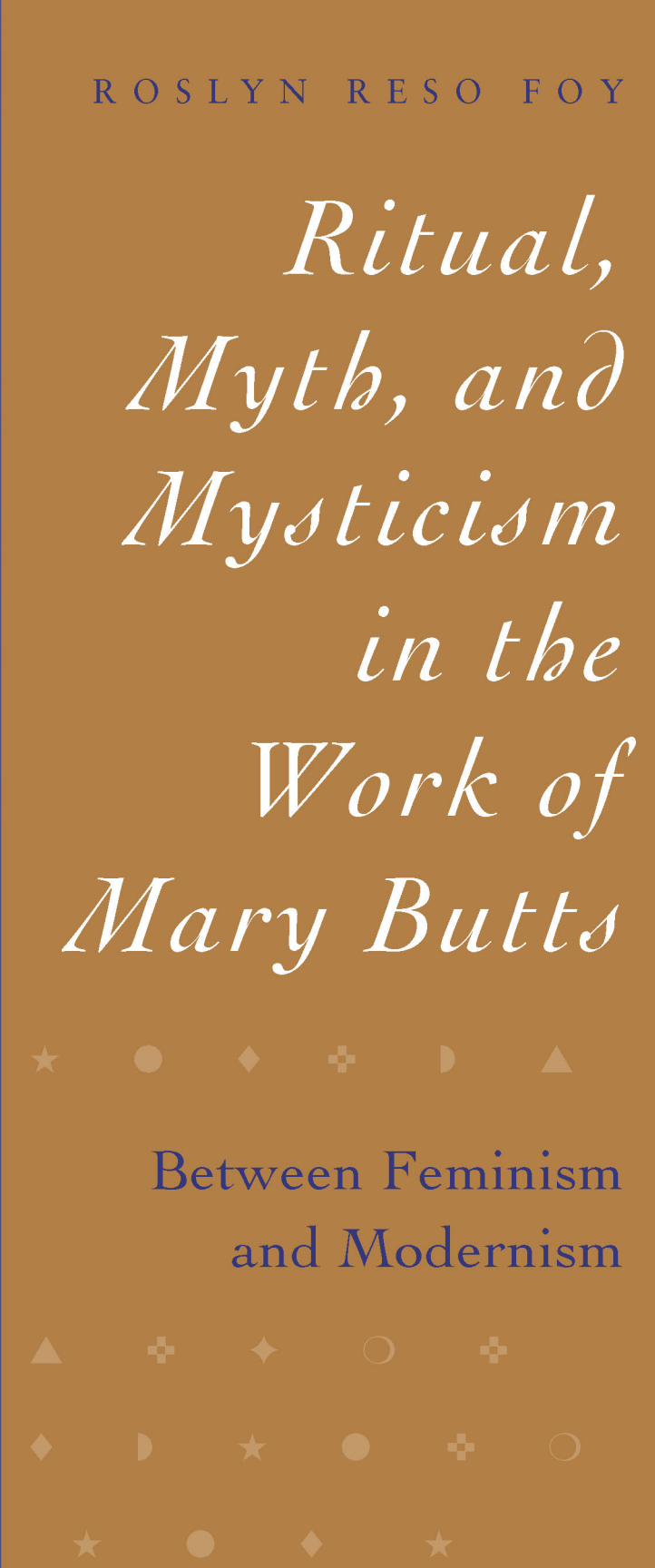


ROSLYN RESO FOY

*Ritual,
Myth, and
Mysticism
in the
Work of
Mary Butts*

Between Feminism
and Modernism



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For Ed and Edna

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Preface

In June of 1996, after several years of reading and studying the work of Mary Butts, I traveled to England to meet with Butts's only child, Camilla Bagg. Camilla agreed to take my husband and me through Butts territory, both physical and spiritual, for several days.

Leaving Camilla's home near Reading, England, we drove south through Dorset to Poole Harbour where Butts's vision came clearly into focus. The places she had described intimately in her autobiography of childhood, *The Crystal Cabinet*, rang out with the beauty and wonder of nature (although greatly changed by the progress Butts so dreaded in her own lifetime). The land surrounding Poole Harbour extends like palms of a hand caressing and protecting a rare part of the natural world. Far south and surrounded by water, the land is lush and green.

Camilla had made arrangements for us to visit the family home of Salterns, which also figures vividly in Butts's *The Crystal Cabinet*. Although time has brought change and modernization to the great eighteenth-century home, much of what Butts describes in her autobiography remains preserved and treasured by the family that now owns it. A presence lingered in the house and the area: its gardens were perfect, the view to the harbor beautiful and inspiring.

We took a ferry across the harbor to the Isle of Purbeck to visit Corfe Castle (the namesake of one of Butts's most striking poems), walked through the ancient village, and discovered the power of the ruined castle whose history Butts likened to that of Delphi. From there we went to Badbury Rings, a series of prehistoric mounded circles several miles northwest of

Poole, well preserved by the National Trust. This site, of particular importance to Mary Butts, offers a vision of both the wildness of nature and the ordering of spiritual chaos in one magnificent spot. Here, truly, the mystery of Butts's writing came alive.

The next day in Camilla's home she allowed me to look at the journals that Butts kept for twenty-one years. Many entries offer insights into the emotions of a young woman who experienced great extremes during her lifetime. Camilla showed me numerous family photos not available elsewhere and was a gracious host and keeper of her mother's heritage. We discussed her own life, which was virtually devoid of the opportunity to be with or to know her mother. She perhaps has learned most about her mother from the journals, and some of the entries are painful to her, even now.

Camilla was also kind enough to arrange a meeting with Nathalie Blondel. Blondel had sole rights to the journals and had spent over seven years working on a biography of Mary Butts. We found that we agreed significantly on interpretations and attitudes. Nathalie invited us to her home, where she permitted me to view her manuscript, showed me several more pictures I had not seen, offered copies of articles I had not been able to unearth in the United States, and talked for several hours about Butts's work. Her comments and discussions helped validate my own work.

On the last day of our visit, Camilla drove into Reading from her home in nearby Bradfield to spend the afternoon with us and to have our last dinner together. Once more we discussed events in her own life as well as her relationship with her mother and her father, John Rodker. I left England gratified to have had firsthand experience of Mary Butts's life and of the land that was so sacred to her.

In April 1998, just after the publication of Blondel's biography, Camilla Bagg visited my home in Metairie, Louisiana, and generously gave me an ivory bracelet that had belonged to her mother during the wild days of the 1920s. This gift is particularly special and treasured because Camilla has so little of her mother's life in her possession. During several conversations, Camilla explained more of the details of why she had maintained possession of the Butts papers for such a long time. When Mary Butts died in 1937, she left her friend (and literary executor) Angus Davidson instructions that Camilla was to receive all her papers, journals, and belongings when she reached age twenty-five. Shortly after that time (1945), Camilla was contacted by Norman Holmes Pearson of Yale University (through the intermediaries of Angus Davidson and Harcourt Wesson Bull), who asked Camilla to arrange for the twenty-one years of journals and the Butts letters and papers to go to the Beinecke Library. Pearson was in the process of collecting the papers belonging to some of the most interesting figures of the

1920s, including H. D., Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, and others. Camilla had a letter from Pearson explaining to her how significant it would be to have the Butts papers at the Beinecke along with, as Camilla remembers it, “so many well-known people” and claiming “that it would be the right place for my mother because so many of her friends were there.”¹ By the time that initial contact occurred and some discussion back and forth between Pearson and Harcourt Wesson Bull took place, it was 1950, and Camilla expected the papers would go to Yale. Then everything stopped for nearly eleven years. During that time, Camilla had a chance to reconsider her decision. When Pearson finally wrote to Angus Davidson in 1961 with instructions to ship the journals and papers, Camilla had grown up a bit and decided not to let these “great men” push her about.

After the deaths of Mary Colville-Hyde (Mary Butts’s mother) in 1947 and two of Colville-Hyde’s sisters, in 1951 and 1952, Camilla had inherited an enormous number of letters to add to the collection. To the dismay of Davidson and Bull, she wrote to Pearson and told him that she would not send the Butts papers to the Beinecke because she wanted more time with them herself to discover things about her mother that she was denied as a child; these journals and possessions were nearly all that was left of her mother and her life. During those years Camilla had married, was raising her own children, and felt she needed to hold on to her mother’s belongings a while longer. Bull and Davidson were anguished and wrote to her asking if she really knew what she was doing, but Camilla remained adamant in her decision.

Then in 1963 two American academics wrote to her and requested access to the journals. By this time Camilla realized she needed to make some decisions about the papers and agreed to allow them the opportunity to work with the Butts papers. After nearly twenty years of “messaging about” with the academics, Camilla was back where she started. The association had been a disappointing one.² Eventually, she heard from a young scholar in California, Elena Storer-Nitzberg, whom she visited and who then became involved with a conference on Mary Butts organized by Christopher and Barbara Wagstaff in 1984, which included the poet Robert Duncan, Robin Blaser, and numerous scholars.³ After her association with academia, Camilla claims she was exhausted; she attended the conference in California and returned home. Then in the early 1990s, Nathalie Blondel contacted Camilla. They met, and Camilla was reticent about beginning another round of academic wrangling. But Blondel was persistent, and Camilla liked and respected her. Eventually, she gave sole rights to the Butts papers to Nathalie Blondel. Blondel’s biography, *Mary Butts: Scenes from the Life*, appeared in March of 1998.

Also in 1998 Camilla arranged for the Mary Butts papers to go to the Beinecke Library at Yale University after all; she ended where she had begun nearly fifty years earlier. Among the papers, in addition to a revealing essay “Bloomsbury,” published in *Modernism/Modernity* in 1998 and a short story published in the *New Yorker* in the same year, there is an extraordinary novel, *Unborn Gods*. Camilla explained that “it seems to be merely an exercise in expressing what she [Butts] thought about men and sex. . . . I think already she was beginning to feel that she had some sort of magic power with men, but what was she to do about it?”⁴ There is also poetry, some published in little magazines of the day but never collected, an unfinished historical novel, *Julian the Apostate*, and other unfinished work. One can only speculate about what the reputation of Mary Butts would have been today had Camilla agreed to release the papers to Norman Holmes Pearson in the 1960s. Now that they will be available to scholars, interest in Mary Butts’s work should continue to grow.

Corfe

M A R Y B U T T S

I

Corfe, the hub of a wheel
Where the green down-spokes turning
Embrace an earth-cup of smoke and ghosts and stone.
The sea orchestrates
The still dance in the cup
Danced forever, the same intricate sobriety
Equivocal, adored.

But when I remember you Corfe, I remember Delphi
Because your history also is a mystery of God.

“And God is no blind man and God is our father’s”
But like lovers
Your cup is full of the courts of other princes
Disrupting you.

Very sweet is the sacred wood
In the gold clearing, in the mustard patch;
But at night comes a change
Like a gold ball thrown out
And a black ball thrown in
(Not a sunset behind Tynham Cap
On a night without a moon.)
But a shift of potencies
Like a black ball thrown in
And a gold ball thrown out
And the players are princes
Of the turf and the weed
And the wind-moulded trees
And the hazel thicket
And the red blackberry thorn.

Never trust a hemlock
 An inch above your mouth.
 An ice-green hemlock
 Is a lover
 In the wood.
 Now every way the wind blows this sweetie goes
 In the south
 Where goes the leaf if the rose
 And the evergreen tree.

II

Inside the house, above the wood
 Look out of the tall windows squared
 With wood-strips painted white.
 The wild grass runs up the wild hill
 The wild sky runs over itself
 And goes nowhere.

A man crosses the rough grass
 Up the wild hill;
 Strong graceless kharki [*sic*] legs in silhouette
 Tired and tough, treading the hill down.

He will not wear it down
 Let him try!
 He is here only because this place is
 A button on the bodies of the green hills.

III

God keep the Hollow Land from all wrong!
 God keep the Hollow Land going strong!
 A song a boy made in a girl
 Brother and sister in a car
 Over the flints, upon the turf
 Beside the crookbacked angry thorn
 Under the gulls, above the dead
 To where the light made the grass glass.

Until they came to the world's end
 The sea below and under them
 The gulls above and over them
 And through the thunder and the wailing
 Sun full of wings was over them
 In a glass world made out of grass.
 "God keep the Hollow Land from all wrong!
 God keep the Hollow Land going strong!"

Curl horns and fleeces, straighten trees,
 Multiply lobsters, assemble bees.

Give it to us for ever, take our hints
Knot up its roads for us, sharpen its flints,
Pour the wind into it, the thick sea rain,
Blot out the landscape and destroy the train.
Turn back our folk from it, we hate the lot
Turn the American and turn the Scot;
Take upropitious [*sic*] the turf, the dust
If the sea doesn't get 'em then the cattle must.

Make many slugs where the stranger goes
Better than barbed wire the briar rose;
Swarm on the down-tops the flint men's hosts
Taboo the barrows, encourage ghosts.

Arm the rabbits with tigers' teeth
Serpents shoot from the soil beneath
By pain in belly and foot and mouth
Keep them out of our sacred south.

Quoted by permission of Camilla Bagg. In Glen E. Morgan, "Mary Butts," *Antaeus* 12 (Winter 1973): 144–46. The "Hollow Land" metaphor comes from a song at the end of William Morris's "The Hollow Land: A Tale." There is a bell in "The Hollow Land" called Mary and "When Mary Rings the Earth Shakes." See *The Collected Works of William Morris* (Routledge/Thoemmes, 1992).

