

MAIDEN GLORY

IL DIVINO TRAGEDDIO



DEDICATIO THE FINAL CHARIOT

Lips like pale cherries, eyes rare as mist,
Hair of quickgold, veins of cyan marble,
Brows like bows, lashes like whips,
Flesh like living porcelain.
Castles of chalcedon, islands of jasperald
Would never wax greater in my behazen mind
When compared to thine thean ring:
Your triune surname.

I gazed above, inside the aspersorium of Fate
Pouring into three chalices and seven vials.
Jove himself would have been enthralled
Were He to see you in your veil nymphall.

To unfix the stars, to douse the lamps of Heaven
Were a plaything, if I have you not.
Who am I to deny the stirrings of passion,
Who am I to reject your velveteen hand?

Let earth teem with our Titan offspring,
Let the sea host cathedrals of glass,
Let the skies ring with gongs and cymbals.
May seraphs descend to sing for thee
When our fingers clasp.

To cleave unto thee, like oak and willow
To grow ancient atwain, like spent stars
And become dust in one tomb
Were a great legacy perhaps.

Yet I would rather thee make eterne
Like Adam, who never falls with Eve ---
When I man the final chariot
To break the speed of thunder.

Kursat Jonathan Pekgoz

TWISTS OF HISTORY

My father once remarked that nobody should write a book before forty. I began working on this “poem in prose” when I was seventeen, taking long and very long breaks in between. I am now forty years old.

The present work is neither pure history nor pure fantasy, nor an example of conventional allegory. The twists of History take many strange bents and turns in our half-real universe. I am a lesser student of greater masters, but I have studied under many masters before grabbing the pen: Vyasa, Valmiki, Hesiod, philosophers who came before Socrates, Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Plato, Aristotle, Ovid, Virgil, Isaiah, Boccaccio, Ferdowsi, Chaucer, Scheherazade, Dante Alighieri, Thomas More, Edmund Spenser, William A. Shakespeare, John Milton, Emmanuel Kant, Jonathan Swift, Wilhelm F. Hegel, Victor Hugo, Ernest Hemingway, Friedrich W. Nietzsche, Alfred P. Whitman, Edgar Allan Poe, John Keats, Algernon C. Swinburne, Mary & Percy Shelley, Agatha L. Christie, H. P. Lovecraft, J. R. R. Tolkien, Jorge L. Borges, Gabriel G. Marquez, Umberto Eco, Stephen King, Paulo Coelho, Amin Maalouf, George R. R. Martin, Orhan Pamuk, J. K. Rowling, Margaret Weiss & Tracy Hickman, Italo Calvino. English, after all, is the Adamic language now.

I studied Ancient Greek for the sake of Plato.¹ Like Spenser himself, I have been called “*a poet’s poet*.” If I may be bold enough to shrug off blasphemy charges, I have also studied the styles of The Upanishads, The Old Testament, surviving Zoroastrian literature, The Long Discourses of The Buddha, The New Testament, and The Quran from

¹ According to Alfred N. Whitehead, “all of Western philosophy consists of a list of footnotes to Plato.”

the perspective of a poet. Parthenissa,² the tragic vestal virgin, is a name borrowed from the English author Roger Doyle --- who inspired in me the idea to write a romance about a Persian princess. This work is dedicated unto that vestal virgin,³ a Joan of Arc reborn, who returns from the dead to “deliver this speech.”

I would like to thank Beatrix Windsor, George R. R. Martin, J. K. Rowling, Wilhelmina von Paque for their disinterested scholarship and creative critique. I would like to thank my English professors for making me fall in love with the English language: Valerie Kennedy, Cevza Sevgen, Matthew Gumpert, Hande Tekdemir, Kim Fortuny, Victoria Kahn, Emily Anderson, Heather James, Leo Braudy, Margaret Russett. I would also like to thank my Ancient Greek instructors: Chryssi Sidiropolou, Kyriaki Konstantinodou, Afroditi Angelopoulou. I have coined some Greek neologisms, eschewing normative grammar in favour of whimsical constructions.

This fictional world is in no small part based upon the fantastic, incomplete maps of Herodotus and Eratosthenes. There are three continents. The massive *Tethyssa* borrows her name from an aquatic goddess. (Asia is the name of a water nymph --- as is Tethys). *Hespera* is a dearly fictive Europe, named after the apples of Hesperides: perhaps also representing the fruit of The Tree of Knowledge here. Gnostics once revered Eve for making the right choice and liberating mankind from Jehovah’s chains. *Caphria* is an anagram of Africa, verdant and pristine and free.

Much of the Strife and Love that inspires this work occurs around The Mediterranean: known for *livid waves*. Ilium and Rome merge into

² “The Sun, was already so far declin’d, that his heat was not offensive, when a Stranger alighted at the Temple of Hierapolis in Syria, where the Queen of Lovean Oracle, as famous as the Deity” --- the opening lines of Parthenissa, by Roger Doyle.

³ “A fair vestal, throned in The West” --- *A Midsummer’s Night’s Dream*, William A. Shakespeare: an allusion to Queen Elizabeth I.

Latillium to honour Virgil. Athens and Sparta, their civil wars meaningless under the firm conquest of Persia, merge into *Sparthena*. The biblical haven of Anatolia, *Tarshish*,⁴ here represents a triumphant West. The Black Sea (Euxine) and The Caspian Sea merge into a second and more fantastic mediterranean, known for *green waves*.

The flow of history has taken strange twists and turns in this half-real universe. The Achaemenid Empire lasts forever, as indestructible as the fires of Azda. *Phoezanthion* (Ποῦζανθιόν) is at the centre of the map and the plot. The empress of Wæold is an unfading yet beleaguered Constantinople where neither Islam nor Christianity, but Zoroastrianism reigns supreme. Sitting upon the narrow strait (*Aphrozeum*) that ties the two mediterranean seas, it seems as if God has cheated the dice while assigning her happy fate. *Symarna*, where the story proper is set to occur, is an amalgam of “Smryna” (praised in ancient writings, be they pagan and Christian) and “Amarna” (where the dissident pharaoh Akhenaton established solar monotheism for the first time in history). Jews never leave Egypt but embrace its heathenish ways: Jehammities (Jehovah, Amon). Turks and Mongols never depart their ancestral steppes, but Anatolia is all over the map.

This imaginary world is riven by crusades and jihads. There is but one God, but so many prophets to interpret him. *Azdaeans* (from root word *Mazda*) allegorise the Zoroastrian faith. I owe it to Ferdowsi to mourn in the most stubborn sense a great faith and an even greater nation hailing from Old Persia. The Azdaean faith is suppressed in Persia proper, as it happened in our own history, yet takes root not in India but Anatolia instead. *Aionites* represent a mixture of Neoplatonism and Gnosticism and Christianity, as if Julian The Apostate had been somewhat successful in his efforts. *Sigeans* (from Greek “Σιγή,” i.e. *Silence*, the name of the highest aeon according to Valentinus) allegorise an unbending and iconoclastic version of Islam, perhaps right before the laxer Abbasids conquered the sterner Umayyads.

⁴ Not unlike Tolkien’s *Gray Havens*.

Make no mistake: this story is about The Old World in all its glory. The Americas must necessarily shrink into three remote islands of legend: *Gargantis* (an amalgam of Rabelais' *Gargantua* and Plato's Atlantis), *Thurasil* (*Thule* and *Brasil*, two fantastic islands according to imaginative medieval maps), *Meropis* (borrowed from obscure poet Theopompus, whose "hippotanes" inspired Jonathan Swift's intelligent horses). There are many such amalgams and anagrams, such as the barbaric *Scimmerians* (Scythians, Cimmerians). Some names are grounded in Biblical lore, such as *Noph* (Memphis). And no mediterranean romance would be complete without Alexandria, that crucible of poets and philosophers (here *Amphion*, implying mastery over sea and land). For a complete list of these whimsical constructions, please consult the end of the book.

Greeks, as it were, must have lost The Battles of Marathon and Salamis in our world. There is but one historical ruler who has ever conquered the known world entire, and he is Cylander The Great. He is a synthesis of Cyrus of Persia, hailed as "messiah" in The Old Testament, and Alexander of Macedon --- whose feats require no introduction to The West. *Coincidentia oppositorum*, in Jungian terms. Persians never let go of Constantinople after conquering it, for three millennia, in the flesh of the ruling Jupithomenid dynasty. They alloy West with East under the guidance of the alchemist *Sarastro*, the peculiar spelling of "Zoroaster" from Mozart's most famous opera, balancing liberty with order upon the scales of an indestructible Istanbul (Στάνβολέ).

But all mundane glory must wane, my epic and tragic masters agree. The walls are in disrepair and the army of Phoezanthion is in disarray as the clocks chime to mark the beginning of this book. Symarna, known for its flower-sprouting soil and elegant citizens, is in danger of falling unto Sigeian hands. There is fear of present and future decline in the hearts of Phoezanthines, who once enjoyed rule over a seamless empire vast enough to seem endless.

Like so many pawns upon a circular game of chess, Symarna can only match the three glorious sons of the sole Caleph with three fairylike daughters of hers. And as with any circular game, there are no winners upon the table except the hand of Fate.

FOREWORD

Shall I unfix the stars and resurrect wraiths from times past? How can I begin this ode unsung? The Testament of Eld begins with the separation of Heaven and Sea and Earth, writ upon papyrus scrolls. The Cycle of Kings begins with an epitaph for the poet, engraven upon tablets of clay. The Pancalliopiad begins with a catalogue of the heroes whose deeds and meeds are inscribed upon parchments of skin. I know not how to begin, I who am a lesser student of greater masters.

Shall I begin with the arrangement of the universe, the emanations of Time? Shall I sing of an age even before legend, when ettins and elves roamed formless lands? Shall I begin with the original language of Man, the most ancient rune carven into the bark of oak? Shall I begin with how the first cornerstone was laid upon the city of Urran? Shall I begin with how The Fire of Fires first sprang alive from meteors twain, from a volcanic coal and a thunderbolt smote? Shall I begin with the first solemn altar devoted unto the oracle of Dodelphis? Nay, such is not the compass of my small story.

I would form poems about the seven olden champions, Zhaal and Aphridon and Sphendiar and Theracles and Persophon and Jaxilleus and Sinoa, but there are already sublimer poems on that matter. I would write chronicles about the seven great metropolises, Noph and Jeriddo and Sard and Sparthena and Latillium and Tarshish and Phoezanthion, but there are already more honest chronicles on that theme. I would compose psalms for the seven splendid archangels, Eosis and Rhabaal and Thaos and Miaphael and Khorda and Wohuman and Trometan, yet poets more devout than I have composed psalms for them. I must rather sing a theme more modest.

Behold! My dimming eyes catch the distant glimmer of crystalline temples. I must sing a circular song about an encircled city. Listen the faint peals of cymbals and the mute thunder of gongs! I do not speak

the tongues of angels and I can but mutter the tongues of men.
Hearken not I, a pale voice in the service of a greater chorus. My story
is a living creature that can speak and thus it begins with a paeon unto
a maiden goddess.

MAIDEN GLORY

Over the gravid plain and the livid sea towers the city called Symarna, sundered from less fortunate kingdoms by walls like mountains and mountains like walls. Her hands reach far into the foam of the western sea and the dust of the eastern wasteland. She rests her feet in the southern fenland and washes her hair in the swirling waves of the river Scamand. Her breasts are veiled with snow, her thighs with sand. Ten thousand of flower seeds grow on her green skin. Her fingertips flutter upon salt-perfumed streets and her eyes scan the livid sea for ships laden with gifts. Her martial throne is an unconquered citadel carven into a sole mountain, called Ancora, but she slumbers in peace upon a bed of dew and cotton. Her dominion covers a circle of no less than a hundred parasangs, though once it covered thrice the area.

She is a maiden always in good company, a nation well beloved of virile empires and handsome republics. She herself is a rare republic in a time of many kingdoms. Has there ever been a lack of kingly suitors at her doorstep? Wealthy conquerors woo her with golden blood, crowned merchants with bleeding gold. Wized archpriests whose lips judge multitudes are filled with lawless lust in her presence. What glory is there in winning her warm, myrrh-sprinkled bed! Sometimes they gently tap her doors, trying to seduce her with donations: sometimes they assault her barbicans with battering rams. All the devilry and mischief that is known to the sons of Man, they practice on this lukewarm maiden --- whether it be for wedlock or rapine. Symarna is a wise damsel, however, and knows how to secure her own freedom. She sets suitor against suitor with subtle policy and recruits warlike hosts from afar to ward off the lecherous throng. A cunning queen, she sacrifices the children of strangers to defend her hearth. Thus her fingertips seldom touch cold iron. When submit she must, she does so with serene grace and on her own terms. She is indeed the softest and gentlest of queens in times of peace, though myriads have fallen for her sake in more warlike times. Corsairs and

pirates, ruffians and vagabonds all alike perish before her bolted gates: feeding her realm with their wealth and flesh. Thus her treasury teems with vibrant jewels, her gardens with lush fruit.

Which city is like unto Symarna? Which city has been chosen for such natural glory, such toil-free bliss? She is neither the greatest nor the most populous, capital of no empire and queen of no people save her own brood. She is no Phoezanthion, empress over twain seas and three continents. She is no Tarshish to orbit and conquer the outer oceans. She is no Jeriddo, home to five imperious thrones and ten thousand stolid idols. She is no Megarinth, mother of colonies greater than herself. She is indeed childless, despite six lecherous husbands and lovers innumerable.

Yet wise men say that the fate of Symarna is the most enviable among all nations. She is a bastion of good fortune, untouched by the troubles of the greater cosmos. The sea at her doors is friendly, the wind always mellow: she knows neither rude gale nor wild wave. No thunderstorm floods her painted streets, no earthquake shatters her temples of glass. Hunger is a word strange to her tongue, thanks to wheaten plains that stretch from horizon to horizon. Her cisterns overflow with snow and wine. The black plague is a temperate fever under her roof and the scarlet pox fears to spoil her lovely form, leaving behind only a beauty mark. Locusts that invade her meadows fall dead and wolves that enter her realm tame themselves. Wasps and bees weave honey in the same hive and the leopard watches over the fatling. Her gardens have never been sown with ash and salt: Symarna has never known the abomination of desolation. For this is the city where Ninaddites drew their utmost borders with iron chariots, where the frost-roaming Hundall forgot their bloodlust. This is where Sigeans fell by the score, even if they were more ice than the axes of the Hundall and more iron than the chariots of Ninaddo. Here, our story must needs begin.

Poets who sing of earthly paradises abandon their caprices when they behold Symarna. Philosophers who have roamed the world restless, dreaming of vain utopias, find the solace of sleep here.
