-line latinum carmen, which is a free translation of the English, followed by the lines:

Haec Pierius omni Spartano liberior.
Calliope, musarum excellentissima, speciosissima, formosissima,
heroicis preest versibus

which Graves translates ("The Dedicated Poet" 283), together with the latinum carmen, as:

Thus speaks a Pierian, one more free than any Spartan, since
Calliope the most excellent, most beautiful, most shapely of the
Muses, presides over my heroic verses.

Firstly, Graves' translation of the latinum carmen takes liberties which have important consequences for our reading of Skelton's poem. Presenting the two separate Latin sentences above, "Haec Prierius...preest versibus" as one complete sentence in English allowed Graves (or, at least, enabled him) to insert the conjunction "since" between the second and the following clauses of his version. The "freedom" of "omni Spartano liberior" thus becomes the direct result of Calliope's intervention in the creative process. Moreover, Graves' insertion of "my", absent in "Calliope...heroicis preest versibus", changes Calliope from the Muse of epic verse—her traditional role—into Skelton's personal Muse: where Skelton speaks in general and conventional terms of praise, Graves' translation misleads us into the "discovery" of a remarkably Gravesean poet/Muse-goddess relationship. His account of the event which occasioned Skelton's poem operates in the same way:

... Yet in old age, after being created Orator Regius, a sort of Latin Secretary, by his former pupil King Henry VIII, Skelton made a startling public avowal of devotion to the Muse-goddess, when he appeared wearing a white and green Court dress embroidered with the golden name CALLIOPE. He chose Calliope ("lovely face") rather than any of the Goddess's eight other names because, as he writes in an amplificatio of Diodorus Siculus' History, Calliope combines "incomparable riches of eloquence with profound sadness." (281-2)

What may be seen as a minor extravagance, well within the limits and even expectations of normal Court behaviour—the appearance at Court of a man dressed in clothes designed to signify social or political rank—becomes a “startling public avowal of devotion to the Muse-goddess”. But Skelton’s Calliope-embroidery can more profitably be read as signifying his own classical learning. Moreover, it is a nice irony for the poet, whose identity as such is created wholly by text, to be literally encloaked in text.² Far from demonstrating dedication, Skelton in fact subverted the whole notion of the Muse: by wearing the Calliope-embroidery he appropriated her identity and labelled himself with her name, proclaiming himself as sole author of his poetry.

But Graves was intent upon reading Skelton as a “Muse poet” rather than an “Apollonian poet” (“The Dedicated Poet” 286-7), intent, that is, upon reading him as a poet whose work is composed “at the back of the mind” and is

an unaccountable product of a trance in which the emotions of love, fear, anger, or grief are profoundly engaged, though at the same time powerfully disciplined; in which intuitive thought reigns supralogically, and personal rhythm subdues metre to its purposes (“The Dedicated Poet” 286)

whereas “Apollonian” poetry is composed in the forepart of the mind:

wittily, should the occasion serve, always reasonably, always on a preconceived plan, and derived from a close knowledge of rhetoric, prosody, Classical example, and contemporary fashion. It may, of course, disguise simple statement in masquerade dress, but if so, observes all masquerade conventions; whether the dress chosen be mediaeval doublet, pastoral smock, Roman toga, or pseudo-Homeric armour. The pleasure [it] offers is consciously aesthetic. (286)

Graves misses or ignores the fact that “disguising simple statement in masquerade dress in order to create a pleasure which is consciously aesthetic” is a good description of the Skelton/Calliope-embroidery episode, and the conventions of Court behaviour under Henry and Elizabeth could very well be summed up as “observing masquerade

conventions”.

There is nothing at all remarkable, or “startling”, in this episode, but Graves’ treatment of it exemplifies the technique he employed to re-create Skelton as “Muse-poet”. That he should have done so at all is connected to his interpretation of the function of poetry, and of his own role in a changing poetic landscape, within which he clearly felt, as both his poetry and his prose criticism demonstrate, an acute sense of displacement. His method of dealing with it was to represent it as a virtue.

The most obvious example of Graves’ displacement is his physical removal to Deyá, Mallorca. In the same way his identification with Skelton is, according to his reading, a perfectly logical process. Skelton is Graves’ “Muse-poet” par excellence, and his admiration is twofold. On the one hand it is based upon what Graves reads as Skelton’s dedication to Calliope. On the other, hand he sees Skelton as “claiming as a poet the liberty of thought and action which King Lycurgus’ proto-Fascist discipline denied even the most patriotic Spartans,” a reference to the Spartan engagement at Thermopylae, and Graves’ interpretation of “... omni Spartano liberior” (“The Dedicated Poet” 283). The notion of freedom—physical, political and poetic—is central both to Graves’ reading of Skelton and to his perception of himself: [Skelton] made good his claim to freedom by being the one man in England who, at the height of Cardinal Wolsey’s power—when Dread led the dance—dared oppose him in cruelly satiric verses as a traitor to King, Church and people. (283)

Graves omits to mention that Skelton and Wolsey were reconciled by the beginning of November, 1523 at the latest, when Skelton composed “Howe The Douty Duke of Albany ...” at Wolsey’s own suggestion. The final Envoi in particular (ll. 524-32) makes this clear:

Go, lytell quayre, apace
 In moost humble wyse,
 Before his noble grace
 That caused you to devise
 This lytel enterprise;
 And hym moost lowly pray,
 In his mynde to comprise,
 Those wordes his grace dyd saye
 Of an ammas gray.

Je foy enterment en sa bone grace.³

There is no reason here to assume that Skelton's compliments to Wolsey are to be taken as irony. The second quatrain, "And hym ... an ammas gray", reminding Wolsey of his promise of a reward, is too openly playful to be ambiguous, and Skelton, as Graves pointed out, was perfectly capable of undisguised satire when he believed it necessary.

Another good illustration of Graves' determination to present Skelton as "Muse-poet" is his reading of the Commendations passage, in praise of Jane Scrope, in "Phyllyp Sparowe" (ll.845-1260), which makes use of the service for the dead, *Ordo Commendationis Animae*.⁴ Graves' argument here is based on Skelton's substitution of "domina" for "domine" at line 996:

Legem pone michi, domina, in viam justificationem tuarum!
'Teach me, Lady, to justify thy ways';

at lines 1061-2:

Bonitatem fecisti cum servo tuo, domina,
Et ex precordiis sonant preconia.

'Thou hast dealt bountifully with thy servant, Lady,
And from his heart your praises ring out';

and at lines 1114-5:

Quomodo dilexi legem tuam, domina!
Recedant vetera, nova sunt omnia.

'O how I love thy law, Lady!
Old things are passed away, all things are become new'.

Scattergood also speaks of this substitution in terms of a deification of Jane Scrope. But many of the Latin quotations in "Phyllyp Sparowe" possibly derive from the "Vigile Mortuorum" in the Sarum Primer. Primers were, as Scattergood notes, traditionally dedicated to the Virgin Mary; and Caxton published, in 1490, a primer entitled "O Gloriosa Femina...", the three words which precede each of the Latin

quotations above (and which Skelton uses a further eight times throughout "Commendations").⁵ It is quite possible that Skelton had Caxton's primer in mind, but even if he was working only with the Vulgate Psalms, there is no reason to connect this passage with Calliope; and there are certainly no grounds to claim, as Graves does, that Skelton here "boldly deifies [Jane Scrope] as the Muse herself!" ("The Dedicated Poet" 292). In fact, Skelton appeals to "the grace dyvyne / Of the Muses nyne" (ll.857-8), and he could hardly expect to elicit much grace by elevating the mortal Jane to Muse-status. More significantly he also appeals to Apollo:

If Apollo wyll promyse
Melodyously it to devyse
His tunable harpe stryngges
With armony that synges
Of princes and of kynges
And of all pleasaunt thynges,
Of lust and of delyght,
Thorow his godly myght;
(ll.863-70)

Why would a "Muse-poet" desire Apollo's aid and "Apollonian" skills, or have Jane voice the common complaint about the shortcomings of the English language, as in lines 774-83?:

Our naturall tong is rude,
And hard to be enneude
With pullyshed termes lusty;
Our language is so rusty,
So cankered and so full
Of frowardes, and so dull,
That if I wolde apply
To wryte ornatly,
I wot not where to fynd
Termes to serve my mynde.

It is certainly true, as Graves noted, that Skelton enriched the English vocabulary, but it is also true that he has Jane regret her lack of the poetic versatility

Of Ovyd or Virgyll,
 Or of Plutharke,
 Or Frauncys Petrarke,
 Alcheus or Sapho,
 Or such other poetes mo
 (ll.756-60)

as well as having her commend Chaucer, whose foreign imports Graves found so distasteful. It is difficult to see how Graves could have missed the reference to Virgil, whom he attacked as "the Apollonian anti-poet, [Skeleton's] precise opposite ... who has for two thousand years exercised an influence over Western culture out of all proportion to his merits as a human being or as a poet" ("The Anti-poet," *On Poetry* 301). Virgil is "timorous, inoffensive" (305) while Naevius, Ennius, Lucretius and Catullus are all "men of determination" (305); Ennius displays "imaginative magnificence" (305). Lucretius is "forthright" (305), Catullus knew "that all long poems have their boring passages... and... therefore wrote no epics" (305).

What begins to emerge from all this is Graves' idealized portrait of Skelton: a "man of determination", "forthright" and not to be deflected from writing the truth at whatever personal risk; a poet whose "imaginative magnificence" has no need of boring epic poetry to make its power felt since his language is "wholly native" and has no need of any pseudo-classical example; earthy and unafraid of bawdy, and vigorously independent of popular trends. This is also, of course, Graves' portrait of himself. The fact remains however that Graves was unable to make a substantial living as a poet—even as one who claimed so often that poetry was an "over-riding obsession" as well as personal guidance from Calliope—and needed to turn to prose in order to earn his keep. It was contemporary "Apollonians" such as Auden, to whom Graves was openly hostile, and Eliot, another "anti-poet," "one of our senior literary church-wardens" ("The Anti-poet" 314), who enjoyed both critical acclaim and financial success. No wonder then that Graves felt the need to identify himself with a historical figure whom he could interpret as important while peripheral, determinedly unfashionable, outspoken, undoubtedly a fine poet, and resurrect him after half a millennium as a misunderstood champion of political and artistic freedom. Graves could only do so by means of blatantly tendentious reading and an irresponsible misinterpretation of literary history.

"To Calliope" introduces his *Collected Poems* (2nd ed., 1959):

Permit me here a simple brief aside,
 Calliope,
 You who have shown such patience with my pride
 And obstinacy:

Am I not loyal to you? I say no less
 Than is to say;
 If more, only from angry-heartedness,
 Not for display.

But you know, I know, and you know I know
 My principal curse:
 Shame at the mounting dues I have come to owe
 A devil of verse,

Who caught me young, ingenuous and uncouth,
 Prompting me how
 To evade the patent clumsiness of truth -
 Which I do now.

No: nothing reads so fresh as I first thought,
 Or as you could wish -
 Yet must I, when far worse is eagerly bought,
 Cry stinking fish?

After all the sniping at literary history and contemporary "Apollonians", the frankness of this poem is a refreshing surprise. Essentially it expresses Graves' regret at his inability to live up to his own standards—his inability, that is, to avoid producing "Apollonian" verse.

The poem professes continued loyalty to the idea of Muse as inspiration, but the nature of that loyalty is here troubled and less clearly defined than in the polemical prose writings referred to above. Graves question "Am I not loyal to you?" (l.5) is a rhetorical device which does not imply the possibility of a negative response, but it does convey Graves' sense of disappointment at nothing reading "so fresh as I first thought / Or as you could wish" (ll.17-18). This is a frustrated loyalty which, Graves has realized, will never be fully rewarded: the

Muse continues to inspire but the results have not lived up to the expectations the inspiration raised, and the production of each poem involves a sense of loss. At the same time, failure itself becomes inspiration insofar as it remains that which is to be overcome, and it is this determination on Graves' part which constitutes his loyalty. It also constitutes the difference, according to Graves' self-representation, between himself and the real "Apollonians". Graves' problem here is that his experience of the creative process is not in accordance with his own theory of poetics. Theoretically, the muse—inspiration—is to be celebrated as the illuminator of "truth"; at the same time however, the creative process itself proves necessarily to involve the evasion of that truth, and this conflict of interests must ultimately, according to Graves' own criteria, cause his poetry to fail.

The final lines, "Yet must I, when far worse is eagerly bought, / Cry stinking fish?" underline both Graves' decision to remain faithful to his poetics and the internal tensions that his decision causes. What is especially interesting is their expression of regret at the compulsion their author clearly felt to display public hostility towards the trend represented by Auden and Eliot. The imperative of his own aesthetics results in a poetry with which Graves experiences a relationship paralleled in that between the idealist Pygmalion and his creation Galatea—as in "Love in Barrenness," "Pygmalion to Galatea," and "Galatea and Pygmalion"—the created Muse reveals herself as his "devil of verse" (l.12) and allows herself to be seduced by Apollo.

The message of "To Calliope" is twofold: it reaffirms Graves' commitment to Gravesian poetics while introducing the theme of the inevitability of failure, and it has the secondary function of supporting the image of himself that Graves wished to project as essentially, if uneasily, other than his contemporaries.

II

... Ben Jonson, of glorious memory, to whom the young wits of Oxford used to flock when in his old age he held forth at Great Tew, allowed poets alone the faculty of judging poems... ("The Dedicated Poet" 280)

... Yes: I know that Dr. Samuel Johnson sturdily rejected Ben Jonson's view. He licensed non-poets to judge any poem, on the ground that a man has a right to scold a carpenter for making him a bad table. But surely this begs the question? Granted that if Dr.

Johnson bespoke a table, giving detailed instructions for its manufacture, he had every right to complain if these were disobeyed; but not since Sir Roger Newdigate founded his Prize, in the early nineteenth century, has it been seriously believed that even Universities have a right to bespeak poems. ("The Dedicated Poet" 280-81)

The true poet, the "Muse-poet", must not only free himself from "Apollonian" rhetoric: he must also exist in complete freedom from popular or critical opinion. The relationship between poet and reader, and the tensions this relationship generates, form the subject of Graves' "The Reader Over My Shoulder" (*Collected Poems* 1938)

You reading over my shoulder, peering beneath
My writing arm—I suddenly feel your breath
Hot on my hand or on my nape,
So interrupt my theme, scratching these few
Words on the margin for you, namely you,
Too-human shape fixed in that shape -

All the saying of things against myself
And for myself I have well done myself.
What now, old enemy, shall you do
But quote and underline, thrusting yourself
Against me, as ambassador of myself,
In damned confusion of myself and you?

For you in strutting, you in sycophancy,
Have played too long this other self of me,
Doubling the part of judge and patron
With that of creaking grind-stone to my wit.
Know me, have done: I am a proud spirit
And you for ever clay. Have done.

The expectations of the reader remain a seduction, whose intensity is sustained in the poem by the sexualization of the poet-reader relationship: the reader's breath is "Hot on my hand or nape"; the reader distracts the poet by "thrusting yourself against me". Succumbing to this seduction involves a negative auto-eroticism, since the reader is also "ambassador of myself"—the poet must "satisfy himself" that the reader's demands are fulfilled. It also involves "scratching these few

/ Words on the margin for you", in a conscious and methodical attempt to prepare poetic responses geared towards the reader, so that the reader usurps the role ideally played by the Muse in the poem's production. This intrusion by the reader is in direct opposition to the "free spirit" Graves claims in the final stanza: the poem's references and associations become planned and "Apollonian" rather than intuitive and inspired. Also, the musical associations of "theme" (l.4) and "played" (l.14) imply the reader/critic as parasite: "scratching these few / Words on the margin" becomes the composer's act of inscribing a manuscript with indications of tempo and interpretation (*presto*, *lento*, *mosso* etc.) so that a critical reading becomes interpretation in the sense of "performance", with the performer, i.e. the critic, misappropriating the acclaim which rightly belongs to the poem.

"The Reader Over My Shoulder" balances self-accusation against redemption. After the construction of the reader as anti-Muse with the power to divert the writer away from true poetry, Graves reasserts, as in "To Calliope", his determination to reject the "other self of me" (l.14), so that the only response that remains for the reader is to "quote and underline" (l.10) in an act of lifeless mimesis.

That Graves did feel able to free himself at least temporarily from his devil of Virgilian rhetoric is attested by the short poem, "Flying Crooked" (*Collected Poems* 1938), which presents a Graves at his most celebratory of "Skeltonic" otherness:

The butterfly, a cabbage-white,
 (His honest idiocy of flight)
 Will never now, it is too late,
 Master the art of flying straight,
 Yet has—who knows so well as I? -
 A just sense of how not to fly:
 He lurches here and here by guess
 And God and hope and hopelessness.
 Even the aerobic swift
 Has not his flying-crooked gift.

The cabbage-white butterfly is the most unadorned and most recognizably "English" kind, and points back to the "native cloth" which Graves perceived as the cultural fundament of Skelton's poetry. But with friends like Graves, Skelton hardly needs enemies: the careless individuality and the "just sense of how not to fly", initially presented

A myrroure of glasse, that I may tote therin; 10
 These maydens full meryly with many a dyvers flowur
 Fresshely they dresse and make swete my bowur,
 With, 'Speke, Parott, I pray yow,' full curteslye they sey,
 'Parott ys a goodlye byrde and a pratye popagay.'

Wythe my beke bente, and my lytell wanton iye, 15
 My fethyrs fresshe as ys the emerawde grene,
 Abowte my necke a cerculett lyke the ryche rubye,
 My lytell legges, my fete bothe fete and clene,
 I am a mynyon to wayte apon a quene;
 'My propyr Parott, my lytell pratye fole.' 20
 With ladyes I lerne and goe with them to scole.

'Heghe, ha, ha, Parott, ye can lawghe pratylye!
 'Parott hathe not dyned of all this long day;
 'Lyke owur pus catt Parott can mewte and crye.'
 Yn Latyn, in Ebrue, and in Caldee, 25
 In Greke tong Parott can bothe speke and sey,
 As Percius, that poete, dothe reporte of me,
 Quis expedit psitaco suum Chyre?

Dowche Frenshe of Paris Parot can lerne,
 Pronownsyng my purpose after my properte, 30
 With, 'Parlez byen, Parott, ow parles ryen.'
 With Dowche, with Spaynyshe, my tonge can agree;
 In Englysshe to God Parott can supple:
 'Cryste save Kyng Herry the viiiith, owur royal kyng,
 The red rose in honour to flowrysshe and sprynge!' 35

The poet is "by Nature" the "free spirit" which Graves associated with the creation of true, non-Virgilian poetry. Subjection to the limitations of the Court renders this creative force captive and essentially voiceless since the poet must adopt a language not his own: the "Nature" of the poet, and therefore of poetry, is ultimately subverted and becomes meaningless. The role of the poet no longer free to range "within the zodiac of his own wit" (Sidney, *Defense of Poetry*) is conflated with that of the critic through the process of self-editing which the conventions of Court-poetry entail. The "reader over my shoulder" thus becomes the poet himself, reconstructed as public performer who

must respond to the "Speke, Parott, I pray yow" of line 13 in return for his keep. The freedom from immediate financial care which a position at Court offers (Parott must after all have "an almon or a date") involves the captivity of "A cage curyowsly carven"; the critical acclaim of other "free spirits" is exchanged for "Parott ys a goodlye bird and a pratyte popagay" and "Heghe, ha, ha, Parott, ye can lawghe pratylye!"; and finally the poet is rendered literally speechless—ceases, that is, to exist at all—as language is lost altogether: what sounds like "Cryste save Kyng Herry the viiith, owur royall kyng" is in fact no more than an animal's "mewte and crye".

One way to ignore the implications of this—that the poet is always compromised and that Apollo will always influence the Muse—is to call it "inconsequential". Yet in his discussion of the poem "Wofully Arayd",⁷ for example, Graves was happy to point out Skelton's compliance to the demands of his position as Laureate and priest. The following text is that as published by Graves in "The Dedicated Poet":

Wofully arrayed
 And Shamefully betrayed
 My blood, man,
 For thee ran,
 It may not be nayed:
 My body blue and wan
 Wofully arrayed. ...

Thus naked am I nailèd, O man, for thy sake.
 I love thee, then love me. Why sleepest thou? Awake!
 Remember my tender heart root for thee break,
 With painès my veinès constrained to crake.
 Thus tuggèd to and fro,
 Thus wrappèd all in woe,
 Whereas never man was so
 Entreated thus in most cruel wise:
 Was like a lamb offered in sacrifice,
 Wofully arrayed.

Of sharp thorn I have worn a crown on my head,
 So painèd, so stainèd, so rueful, so red:
 Thus bobbèd, thus robbèd, thus for thy love dead,
 Unfainèd not deignèd my blood for to shed.

My feet and handës sore;
 The sturdy nailës bore;
 What might I suffer more
 Than I have done, O man, for thee?
 Come when thou list, welcome to me,
 Woefully arrayed. ...

Graves discusses these lines as representing the adoption by Skelton of "an ancient sacrificial theme inspired by the Goddess" and therefore "emotionally aflame" ("The Dedicated Poet" 290); and in spite of the associations in "Of sharp thorn I have worn a crown on my head", "My feet and handës sore" and "The sturdy nailës bore", it is certainly possible to read "I love thee, then love me. Why sleepest thou? Awake!" and "Come when thou list, welcome to me" as the pleas of a rejected Muse to her erring, temporarily "Apollonian" protégé. But this reading is only made possible by Graves' crucial omission of lines 7-16 (in Hammond's *Selected* edition):

Behold me, I pray thee, with all thy whole reason,
 And be not so hard-hearted, and for this encheason,
 Sith I for thy soul sake was slain in good season,
 Beguiled and betrayed by Judas' false treason;
 Unkindly entreated,
 With sharp cord sore fretted,
 The Jews me threted:
 They mowed, they grinned, they scorned me,
 Condemned to death, as thou mayest see,
 Woefully arrayed.

with their unambiguous, i.e. un-misreadable, references to the crucifixion of Christ, who is now clearly the speaker of this poem. From its remains Graves constructed an apparent acknowledgement by Skelton of the seductive power of "Apollonian" poetics, which then allowed Graves to make the same admission in the self-exculpatory "To Calliope" and "The Reader Over My Shoulder". It also enabled him to endow the poem with a symmetry it does not possess, and thus to present its progress as the flaring up and subsequent dying down of an inspirational flame which eventually "flickers out in ecclesiastic homily" ("The Dedicated Poet" 291) in the lines:

Dear brother, no other thing I of thee desire
 But give me thine heart free to reward mine hire.
 I wrought thee, I bought thee from eternal fire.
 I pray thee, array thee toward my high empire
 Above the orient
 Wherof I am regènt
 Lord God Omnipotent,
 With me to reign in endless wealth.
 Remember, man, thy soulës health. ...

There is more to the difficulty which Graves encountered in this stanza than his dismissive "ecclesiastic homily" implies: what prevents the attribution to the Muse of "But give me thine heart free to reward mine hire. / I wrought thee..." and "I pray thee, array thee toward my high empire," is the appearance of the patriarch "Lord God Omnipotent", and as Patrick Grant (*The Malahat Review* 35) points out, Graves demonstrated

an obdurate and consistent refusal to acknowledge God the Father as the source of any true poetic inspiration. The mystery for Graves resides with the mother, and in all his study of mythology Graves reverts to the hypothesis that patriarchy, and the patriarchal gods, were regrettable results of schism from a prior matriarchal order wherein woman, as mother, lover, and crone, was worshipped as the Great Triple Goddess, the power of the waxing, full, and waning moon, and of the three-season year of spring, summer, and winter.

Graves' poetics allows the priest Skelton to compose sacred verse so long as it employs a vocabulary adaptable to, or readable as derived from, Muse-worship. Any intrusion into the poet-Muse relationship by God the Father becomes an attempt to usurp matriarchal power and is rejected. This rejection is not text-based, however, firstly because such a dismantling of the patriarchal God-figure must employ an "Apollonian" language of logic and reason; and secondly because the attempt to confront this problem with anything other than dismissal implies an acknowledgement of the creative energy derived from Christianity. In order to sustain his re-construction of Skelton, and by extension the construction of himself, Graves must always defuse the possibility of intellectual engagement with texts that clearly

threaten to undermine his position: he does so by refusing to take them seriously.

I thank those of you members of the Congregation who, last February, disregarded the warning of London's best-known literary weekly: to the effect that, though a poet, Mr. Graves could have nothing either novel or important to say from this chair—which, it was added, might be better occupied by a Russian or French savant or, better still, by a bright young lecturer from a red-brick university. The same editorial insisted that the Professor you chose to address what would be predominantly an undergraduate audience, should adopt a serious moral attitude consonant with the dignity of his, or her, position. I do not dispute this last point; but poetic morals can surely be best discussed by poets, who, in the course of their labours, suffer pricks of professional conscience at which a Muscovite savant or a bright young red-brick lecturer, cannot do more than guess. ("The Dedicated Poet" 279)

Robert Graves first encountered Skelton's poetry in 1916, on leave from the Somme; the lecture from which the passage above is quoted was delivered at Oxford in the early 1960s. He had spent most of the intervening period abroad, in Mallorca, the United States and Switzerland, producing numerous volumes of poetry and prose and formulating his own system of "poetic morals". One of the problems involved in engaging with this system is the realization that it is based largely upon the social and intellectual politics expressed above: these, as much as stylistic individuality, set Graves apart from those he considered his literary enemies. In this passage Graves employs wholly "Apollonian" tactics and aligns himself clearly with his audience against European intellectual trends: France, of course, is particularly to be despised for the influence of its Surrealists on the development of English modernist poets. But the passage above is also designed to allow Graves' audience to infer his, and by extension their own, moral superiority: the "bright young red-brick lecturer" can do no more than guess at the "pricks of professional conscience" which the poet—the true, Muse-poet—must suffer in order to compose his poetry. Here Graves is among his own social kind, and his audience is invited to deprecate with him not only the intellectual values which produce Russian or French savants, but also those within which the great majority of English students flourish. The idea that there may be an

“English” (though not wholly so) poetic tradition to which it is possible to return is not in itself redundant; but a search for such a tradition which associates itself, however obliquely, with the desire to find confirmation for a particular social politics, can have no real relevance.

If Graves’ poetry consistently reflected such snobbery, it would be easy to dismiss him as a historical curiosity. The fact remains, however, that his poetry continues to engage, not least because of the conflicts and tensions discussed in this paper.

END NOTES

1 ‘On the evidence of a patent, dated in the fifth year of Henry VIII’s reign, in which Skelton was granted the title of royal poet, this poem may be dated after April 1512.’ (Scattergood, 420). The text used by Scattergood is that of Marshe’s edition of *Skelton’s Workes*, 1568. Maulgre touz malheureux: ‘despite all misfortunes’.

2 In the same way as a book, regarded as an intrinsically beautiful object, could be beautified, according to the renaissance aesthetics of internal (male) and external (female) beauty, by an ornate binding, so the poet Skelton, the ‘text within’, recreates himself as a complete, i.e. a wholly beautiful or perfected, work of art by ‘binding’ himself in text—a text moreover which itself has an immediate association with the actual production of text. Viewed as text (message), Skelton’s use of ‘Calliope’ in fact reflects medieval sign-theory. Eco discusses how, for instance, the followers of Priscian ‘spoke of names [nouns] as signifying a substance [Calliope as Muse or ‘person’] together with a [poetic] quality, where the latter was undoubtedly the universal nature of the thing, but the former was the individual thing’. See Umberto Eco, ‘Denotation’, in: Umberto Eco and Costantino Marmo (Eds.), *On the Medieval Theory of Signs*, Amsterdam—Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1989, p.56; and Lambert M. De Rijk, ‘The Origins of the Theory of the Property of Terms’ in: Kretzmann, N., A Kenny, J. Pinborg and E. Stump (Eds.), *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy. From the Rediscovery of Aristotle to the Disintegration of Scholasticism, 1100—1600*, Cambridge—London—New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982 (quoted by Eco in ‘Denotation’, above). Priscian (fl.500) was the author of the 18 vol. *Institutiones Grammaticae*. The work was popular with scholars and teachers of Latin.

3 quayre: choir, group of singers; ammas: an ecclesiastical hood, or

hooded cape, usually lined with grey fur. Wolsey had promised Skelton a prebend (Scattergood 516); Je foy enterment en sa bone grace: 'I trust completely in his good grace.'

4 Scattergood's text is a collation of Kele's print (c.1545) with those of Wyght (c.1553) and Kitson (c.1560), and the copy in Marshe's *Workes* (1568). 'Occasionally Kitson can be corrected in lines 1268-1382 from the version of these lines in the *Garlande of Laurell* (1310, 1340, 1345, 1371). See Scattergood, pp.405ff for a full discussion of the text.

5 Scattergood here follows Dyce (Rev. Alexander Dyce, ed., *The Poetical Works of John Skelton*, 2 vols., London: Thomas Rodd, (1843) 1965) in reading 'domina', though Kele, Kitson, Wyght and Marshe all read 'domine'. See Scattergood, pp.405-417.

6 The references in 'Speke Parrot' to the politics of Church and State are obviously too numerous to list here. Most notable is the reference at line 70 to Wolsey's dealings with the French in 1520, and with the Emperor Charles V in 1521: Wolsey obtained a pledge from both to support his election to the Papacy. For a full discussion of contemporary references, see the excellent annotations in Scattergood, pp.453-64.

7 The authorship of this manuscript poem is uncertain. Dyce accepts it as Skelton's work, and it is included in Gerald Hammond, ed., *John Skelton: Selected Poems*, Carcanet, 1980. Scattergood (1983) does not attribute it to Skelton and points out that themes of this and of other apparently lost poems were common enough. 'Garlande or Chapelet of Laurell' has Occupacyon list this poem among 'sum parte of Skeltons bokes and baladis with ditis of plesure', but this list is by no means complete. For a discussion, see Pollet, Maurice, *John Skelton: Contribution l'Histoire de la PrÈrenaissance Anglaise*, Paris, Librairie Didier, 1962 pp.259-60 (English transl. John Warrington, Dent, 1971), quoted in Scattergood, p.510.

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