

Robert Graves, *The White Goddess--a Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: 1961, first publ. 1948)

There are many folkloristic echoes in Liz Lochhead's poems, and we know that in particular she was strongly influenced by the famous English poet and novelist Robert Graves's (1895-1985) book *The White Goddess*, whose argument was that much of the imagery of Western poetry descends from a lost pre-Christian matriarchal cult of the moon goddess. The book went through several editions, becoming one of the key texts in the feminist revival of the 1970s. What concerns us here, is the idea of the sacrificial male, centering on the Hercules legend in its numerous forms. See if you can find echoes of this in any of the poems in Liz Lochhead's "Grimm Sisters":

"Hercules first appears in legend as a pastoral sacred king [...] male leader of all orgiastic rites and has twelve archer companions, including his spear-armed twin who is his *tanist* or deputy. Her performs an annual green-wood marriage with the queen of the woods [...] The manner of his death can be reconstructed from a variety of legends, folk customs and other religious survivals. At mid-summer, at the end of a half-year reign, he is made drunk with mead and led into the middle of a circle of twelve stones arranged around an oak, in front of which stands an altar-stone; the oak has been lopped until it is T-shaped. He is bound to it with willow thongs in the 'five-fold bond' which joins wrists, neck, and ankles together, beaten by his comrades until he faints, then flayed, blinded, castrated, impaled with a mistletoe stake, and finally hacked into joints on the altar stone. His blood is caught in a basin and used for sprinkling on the whole tribe to make them vigorous and fruitful. The joints are roasted at twin fires of oak-loppings, kindled with sacred fire preserved from a lightning-blasted oak [...] The twelve merry-men rush in a wild figure-of-eight dance around the fires, singing ecstatically and tearing at the flesh with their teeth. The bloody remains are burnt in the fire, all except the genitals and the head. These are put into an alder-wood boat and floated down a river to an islet. His tanist succeeds him and reigns for the remainder of the year, when he is sacrificially killed by a new Hercules." pp.125-6

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