

THE MARRIAGE MADE IN HELL

G.R.H. Wright

*There is an ancient tradition
that they (the individual souls) go
there (the underworld) from
here and come back here again,
and are born from the dead !
(Plato, *Phaedo* 10)*

I

In a recent edition of Orpheus Svetlana Yanakieva (1996) deals with a mythological theme referred to as “The Wedding Death”. She sees this mythogem (1996, 25) as relevant (indeed as a basic substratum) to well known Greek mystery cults *e.g.* at Eleusis and Samothrake – and more broadly, as relevant in Dionysiac and Orphic contexts. She also notes that the motif is widespread in the folklore of all contemporary Balkan people (1996, 49). Accordingly she believes that the whole complex surrounding the theme belongs “to the ancient religious life of the Balkan, to the period before the Olympian religion took shape” (Yanakieva 1996, 25). In this way she draws on a number of publications in Bulgaria and Russia, so as to use the mythogem as a type example of what may be described as mythological development by the way of both dispersion (variation) of single, and concentration (amalgamation) of several themes. Her line of procedure is to conflate a number of mythological figures (Persephone, Ariadne, etc.) whose legend incorporates the mythogem or who are related by birth or marriage – *i.e.* who may be reckoned as either analogous or homologous figures. In this process both the classical mythology and the mythological theory are very fully documented.

To this interesting submission it may be possible to add some supplementary background, by approaching the question not *via* the *dramatis personae* but by way of the argument of the myth – and in so doing to show how primal and widespread the myth was. Finally, because of this primal quality, it may be possible to make the theme a vehicle for suggesting some line of general analysis of mythology, as Svetlana Yanakieva has done.

II

Svetlana Yanakieva's "Wedding Death" is one aspect of that perennial fantasy of mankind: descent into the underworld, with ensuing return to the light of day – this is man's response to the besetting mystery of life concerning which no direct evidence has ever been forthcoming. This grand *peut-être* gives rise to a number of mythological expressions. Both men and women have been imagined to have descended into the abode of the dead and to have returned (or sought to have returned) thence. Svetlana Yanakieva is concerned with female protagonists. She advances the case of Persephone as prime instance and reckons to establish the general category by adducing in support Ariadne, Europa, Helen, Semele, Eurydice and Harmonia. This seems a mixed bag. Other than Persephone, the only examples of descent and return are Eurydice and Semele. Ariadne's case is cognate since she is at home in the labyrinth (which is clearly an underworld image) and escapes with Theseus. Helen has nothing to do with the underworld but has a connection with Theseus, while Europa and Harmonia equally have nothing to do with the underworld but are connected in legend to Semele (and Cadmus).

So far as can be understood this assemblage is designed to demonstrate the general thesis that the ramifications of (classical) mythology arise through the two processes of variation on the one myth and/or compounding together originally separate myths into a new amalgam. How good a demonstration is to be assessed from Svetlana Yanakieva's article. However, over and above this concern, the article interests itself directly in the Wedding Death motif *per se* and this latter interest is henceforth the concern of the present article to the exclusion of the general theory accounting for mythological diversification.

III

As a background a brief preliminary sketch is provided of the mythological complex which comprehends the Wedding Death. This is, in effect, exceptional commerce, tragic or heroic with

“The undiscovered country, from whose bourne
No traveller returns...
Whereon light never falls nor foot of day
.... the bourne of all, the unbeholden land”

Obviously the ramification of this theme in myth, legend and folklore is vast. However, if attention is focused on Classic and Middle Eastern mythology, then the field can be circumscribed somewhat.

Typical is the descent into the underworld while still living and the subsequent return above ground – N.B.: at times it is difficult to be sure of the actual state of the visitor while in the underworld, whether completely living, completely dead or in some intermediate condition. The protagonists can be of both sexes, male or female, and of all natures: divine, semi-divine or human. The purpose of the descent and return may be either to “save” individuals directly from the bonds of death or it may be reckoned to effect sympathetically the seasonal increase from the earth (which is the ultimate salvation of men). Considering these distinctions jointly, it is possible to be more precise.

The direct saving/releasing of individuals from the underworld is the work of men/heroes. Promoting the cyclical renewal of nature and its yield on earth is the office of divine beings. Although there are instances of female descent into the underworld of their own motion, the connection of living women with the underworld is characterically presented in the guise of possession by or relations with non-human figures. A recognisable extension of this situation is the exposure of such a woman to the attentions of a death dealing monster (a recognisable image of the underworld) and her succour by the intervention of a hero (*cf.* Andromeda), thus pre-empting the actual descent into the underworld.

IV

Following on this outline of the mythological complex which comprehends Svetlana Yanakieva’s Wedding Death motif (let us say again connections between the underworld and the living) some anthropological and archaeological evidence is called into account in the hope that it may elucidate the mythology – and in so doing may even suggest a general issue in the study of mythology.

In order to maintain an existence which is in any way human, every society must adopt some understanding of two “facts of life” which appear to pass from life in this world to some other kind of existence – birth and death.

Because of this apparent transcendence of the living world, birth and death are often taken to have a dimension in common and therefore linked together in consideration. When a century or so ago European scholars began to produce systematic accounts of communities with a primitive material life style, a constant was observed. Numbers of these societies shared an understanding of the process of human generation very different from the scientific analysis long accepted as axiomatic. And this fact affords a convenient approach to elucidating the “underworld mythology” in issue here.

Some reflection shows that the fact was not surprising. The mode of human generation is not at all obvious on the face of things. It would be impossi-

ble to induce the cause of pregnancy by general observation – least of all that it is due to sexual congress *inter vivos*. The succession of the two phenomena is not constant enough and the interval between them is too protracted to establish any causal connection. In fact, the scientific explanation of conception requires a very considerable background knowledge of physiology, biology, etc., so that the truth of its postulates can be assessed by the criterion of correspondence.

As opposed to this, the “pre-scientific” understanding encountered by early anthropologists was not validated at all by correspondence. It was founded on accord with the understanding of death; and above all both critical facts of human existence were required to accord with cosmic existence. The canon of primitive man’s explanation was to bring the experience of his own life as closely as possible in conformity with what he observed in the external life of the world at large (= the natural order) – *i.e.* to secure the best adjustment of the human and the cosmic. And the systematic understanding devised to this end might be termed “total life”. One aspect of this outlook is to be mentioned as a preliminary. Total life is expressed only within a compendium of several life times. A man looks back to his father and beyond that his grandfather-figure, who merges with the interminable group beyond his ken, the ancestors. He looks forward to his son, and beyond him to his grandson, who merges with the again interminable group of descendants. It is within this cycle of at least three generations that total life is manifested, and it is to be thought of as a cyclical phenomenon.

The beginning of pre-scientific man’s account to himself of human generation was his perception of the cyclical path of nature – its features appeared to view, disappeared from view and reappeared. Equally he saw that all this manifestation, this produce, was from the earth, and to the earth it returned. Proceeding on these observations it was possible to give a coherent account of human generation – one shaped according to the device of economy of effect, where “entities are not multiplied needlessly”.

Men appeared on the earth and after a short time their bodies disappeared under the earth (into the underworld). And men, new-born appeared on earth again. If men disappeared under the earth then in some manner the new-born must mark the re-appearance of the departed dead. It was but a particular application of nature’s eternal return; and of the observation that all produce, wealth, increase ultimately came out of the earth. And it certainly was the most economic of explanations. The question was, of course, the *modus operandi* of the process.

How did men who had lived their time under the sun and then disappeared under the earth return again to the light of day?

Man was clearly born of a woman, no one thought to challenge this evident fact. The new-born emerged from the body of a (youngish) woman. That being so, it stood to reason that what had emerged from the body of a woman somehow must have got into the body of that woman – but by what

process so as to comprehend the return from the earth of those who had disappeared beneath it; the men of former times.

The process was a direct one. Nubile women were exposed/exposed themselves in places and in conditions, where it was possible to think that essence from the departed dead of a previous generation lodged in their bodies via the genitals; and thus became subject to the process of gestation so as to appear once more on the earth. Insufficient this explanation is, and in some aspects ludicrous. It is departed old men, who impregnate living women. What then of departed women of former times

“Dictez moy ou, n’en quel pays,
Est Flora la belle Rommaine”

and are we to suppose that the “ancestors” return to earth in their guise of men? Yes, in the main. Then what of the generation of women? However, it is doubtful that such details were closely addressed. It was certainly a very general and fundamental understanding, since it survived in whole or in part, or recognisably transmuted down to modern times.

To this anthropological data it is possible to juxtapose an extensive archaeological record. Everyone knows how difficult it is to penetrate ancient mentality by way of prehistoric archaeology, yet in the present instance it seems ancient material remains can be fitted closely to these well attested beliefs which are obviously very ancient.

During the latter half of the 20th century, excavation revealed that in the region of Syria-Palestine-Cyprus and extending eastward, the earliest solidly built up settlements (*cf. ca.* 10.0000 years ago) were assemblages of standard round houses. Every building in the settlement was of the same form – a round house which centralised design expressed a cosmic significance: the round tabular world domed over by the sky. In the larger structures these were often two types of installation – a larger central hearth and benches built up solid. Frequently there was very little evidence for cooking and eating, etc. On the other hand buried human remains are profuse both in the state of primary and of secondary burials; with in some instances, remains of severed heads singly and in groups.

Human remains are often in and under benches or around under hearths. Thus these round buildings (sometimes termed tholoi) were tombs, and they were also “chambers” for “sleeping” – in short they were venues for conception and death, so closely associated in contemporary understanding as to be inseparable, and together to constitute the “total life” of the family, *viz.* birth, death and rebirth; life’s arrival, departure and return.

Careful disposition was made so that the living could sleep in the closest

proximity to the mortal remains of the dead. This is clearly a functional device with intent to provide for human procreation, according to the “pre-scientific” method as outlined above – *i.e.* by congress between men of earlier time departed under the earth and nubile women with their genital parts made and kept suitably receptive (by regular penetration). The couches and the hearth secured the optimum congress. Additionally the hearth was at the centre of the world – the pole where states of existence intercommunicate – where the underworld breaks through in flame so as to provide a further facility for procreation, the vector, fire sparks, which transmit the ancestral essence from the underworld into the land of the living. Also the severed heads (skulls) are connected with procreation. Modern skull cults (often in association with head hunting) are specifically directed towards fertility (the provision of a skull by the prospective bridegroom is often necessary prerequisite to marriage).

V

The mythological, anthropological and archaeological evidence which has been cited here leads to this assessment. The Wedding Death myth is based on the very ancient unscientific theory that human generation proceeds by way of commerce between living women and dead men (*i.e.* denizens of the underworld). In time, this mistaken idea was largely ousted from men’s understanding of their lives in the world (= the order of nature). However, like any train of association, once established it remained in the mind to condition the mind; and was thus used to construct later accounts of the supernatural (in the form of myth, legend and folklore). It was, in effect, a “way through the woods”, long since closed and abandoned for human passage, but still a guiding pathway for the imagination. The upshot was, there still remained the understanding that in quintessential cases for due fecundity, the proper end of marriage, marriages are not made in heaven; for there “they neither marry nor are given marriage”.

On the contrary marriages are made in or from the underworld (the source of all increase); that is, significant marriages are made in hell.

As a token of this appraisal, mention may be made of two complementary attitudes still meaningful in Europe. Over and above specific expression of regret for loss of the bride by her kin and loss by the bride of her kin, an underlying sadness accompanies all bridal ceremonies. Corresponding to this, when a maiden (unmarried women) dies, it is everywhere recognised fitting that she should be interred in a wedding gown “adorned like a bride to meet her husband” (*cf.* Seaford 1987).

In conclusion it now remains to suggest that the line of analysis proposed in this specific instance of The Wedding Death may be of some general appli-

cation in the study of mythology. Consider again the complex of “underworld mythology” which is the matrix of this Wedding Death. It will be found that the aspects of this complex align with the very ancient understanding of human birth and death:

a. According to the understanding, all men are born of a living human being (female) and a supernatural being (male) – a presence from the beyond (underworld). In later mythology this type of generation is proper only to the hero, who thus has two natures – *cf.* Perseus, Jesus, etc. (*cf.* Hartland 1894).

b. Again according to this understanding all men go down into the underworld and return to the light of day in some manner. In later mythology again this is the prerogative of the hero – *cf.* Theseus, Herakles, Orpheus, Jesus, etc.

Here can be observed an incipient rule. What in very ancient (*e.g.* Early Neolithic) times was reckoned to be the way of all flesh in the natural world becomes outmoded by newer understanding of the order of nature and is then drawn on to articulate concepts of the supernatural – *i.e.* “in heaven as it was on earth”. This is, in effect, an ideological parallel to a common material succession, *e.g.* the sacrificial knife used by the priest to perform a holy office is a flint knife because that was the type of knife once used by all men in everyday life during very ancient times.

There is no intention of over-generalising this issue. It is well recognised that there is no rationale of single origin to mythology. Mythology is of mixed origin and its nature and function is difficult to define. However, on occasion it is useful to recognise that later mythology may conceal earlier anthropology.

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G.R.H. Wright
 Domaine Bouchony,
 Isle de la Barthelasse
 F-84000 Avignon
 France