

TALES OF THE FRANÇOIS VASE



Julia Older

The Hubblebush Granite State Poetry Series, Volume III

HOBBLEBUSH BOOKS
Brookline, New Hampshire

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Composed in Adobe Arno Pro at Hobbleshush Books

Printed in the United States of America

First Edition

Publisher's Cataloging-In-Publication Data
(Prepared by The Donohue Group, Inc.)

Older, Julia, 1941-

Tales of the François Vase / Julia Older. – 1st ed.

p. : ill. ; cm. + 1 CD-ROM. – (The Hobbleshush granite state poetry series ; v. 3)

Originally written as a verse play; adapted for radio broadcast by New Hampshire Public Radio. Transformed by the author into a book-length poem. A CD-ROM of the radio play accompanies the book.

ISBN: 978-0-9845921-2-8

1. François Vase–Poetry. 2. Kraters–Greece–Poetry. 3. Vases, Etruscan–Poetry. 4. Mediterranean Region–Civilization–Poetry. 5. Historical poetry. 6. Radio adaptations. I. New Hampshire Public Radio. II. Title. III. Title: Tales of the François Vase. Adaptations. IV. Series: Hobbleshush granite state poetry series ; v. 3.

PS3565.L314 T25 2012

811/.54

2011937502

The Hobbleshush Granite State Poetry Series, Volume III
Editors: Sidney Hall Jr. and Rodger Martin

HOBBLEBUSH BOOKS

17-A Old Milford Road
Brookline, New Hampshire 03033

www.hobbleshush.com

*Is it possible to understand this whole life,
not in fragments, but completely?*

—KRISHNAMURTI

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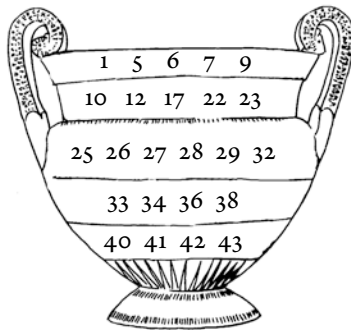
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*Pages with Illustrations
from the Vase*

FOREWORD

THERE REALLY IS a François Vase, and anyone who visits Florence can see it in that city's Archeological Museum. The facts of its discovery and its several restorations are well documented—as are certain strange events of its history, such as the time it was smashed by an insane museum custodian just after the turn of the twentieth century. The archeological uniqueness and rarity of the Vase are recorded in art books and journals.

It is easy to understand what captured Julia Older's attention. The animated figures painted on the Vase—its gods, heroes, and strange creatures—are adapted from scenes of Homer's *Iliad*. His epic poem about the Trojan War was at the time the equivalent of a best seller.

Today, at a distance of two and a half millennia from its creation, Homer's great song takes on archetypal authority that almost transcends mere human origin. Like the bands of figures on the Vase's gracefully tapering sides, the parade of people who own, encounter, destroy, and restore the François Vase come alive in Older's *Tales*—winding in a continuous coil through her fast-moving narrative.

A wide variety of verse forms are employed, from traditional sonnets to ritual chants to free verse, in characterizations that emerge as naturally individualized voices developing with the story. Yet any narrative construction proposing to leap back 2500 years is bound to contain a certain level of imaginative speculation.

Take the Haruspex, for example. She's a priestess charged with divining auguries of the future from mystical readings of sheeps' livers. More important, perhaps, is her national identity, which is not Greek, but Etruscan. This accounts for the François Vase's most significant journey in geographic terms, across the Adriatic from Greece to what is now Italy. The Etruscans, a somewhat mysterious pre-Roman civilization, had a very good reason for importing ceramic products from their Greek neighbors: they were inferior potters. Moreover, they were deeply immersed in sacred rituals. It would not be unusual for a prized Greek vase to be used as the poet imagines, in an Etruscan rite.

You'll find that ritualized behavior plays a significant role throughout the life of Older's François Vase from the wine-mixing of its first owners and bloody divinations of the Haruspex, to the minute shard gatherings and reassemblies of the 19th and 20th centuries, and the Vase's eventual apotheosis as an object of antiquarian veneration in its hermetically sealed display case.

Even the signal events of the poem, the three separate smashings of the Vase, are characterized by ritual or symbolic intent. One character, the early Christian Martyr, destroys it in order to renounce its pagan associations. The Mad Custodian attacks it as a symbol of perceived injustice. And the devoted Conservator, Mauro Cristofani, breaks it with grave deliberation in order to return the Vase to wholeness by restoring its final missing piece.

Contrasted with the passionate engagement of some characters are others whose encounters with the Vase are oblique or tangential. The Etruscan Servant who conceals it from invading Roman armies in the tomb where François eventually discovers its fragments. The Italian Mountebank who assists François, then holds a piece of the Vase hostage in order to extort money. The turn-of-the-century Diva who sings a piece of the story to us. Or the Hippie Art Student who observes the great Florentine flood of 1966, and the efforts of conservators like Cristofani to save the city's treasures from destruction. This inclusion of incidental characters sharpens the contextual focus of each major time period and adds an element of empathetic attachment to the events.

The most enigmatic character in Older's poem is the François Vase herself. I'm reminded of St. Exupery's *Little Prince*—except that the Vase's vanity is mythic and divine rather than petty and insecure. She assumes her power as storyteller, narrating her way through the human drama swirling around her.

The poet consistently uses a rich palette of images in the service of individual characters—who are freed to express themselves first, and their creator only subsequently. Their autonomy lends the poem dramatic strength; it allows us to journey with the Vase through a variety of locations and historical time frames sharing her will to endure, to become whole.

—KEVIN GARDNER

STEPPING INTO THE CIRCLE

I FIRST SAW THE FRANÇOIS VASE in a newspaper. The Vase was in Florence, the paper said, at the Archeological Museum. I stared at the picture. The Vase was more than two feet tall, and almost that wide from handle to handle across the rim. It was an ancient Greek wedding bowl, called a krater, a vessel used for cooling hot wine. It was 2500 years old.

What caught my attention were five painted bands depicting scores of scenes from Homer's *Iliad* wound like a film strip around its tapering circumference. Each figure was carefully labeled, and The Vase itself bore the signatures of its proud Greek makers: "Ergotimos made me. Kleitias painted me."

I don't know why I became obsessed. Perhaps it was because I had lived and studied in Italy, or maybe my imagination was captured by the stories The Vase could tell, the things it had seen. I began to search for its history in books, in illustrations and manuscripts. I found and translated the original Italian journal which contained an account of its discovery.

Alessandro François had found it in 600 pieces in an ancient Etruscan tomb in 1844. But that wasn't all. Next, I found a journal devoted entirely to the restorations of The Vase, which had been broken and pieced together no fewer than *three times* in its 2500 year history. Stories. And more stories. Stories on The Vase and stories in it. I couldn't help but wonder what they were.

One day I was sitting among piles of photographs of this wondrous work of art writing a poem about it. Hours went by, and the poem wouldn't come. I had almost given up when, faintly, as if from a great distance, I thought I heard—breathing—a murmur of music—a voice. Thinking I'd been working too long, I put the poem aside and stood up to stretch. Then, she spoke:

*I am the François Vase,
and I will tell you the journey I took
through other times in another place.
I'm not on a screen or in a book.*

Where was she? I arranged the photographs in a great circle on the floor and walked around them, staring at The Vase from every angle. She spoke again:

*I see you circle round
then return
as if to spin the world you've found
in an urn.*

The voice and its music were inside the circle. I stepped in too and sat down on the floor. "Like you, I've been broken and mended," I said to her. There was no answer. Perhaps she was offended! I consoled, "Still, how proud Ergotimos and Kleitias must have been." Before I could finish, the music began again to the sound of . . .

A TURNING WHEEL

The birth of beauty always feels like pleasure.
Should it not? Especially in Ceramicus
where we potters slip imagination
in red clay subdued by yellow buff,
engraving the lives of gods strip by strip
so if unwound the frieze could fill a wall.
That's how we spin the earth, Kleitias and I.

ΕΡΓΟΤΙΜΟΣ ΜΕ ΠΟΙΗΣΕΝ

ERGOTIMOS MADE ME

Ergotimos masterminds my lot
by forming a wedding krater or a funeral pot.
His hand in turn gives landscape to my hand
and sends me circulating in a maze
of heroic silhouettes in lustrous black glaze.
Seven marriage carts in joyful process
convey the mortal Peleus and his goddess
licked from below by the rays of a blazing sun
while pigmies and cranes dance an epithalamium.

ΚΛΕΙΤΙΑΣ ΜΕ ΛΥΑΦΕΣΕΝ

KLEITIAS PAINTED ME

All day long I sit at the turning wheel
and can't help feeling as the urn
forms under my fingers how like unworn
youthful flesh it flaunts its coiled strength.
Ha! We know the secret of our folly
having burst many a vessel in our passion—
demand being greater than supply
in more ways than one—ah Kleitias and I.

I paint 200 figures on the krater.
It's my best work, and I keep thinking of the buyer
drunk as Bacchus dropping our Vase on the floor.
Ergotimos tries to warn me—"Let go!"
Still . . . I wonder who owns that krater now.

*For thirty years or more
The Commander of Athens and his wife pour
a steady stream of wine inside me.*



*Dionysus, god of wine,
trips, grips a chartreuse vine.
The clusters pop, the bruised
flesh. The blood, the juice
of water-woven tangled mesh,
thrush and splash. The musty pull
of pungent silhouetted globes
so full and bronze and
sweet sun spill—the rape of grape . . .
And then one day the swell of lips
and sensually longing sips
withheld and held within
the stain of my empurpled skin cease
and I'm carted away . . .*

TO THE COMMANDER OF ATHENS PALACE

I believe my husband the Commander would sell
his own mother to clinch a deal!
That beautiful wine bowl
was a wedding gift from my parents
and now I bet it's some Etruscan whore's.

Ah well, I gave him what he wanted. Sons!
I ask you, isn't that what all men want?
Sons as warriors, sons to possess their wealth.
When I complained and stormed about the house
because he sold the only thing I loved
he reached into his tunic . . .

Woman, will you stop that foolish whining!
Here, have your slave go buy another . . .



As if he could drive a bargain for my grief!
My Lydian slave who always did the shopping
(for I stay hidden in the women's quarters)
had learned the Greek alphabet well enough,
and on the sly (with not a few caresses)

he read to me the names above the gods.
I had my favorites—Athena, strangely white
with purple peeking through the under-tones.

Often left alone to my own devices,
I lingered upon every changing scene
trying to figure out what figures mean.
And so, while my husband caroused
and slept about
I found my own lovers—Ajax, Achilles.
They filled my days with lovely reveries.



* * *

How that woman rants about that vase!
You'd think it were pure Etruscan bronze.
True, it had a certain artful grace,
and that's why I sold it to the Spartan—
commanding, I might add, a handsome sum.
Zeus! Election's coming 'round again
and a few drachmas can't harm
 the outcome of the race.
They say I'm worth my salt like the best slave.
I control expenditures for all of Athens
and keep our fleet afloat.
Why does she rave
about that silly Vase, especially now
when she should be mourning Pisistratus,
our dear beloved friend and trusted leader?
With all due respect to the epic Poet,
a wife is no better than a cow!

*Stuffed to the neck in stable straw
and wrapped in fleece
I am packed in a ship
that sails from Greece
across the sea to Etruscan soil.*



*Left within a market stall
a mysterious hand
undulates sidewise
and taps along my inner wall
rapping a gentle touch.*

*The hand that buys
knows far too much.
Yet I'm in love with revelation,
and circa five hundred BC
'Telling futures'
is the going story.*