

THE GLORY, JEST AND RIDDLE
JAMES GEORGE FRAZER AND THE GOLDEN BOUGH

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Summary

Jonathan Z. Smith: The Glory, Jest and Riddle:
James George Frazer and The Golden Bough (1969)

This study has sought to articulate several stances which might be taken toward Frazer's monumental work, The Golden Bough. Frazer, while being consistently used by contemporary scholars, is often criticized either on the basis of his utilizing inadequate theories or outdated facts. It has been the presupposition of this dissertation that fact and theory cannot be so easily separated and that their inter-relationship is a complex affair. Thus this study strives to set forth a variety of modes of apprehending Frazer's work, his synthesis of fact and theory, and the judgements that might be made upon his work in light of contemporary scholarship.

Part One of the dissertation attempted to assess Frazer's own understanding of what he had done, both in his inaugural lecture and in The Golden Bough. The categories of play, the joke and burlesque were found to be most useful in interpreting this. Frazer's questions were shown to be shams; his answers, no answers; his theories, a torn tissue of dubious hypotheses. His treatment of sources was found to be untrustworthy in many instances due to his tendency to "improve" his texts.

Nevertheless, although neither the golden bough nor the Arician priesthood were central to his work as Frazer had claimed, it was suggested that the figure of the divine king was Frazer's chief concern and that this had proved a useful pattern for future scholarship. In Part Two, Frazer's African data for sacral regicide was exhaustively examined and then more recent scholarship on the question was reviewed. Africa is the only non-classical source Frazer had for his kingship theory and thus provided the only possible area for the empirical testing of his thesis. The evidence was found to be mixed, neither as positive as Frazer's supporters would claim nor as negative as his detractors have held.

In Part Two, chapter five, the complex of interlocking motifs which make up Frazer's theory of divine kingship was examined. It was concluded that Frazer had not so much attempted an anthropological or historical study as a dramatic, philosophical representation of the brave absurdity of man, particularly in the face of death. From this perspective the joke and burlesque character of Frazer's work must be reassessed as expressive of his perception that human existence is itself play and joke.

In Part Three the possibility of the contemporary use of Frazer was raised. The chief problem confronting both anthropology and history of religions appears to be a concern for a return to the practice of comparison. Frazer as the most massive illustration of comparison is of no practical value in this endeavor as he had no method for his comparisons. Nevertheless, his work pointed to a number of persistent patterns in man's social and religious behavior. In so doing Frazer remains a challenge for contemporary scholarship.

the green covers of his work and his frequent reference to the term, vegetation deities are not at the forefront of his concern. The vegetation cycle is merely the most dramatic possible symbolization of the alteration of the seasons, as the alteration of the seasons is the most dramatic possible symbolization of the vicissitudes of existence.⁴⁵ Read sympathetically from this perspective, Frazer, while bound by his presuppositions from explicitly and univocally so stating, hints at what Eliade will, half a century later, brilliantly formulate:

It was not the periodic disappearing and reappearing of vegetation which produced the figures and myths of the vegetation gods (Tammuz, Attis, Osiris and the rest); at least, it was not the mere empirical, rational, observation of the "natural" phenomenon. The appearing and disappearing of vegetation were always felt, in the perspective of magico-religious experience, to be a sign of the periodic creation of the Universe . . . the myth of Tammuz and the myths of gods like him, disclose aspects of the nature of the cosmos which extend far beyond the sphere of plant life; it discloses on the one hand, the fundamental unity of life and death, and on the other, the hopes man draws, with good reason, from that fundamental unity, for his own life after death. From this point of view, we may look upon the myths of the sufferings, deaths and resurrections of the vegetation gods as paradigms of the state of mankind . . .⁴⁶

5. The Royal Play: I have read somewhere a comparison between the Cretan bull game and the Spanish bull fight which contrasted sharply the attitude and ideology inherent in each. For both, the bull is an awesome symbol of death. But, in the Cretan ritual, young naked men and women go out and encounter death and play with it,

vaulting agilely over the terrible horns. In the Spanish ritual, steeped in Christian symbolism, death is encountered by the armed matador who, in a moment of truth, offers himself to the horns and slays death. The former is comic, playful action; the latter a tragic encounter. The one, however, is no less serious than the other.

As one steps back and attempts to survey the vast panorama of Frazer's The Golden Bough, one is struck by the fact that Frazer has combined these two attitudes. He has chosen as his subject matter the daring, tragic attempt by man to overcome death by slaying it and has chosen as his manner of approach, his style, a comic, playful stance. Unless the two are indissolubly held together (by author and reader alike), unless the seriousness of each is equally perceived, there is a danger of reducing Frazer (or of Frazer reducing himself) to the maudlin and over-dramatic on the one hand, to being frivolous on the other.

What Frazer has sensed in The Golden Bough is what later philosophers have termed the absurdity of the human condition, l'homme est une passion inutile. Striving to conquer death by means of death, man asserts the reality of death, its omnipresence and omnipotence, all the more strongly. It is tragic, it is comic, it is absurd. To kill death is a paradox; for men "to be in the habit of killing the beings they worship" (GB, Vol. VIII, p. 169) is absurd (and Frazer's way of putting it makes the absurdity even more obvious).

Man is a very curious animal, and the more we know of his habits, the more curious does he appear. He may be the most rational of all beasts, but certainly he is the most absurd. Even the saturnine wit of Swift, unaided by a knowledge of savages, fell far short of the reality in his attempt to set human folly in a strong light.⁴⁷

For Frazer, the absurdity of man in the face of death is no mere poetic conceit, no speculative hypothesis--it is pre-eminently real. Real men have really been slain by their fellows in an attempt to escape the common lot of all. Real men have really castrated themselves; real women have given themselves up to real acts of sexual intercourse in rituals of sacred prostitution; real men of all ages and in all societies have performed rituals using real plants, animals and human flesh in an attempt to aid their gods or themselves in transcending that which cannot be transcended--death. The fact of death is "no figurative or allegorical death, no poetical embroidery thrown over the skeleton, but the real death, the naked skeleton" (GB, Vol. VII, p. vi).⁴⁸ And in the face of this "real death," this "naked skeleton" one can only act absurdly, or, to put it another way, all action is a joke. (Thus, it is perhaps no accident that Frazer's controversial thesis relating the crucifixion of Jesus to Purim and the Sacaea should emphasize that Jesus was killed as a mock-king, as a burlesque; and yet should insist that the death was no less real, the religion and myth which formed about this death no less valid for all its being a joke).⁴⁹

Man has not always been willing to watch this momentous conflict [between life and death]; he has felt that he has had too great a stake in its issue to stand by with folded hands while it is being fought out; he has taken sides against the forces of death and decay-- has flung into the trembling scale all the weight of his puny person, and has exulted in his fancied strength when the great balance has slowly inclined towards the side of life, little knowing that for all his strenuous efforts he can as little stir that balance by a hair's breadth as can the primrose on a mossy bank in spring or the dead leaf blown by the chilly breath of autumn. (GB, Vol. IX, p. 241)⁵⁰

Frazer, as the chronicler of "these efforts, vain and pitiful, yet pathetic" (ibid.), adopts the necessary double-face. At the conclusion of The Golden Bough, he bids farewell to the work and his readers but hopes "they will bear with me yet a while if I should attempt to entertain them with fresh subjects of laughter and tears drawn from the comedy and the tragedy of man's endless quest . . ." (GB, Vol. X, p. xii).