



Goat Song

SINCE THE DAWN of time, the goat has held divine significance in many cultures. The sacred robes of Babylonian priests were made of goatskins. The zodiacal Capricorn with head and body of a goat and a fish's tail, was established as early as the 15th century B.C.E.; the Sea Goat appears engraved on gems dated to the height of Chaldean rule in Babylon. A cuneiform inscription calls the goat "sacred and exalted,"—and at that time this sign was designated as the "Father of Light." Despite the glory the goat enjoyed among the ancients, its present reputation as a symbol of lust and evil is due to the devil-lore devised by medieval churchmen.

Perhaps the goat's character as loathsome and unclean began when the early Hebrews chose it as the animal to carry away the sins of the community in an annual rite of atonement. The hapless scapegoat was driven into the wilderness to perish bearing all the blame for crimes committed by others.

How wildly different is the ancient Greek symbolism regarding the same animal. Associated with the Gods Dionysus and Pan, the goat represent the pure, spontaneous joy of being alive. The great god Zeus was nurtured by the she-goat Amalthea. Her name is given to the mythical Horn of Plenty, the cornucopia promising its possessor

an abundance of all things desired.

We owe the art of drama to the music and dance celebrations honoring Dionysus. The goat and the god were one—the essence of high spirits and joyful abandon. The chorus and dancers wore goatskins and the rites were performed in an orderly manner until a singer named Thespis broke the rules and began a dispute with the choral leader. His action established dialogue and ever after the religious rituals were plays, for the unexpected is in the very nature of the god himself. Thespian became another word for actor. The highest form of drama, the tragedy, means goat song in Greek.

In northern Europe, the goat was revered for its playful nature, a nature firmly ruled by discipline. The love goddess of Germanic tribes rode a goat to the May Eve revels. She held an apple to her lips, a hound and a hare ran beside her and a raven flew overhead. Thor, the red-headed Norse god of thunder, drove a chariot drawn by two fierce goats. Both god and goddess were in complete control of their animals.

The Greeks warn us that when we deny the wildness in human nature, we court disaster. The message from the North is just as wise: we should acknowledge the wildness, use it to advantage, and learn to temper its force with strength and understanding.