
Two Unpublished Robert Graves Muse Poems

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Abstract: An overview of ‘I am Your Poet’ and ‘The Mead-Vat’, two unpublished poems, found among in Margot Callas’s manuscript archive, sold to St John’s College, Oxford in April 2023.

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‘I am Your Poet’ and ‘The Mead-Vat’, two unpublished poems, were among the manuscripts together with letters from Robert Graves which Margot Callas, his ‘muse’ in 1960–63, sold to St John’s College, Oxford, the year before her death in April 2023.

The remarkable outpouring of poems in the last fifteen years of Graves’s life – almost half as many as in all his previous books – began when he met Margot Callas in Mallorca, on 10 June 1960. She was twenty-four, he nearly sixty-five; both were married. Graves published a total of sixty-seven poems arising from their relationship in his next three books: *More Poems 1961* (1961), section XI; *New Poems 1962* (1962), section XIII; and *Man Does, Woman Is* (1964), section XV. These form a sequence in which Graves ‘ventured to dramatize, truthfully and factually, the vicissitudes of a poet’s dealings with the White Goddess, the Muse, the perpetual Other Woman’.¹

The ‘Margot sequence’ (to call it that) is predicated on Graves’s theory of ‘a personal Muse’, as expounded in his ‘Postscript 1960’ to *The White Goddess*:²

By ancient tradition, the White Goddess becomes one with her human representative [...]. No ‘Muse’ poet grows conscious of the Muse except by experience of a woman in whom the Goddess is to some degree resident [...]. A Muse-poet falls in love, absolutely, and his true love is for him the embodiment of the Muse. [...] But the real, perpetually obsessed Muse-poet distinguishes between the Goddess as manifest in the supreme power, glory, wisdom and love of woman, and the individual woman whom the Goddess may make her instrument for a month, a year, seven years, or even more. The Goddess abides; and perhaps he will again have knowledge of her through his experience of another woman.

Graves added this postscript when he was preparing the third edition of *The White Goddess*, from 24 March to 17 June 1960:³ by the latter date, ‘his experience of another woman’ – Margot Callas – had already started.

‘I am Your Poet’ is dated ‘Aug 12, 1960’, two months after they met. Written in ink on a sheet of the thin paper Graves often used for his drafts, it appears to be a fair copy, without emendations, and carefully punctuated. The poem is itself one of the ‘songs’ that the Muse has ‘ordained’. Addressing her directly, the poet ‘blurt[s] out’ (‘spell[s] out’ in a preceding draft with the same date) traditional ‘attributes’ of the White Goddess. The imagery in the last two lines, the ‘lily-of-the-valley shoots | That track the forest where you tread’, anticipates ‘The headlong power that whitened all her way | With a broad track of trefoil’, in ‘In Her Praise’ (*New Poems* 1962), ll. 6–7, and the Queen’s ‘lilies-of-the-valley’ that ‘shone’ from her lover Oisín’s ‘helm’ in ‘The Broken Girth’ (*New Poems* 1962). ‘The stars that aureole your head’ recall the hero’s ‘starry crown’ in ‘The Sirens’ Welcome to Cronos’

(*Collected Poems 1914–1947*) (1948)), and ironically presage the ‘deathless crown’ with which the poet will in the end punish the ‘Queen of ingratitude’ for her betrayal (‘The Wreath’ (*New Poems 1962*)). As for those ‘spotted serpents’ and ‘Phrygian flutes’, they would certainly have enlivened the ‘Margot sequence’

‘The Mead-Vat’, dated ‘Jan 7, 1961’, was written five months after ‘I am Your Poet’, while Margot Callas was back in New York. Graves penned it on the back of a compliments slip from his literary agents, A. P. Watt & Son. He made several emendations, and his handwriting has more impetus than in the earlier manuscript. (The transcription has three editorial emendations: in the title, a hyphen in ‘Mead-Vat’, which is how Graves spells it in st. 3 l. 2, and in other poems quoted below; a comma after ‘beauty’ in st. 2 l. 6; and the ampersand in st. 3 l. 4 replaced by ‘and’.) Graves’s diary records that the poems in section XI of *More Poems 1962* were written in June–November 1960, so ‘I am Your Poet’ would presumably have appeared there, and ‘The Mead-Vat’ in *New Poems 1962*, section XIII.

The first and second stanzas of ‘The Mead-Vat’ elaborate on the claim in ‘I am Your Poet’ that the Muse ‘ordained’ all his poetry: Graves’s once bare study in his Deià house is now crammed with books, testifying to his dedication to the ‘Queen of the Grove’. The third stanza envisions his reward, a mythic immortality, as promised in ‘The Sirens’ Welcome to Cronos’: on ‘Silver Island’:

A starry crown awaits your head,
A hero feast is spread for you:
Swineflesh, milk and mead.

‘This prince’s immortality’ is ‘confirmed’ in ‘The Hero’ (*Poems 1953*): he voyages to ‘that island paradise’ where ‘thrice three damsels in a tall house | Tend the mead-vat of

inspiration'. And thus, in his turn, the poet himself may hope to go 'To where her mead-vat smokes in the crystal hall'. Yet the last line in the poem seems to put the reward in question: 'Will she forget my studiousness and love?'

If it is a rhetorical question, it is a question nonetheless, one that raises a doubt about the outcome of the entire 'headstrong and heroic' venture.⁴ Perhaps this is one reason why Graves omitted 'The Mead-Vat' from the 'Margo sequence'. Later, however, in 'A Last Poem' (*Man Does, Woman Is* (1964)), he reformulates the question: when will he

Sit well wrapped in a many-coloured cloak
Where the moon shines new through Castle Crystal?
Shall I never hear her whisper softly:
'But this is truth written by you only,
And for me only; therefore, love, have done'?

The first two lines above come from a superseded version of 'New Moon Through Glass' published in the magazine *Atlantic* in October 1963, which continues: 'And if the Queen walks quietly in to greet him | Beside the bubbling vat of her wide hall' . . .⁵ Though 'The Mead-Vat' had been discarded, its symbolism simmered on in Graves's creative imagination.

The effect of the 'Margot sequence' is blurred by its sections being dispersed, with sections of unrelated poems intervening, and by running on to the poems about Graves's next 'muse', without a clear division. Doubtless its overall coherence and the inner logic of its organisation would be brought out if it were printed separately, with 'Unposted Letter (1963)' (*Poems 1970-1972* (1972)) as a coda, and 'I am Your Poet' and 'The Mead-Vat', plus 'Never Yet', an unpublished 1962 poem,⁶ in an appendix.

Dunstan Ward is the co-editor of the *Complete Poems* of Robert Graves, and the author of two volumes of poems, *Beyond Puketapu* (2015) and *At This Distance* (2019).

NOTES

¹ ‘Intimations of the Black Goddess’ (1963), *Mammon and the Black Goddess* (London: Cassell, 1965), p. 151.

² *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, third edition (London: Faber, 1961), revised edition, ed. by Grevel Lindop (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997; London: Faber, 1999), pp. 490/481.

³ Graves’s diary. See Robert Graves, *Complete Poems*, ed. by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward, vol. 3 (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), p. 442.

⁴ ‘The White Goddess’ (*Poems and Satires 1951* (1951)).

⁵ *Complete Poems*, vol. 3, ‘Uncollected Poems’, pp. 368, 537; *The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), p. 789.

⁶ *Complete Poems*, vol. 3, ‘Unpublished and Posthumously Published Poems’, pp. 409–10, 558; Penguin Classics, p. 827.

Two Unpublished Muse Poems

Robert Graves

I AM YOUR POET

I am your poet, you the Muse
 Who all these songs of mine ordained;
And though no news I bring is news
 You laugh as at a victory gained

When I blurt out your attributes:
 The stars that aureole your head,
The spotted serpents, Phrygian flutes,
 Sad conjurations of the dead,
And lily-of-the-valley shoots
 That track the forest where you tread.

THE MEAD-VAT

Though once the cell was furnished only
With oak table and chair,
Two pegs in the wall, a goatskin rug, an inkwell,
A copper brazier and an empty chest,
Now large dun tomes and their gay-jacketed children
Mount to the rafters on all sides of him
And lurk on window ledges.
But let none quarrel with this innovation:
The Queen of the Grove has visited him here
Has ruffled his thick hair
Has drawn the pen from his hand to blot
A verse, or half a page, demanding
Livelier disquisitions of her beauty.
And if one day he goes, penless and bookless,
To where her mead-vat smokes in the crystal hall,
Where the tall elect foregather
Royally shod, his blood brothers and sisters
Under the chieftain trees, where wild birds call
And salmon leap the weir,
Will she forget such love and studiousness?

