

## CHAPTER I.

### INTRODUCTORY.

‘Die mit dem goldenen Schuh und dem Geiger ist auch eine Muttergottes.’  
*Bavarian Saying.*

#### § 1. The Borderland of Heathendom and Christianity.

IN order to gain an insight into the causes of the rapid development of monasticism among the German races, it is necessary to enquire into the social arrangements of the period which witnessed the introduction of Christianity, and into those survivals of the previous period of social development which German Christianity absorbed. Among peoples of German race monastic life generally, and especially monastic life which gave scope for independent activity among women, had a development of its own. Women of the newly-converted yet still barbarian race readily gathered together and dwelt in religious settlements founded on their own initiative and ruled independently of men. A reason for this must be sought in the drift of contemporary life, which we shall thus have to discuss at some length.

During the period of declining heathendom—for how long, measuring time by centuries, it is not yet possible to say—the drift of society had been towards curtailing woman’s liberty of movement and interfering with her freedom of action. When the Germans crossed the threshold of history the characteristics of the father-age were already in the ascendant; the social era, when the growing desire for certainty of fatherhood caused individual women and their offspring to be brought into the possession of individual men, had already begun. The influence of women was more and more restricted owing to their domestic subjection. But traditions of a time when it had been otherwise still lingered.

Students of primitive history are recognising, for peoples of German race among others, the existence of an early period of development, when women played a greater part in both social

and tribal life. Folk-lore, philology, and surviving customs yield overwhelming evidence in support of the few historic data which point to the period, conveniently called the mother-age, when women held positions of authority inside the tribal group and directly exercised influence on the doings of the tribe<sup>1</sup>.

This period, the mother-age, is generally looked upon as an advance from an earlier stage of savagery, and considered to be contemporaneous with the beginnings of settled tribal life. It brought with it the practice of tith and agriculture, and led to the domestication of some of the smaller animals and the invention of weaving and spinning, achievements with which it is recognised that women must be credited.

In matters of polity and sex it established the paramount importance of the woman; it is she who regulates the home, who notes the changes of the seasons, who stores the results of experience, and treasures up the intellectual wealth of the community in sayings which have come down to us in the form of quaint maxims and old-world saws. As for family arrangements, it was inside the tribal group and at the tribal festival that sex unions were contracted; and this festival, traditions of which survive in many parts of Europe to this day, and which was in its earliest forms a period of unrestrained license for the women as well as the men, was presided over by the tribal mothers, an arrangement which in various particulars affords an explanation of many ideas associated with women in later times.

The father-age succeeding to the mother-age in time altogether revolutionised the relations of the sexes; transient sex unions, formerly the rule, were gradually eliminated by capture and retention of wives from outside the tribal group. The change marks a distinct step in social advance. When men as heads of families succeeded to much of the influence women had held in the tribe, barbarous tendencies, such as blood sacrifice, were checked and a higher moral standard was attained. But this was done at the cost of her prerogative to the woman; and her social influence to some extent passed from her.

It must be granted that the character of the mother-age in some of its bearings is hypothetical, but we can infer many of the social arrangements of the period from surviving customs and

<sup>1</sup> The literature on this subject is daily accumulating. Among older authorities are Bachofen, *Das Mutterrecht*, 1861; Zmigrodski, *Die Mutter bei den Völkern des arischen Stammes*, 1886; Pearson, K., *Ethic of Free Thought*, 1888.

usages, and its organisation from the part woman played in tradition and saga, and, as we shall see later, from folk-traditions preserved in the legends of the saints. And further, unless we admit that the social arrangements of the earlier period differed from those of the later, we are at a loss to account for the veneration in which woman was held and for the influence exerted by her as we confront her on the threshold of written history. When once we grasp the essentials of these earlier arrangements, we hold the clue to the existence of types of character and tendencies which otherwise appear anomalous.

For at the time when contact with Christianity brought with it the possibility of monastic settlements, the love of domestic life had not penetrated so deeply, nor were its conditions so uniformly favourable, but that many women were ready to break away from it. Reminiscences of an independence belonging to them in the past, coupled with the desire for leadership, made many women loth to conform to life inside the family as wives and mothers under conditions formulated by men. Tendencies surviving from the earlier period, and still unsubdued, made the advantages of married life weigh light in the balance against a loss of liberty. To conceive the force of these tendencies is to gain an insight into the elements which the convent forthwith absorbs.

In the world outside the convent commanding figures of womankind become fewer with outgoing heathendom, and the part played by women becomes of less and less importance. There is less room left for the Gannas of history or for the Kriemhilds of saga, for powerful natures such as the Visigoth princess Brunihild, queen of the Franks, or Drahomir of Brandenburg, queen in Bohemia, who gratify their passion for influence with a recklessness which strikes terror into the breasts of their contemporaries. As the old chronicler of St Denis remarks, women who are bent on evil do worse evil than men. But in the convent the influence of womankind lasted longer. Spirited nuns and independent-minded abbesses turn to account the possibilities open to them in a way which commands respect and repeatedly secures superstitious reverence in the outside world. The influence and the powers exerted by these women, as we shall see further on, are altogether remarkable, especially during early Christian times. But we also come across frequent instances of lawlessness among the women who band together in the convent,—a lawlessness to which the arrangements of the earlier age likewise supply a clue. For that

very love of independence, which led to beneficial results where it was coupled with self-control and consciousness of greater responsibility, tended in the direction of vagrancy and dissoluteness when it was accompanied by distaste for every kind of restraint.

In this connection we must say a few words on the varying status of loose women, since the estimation in which these women were held and the attitude assumed towards them affected monasticism in various particulars. It is true that during early Christian times little heed was taken of them and few objections were raised to their influence, but later distinct efforts were made by various religious orders to prevent women from drifting into a class which, whatever may have been its condition in past times, was felt to be steadily and surely deteriorating.

The distinction of women into so-called respectable and disreputable classes dates from before the introduction of Christianity. It arose as the father-age gained on the mother-age, when appropriated women were more and more absorbed into domesticity, while those women outside, who either resented or escaped subjection, found their position surrounded by increasing difficulties, and aspersion more and more cast on their independence. By accepting the distinction, the teachers of Christianity certainly helped to make it more definite; but for centuries the existence of loose women, so far from being condemned, was hardly discountenanced by them. The revenues which ecclesiastical courts and royal households derived from taxes levied on these women as a class yield proof of this<sup>1</sup>. Certainly efforts were made to set limits to their practices and the disorderly tendencies which in the nature of things became connected with them and with those with whom they habitually consorted. But this was done not so much to restrain them as to protect women of the other class from being confounded with them. Down to the time of the Reformation, the idea that the existence of loose women as a class should be discountenanced does not present itself, for they were a recognised feature of court life and of town life everywhere. Marshalled into bands, they accompanied the king and the army on their most distant expeditions, and stepped to the fore wherever there was question of merrymaking or entertainment. Indeed there is reason to believe, improbable though it may seem at first sight, that women of loose life, as we come across them in the Middle Ages, are successors to a class which had been powerful in the past. They are not altogether depraved and

<sup>1</sup> Kriegk, G. L., *Deutsches Bürgerthum im Mittelalter*, 1868, ch. 12-15.

despised characters such as legislation founded on tenets of Roman Law chose to stamp them. For law and custom are often at variance regarding the rights and privileges belonging to them. These rights and privileges they retained in various particulars till the time of the Reformation, which indeed marks a turning point in the attitude taken by society towards women generally.

Different ages have different standards of purity and faithfulness. The loose or unattached women of the past are of many kinds and many types; to apply the term prostitute to them raises a false idea of their position as compared with that of women in other walks of life. If we would deal with them as a class at all, it is only this they have in common,—that they are indifferent to the ties of family, and that the men who associate with them are not by so doing held to incur any responsibility towards them or towards their offspring.

If we bear in mind the part these women have played and the modifications which their status has undergone, it will be seen that the subject is one which nearly affects monasticism. For the convent accepted the dislike women felt to domestic subjection and countenanced them in their refusal to undertake the duties of married life. It offered an escape from the tyranny of the family, but it did so on condition of such a sacrifice of personal independence, as in the outside world more and more involved the loss of good repute. On the face of it, a greater contrast than that between the loose woman and the nun is hard to conceive; and yet they have this in common, that they are both the outcome of the refusal among womankind to accept married relations on the basis of the subjection imposed by the father-age.

In other respects too the earlier heathen period was not without influence on the incoming Christian faith, and helped to determine its conceptions with regard to women. In actual life the sacerdotal privileges, which tribal mothers had appropriated to themselves at the time of the introduction of Christianity, were retained by the priestess; while in the realm of the ideal the reverence in which tribal mothers had been held still lived on in the worship of the tribal mother-divinity. It is under this twofold aspect, as priestess and as tribal mother-goddess, that the power of women was brought face to face with Christianity; the priestess and the mother-goddess were the well-defined types of heathen womanhood with which the early Church was called upon to deal.

We will show later on how the ideal conception prevailed, and how the heathen mother-goddess often assumed the garb of a Christian woman-saint, and as a Christian woman-saint was left to exist unmolested. Not so the heathen priestess and prophetess. From the first introduction of Christianity the holding of sacerdotal powers by women was resented both within and without the Church, and opprobrium was cast on the women who claimed to mediate between the human and the divine.

At the time of the advent of Christianity the Gannas and Veledas of the Roman period are still a living reality; they are the 'wise women' who every now and then leave their retreat and appear on the stage of history. A prophetess in gorgeous apparel makes her entry into Verdun in the year 547, drawing crowds about her and foretelling the future. She is in no way intimidated by the exorcisms of prelates, and presently leaves to betake herself to the court of the Frankish queen Fredegund. Again in 577 we find the Frankish king Guntchramm in consultation with a woman soothsayer, and other cases of the kind are on record<sup>1</sup>.

In the ninth century the Church more effectually exercised her influence in the case of the woman Thiota, who coming from Switzerland inflamed the minds of the folk in Mainz; for she was accused of profanity and publicly scourged<sup>2</sup>. But for all the attacks of the Church, the folk persisted in clinging to its priestesses and in believing them gifted with special powers. Grimm shows how the Christian accusers of soothsaying women made them into odious witches<sup>3</sup>; Wuttke and Weinhold, both well-known students of folk-lore, consider that witches were originally heathen priestesses<sup>4</sup>. The intrinsic meaning of the word *hexe*, the German designation for witch, points to some one who originally belonged to a group living in a particular manner, but whose practices made her obnoxious to those who had apprehended the higher moral standard of a later social period. But the Church failed to stamp even the witch as wholly despicable; for in popular estimation she always retained some of the attributes of the priestess, the wise woman, the *bona domina*, the 'white witch' of tradition; so that the doctrine that the soothsaying woman is necessarily the associate of evil was never altogether accepted.

<sup>1</sup> Gregorius Tur., *Hist. Eccles.* 5, ch. 14, 16, 19.

<sup>2</sup> Grimm, J., *Deutsche Mythologie*, 1875, p. 78.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 881 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Wuttke, *Deutscher Volksaberglaube*, 1869, p. 141; Weinhold, K., *Deutsche Frauen*, 1882, vol. 1, p. 73.

Even now-a-days incidents happen occasionally in remote districts which show how the people still readily seek the help of women in matters of wisdom, of leechcraft, and of prescience. It was only under the influence of a scare that people, who were accustomed to consult the wise woman in good faith, could be brought to abhor her as a witch. It was only during the later Middle Ages that the undisputed and indisputable connection of some 'wise women' with licentious customs gave their traducers a weapon of which they were not slow to avail themselves, and which enabled them to rouse fanaticism of the worst kind against these women.

The practices and popularity of witchcraft were in truth the latest survivals of the mother-age. The woman, who devised love-charms and brewed manifold remedies for impotence and for allaying the pangs of childbirth, who pretended to control the weather and claimed the power to turn the milk of a whole village blue, carried on traditions of a very primitive period. And her powers, as we shall see, always had a close parallel in those attributed to women-saints. For example St Gertrud of Nivelles has left a highly prized relic to womankind in the form of a cloak which is still hung about those who are desirous of becoming mothers<sup>1</sup>; and the hair of a saint, Mechthild, is still hung outside the church at Töss in Switzerland to avert the thunderstorm<sup>2</sup>; and again St Gunthild of Biberbach and others are still appealed to that they may avert the cattle plague<sup>3</sup>. What difference, it may be asked, is there between the powers attributed to these saints and the powers with which witches are usually credited? They are the obverse and reverse of woman's connection with the supernatural, which in the one case is interpreted by the sober mind of reverence, and in the other is dreaded under the perturbing influence of a fear encouraged, if not originated, by Christian fanatics.

In the Christian Church the profession of the nun was accepted as holy, but an impassable gulf separated her from the priestess. During early Christian times we come across the injunction that women shall not serve at the altar<sup>4</sup>, and that lady abbesses shall not take upon themselves religious duties reserved to men by the Church. When we think of women gathered together in a religious

<sup>1</sup> Rochholz, E. L., *Drei Gaugöttinnen*, 1870, p. 191.

<sup>2</sup> Menzel, *Christliche Symbolik*, 1854, article 'Haar.'

<sup>3</sup> *A. S. S. Boll.*, St Gunthildis, Sept. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Bouquet, *Recueil Hist.*, vol. 5, p. 690. Capitulare incerti anni, nr 6, 'ut mulieres ad altare non ingrediantur.'

establishment and dependent on the priest outside for the performing of divine worship, their desire to manage things for themselves does not appear unnatural, encouraged as it would be by traditions of sacerdotal rights belonging to them in the past. And it is worthy of notice that as late as the 13th century, Brother Berthold, an influential preacher of south Germany, speaks ardently against women who would officiate at divine service and urges the mischief that may result from such a course.

Turning to the question of how far these obvious survivals from a heathen age are determined by time and place, we find broad lines of difference between the heathen survivals of the various branches of the German race, and considerable diversity in the character of their early Christianity and their early women-saints. This diversity is attributable to the fact that the heathen beliefs of these various peoples were not the same at the time of their first contact with Christianity, and that they did not accept it under like circumstances.

For while those branches of the race who moved in the vanguard of the great migration, the Vandals, the Burgundians and the Goths, readily embraced Christianity, it was Christianity in its Arian form. Arianism, which elsewhere had been branded as heresy and well-nigh stamped out, suddenly revived among the Germans; all the branches of the race who came into direct contact with peoples of civilized Latinity readily embraced it. Now one of the distinguishing features of Arian belief was its hatred of monasticism<sup>1</sup>. The Arian convert hunted the monk from his seclusion and thrust him back to the duties of civic life. It is not then among Germans who adopted Arian Christianity that the beginnings of convent life must be sought. Indeed as Germans these peoples soon passed away from the theatre of history; they intermarried and fell in with the habits of the people among whom they settled, and forfeited their German language and their German traditions.

It was otherwise with the Franks who entered Gaul at the close of the fourth century, and with the Anglo-Saxons who took possession of Britain. The essentially warlike character of these peoples was marked by their worship of deities such as Wodan, a worship before which the earlier worship of mother-divinities was giving way. Women had already been brought into subjection, but they had a latent desire for independence, and among the Franks and Anglo-

<sup>1</sup> Montalembert, *Monks of the West*, I, p. 359.

Saxons women of the newly converted race eagerly snatched at the possibilities opened out by convent life, and in their ranks history chronicles some of the earliest and most remarkable developments of monasticism. But the Franks and the Anglo-Saxons, in leaving behind the land of their origin, had left behind those hallowed sites on which primitive worship so essentially depends. It is in vain that we seek among them for a direct connection between heathen mother-divinity and Christian woman-saint; their mother-divinities did not live on in connection with the Church. It is true that the inclination to hold women in reverence remained, and found expression in the readiness with which they revered women as saints. The women-saints of the Anglo-Saxons and the Franks are numerous, and are nearly all known to have been interested in convent foundations. But the legends, which in course of time have crystallised round them, and the miracles attributed to them, though containing certain elements of heathen folk-tradition, are colourless and pale compared with the traditions which have been preserved by saint legend abroad. It is in Germany proper, where the same race has been in possession of the same sites for countless generations, that the primitive character of heathen traditions is most pronounced and has most directly determined and influenced the cult and the legends of women-saints.

Besides the reminiscences of the early period which have survived in saint legend, traditions and customs of the same period have lived on in the worship of the Virgin Mary. The worship of the Virgin Mary was but slightly developed in Romanised Gaul and Keltic Britain, but from the beginning of the sixth century it is a marked feature in the popular creed in those countries where the German element prevailed.

As Mrs Jameson says in her book on the legends of the Madonna: 'It is curious to observe, as the worship of the Virgin mother expanded and gathered in itself the relics of many an ancient faith, how the new and the old elements, some of them apparently most heterogeneous, became amalgamated and were combined into the earlier forms of art...<sup>1</sup>'

Indeed the prominence given to the Virgin is out of all proportion to the meagre mention of her in the gospels. During the early Christian period she was largely worshipped as a patron saint in France, England and Germany, and her fame continued steadily increasing with the centuries till its climax was reached in the

<sup>1</sup> Jameson, *Legends of the Madonna*, 1857, Introd. xix.

Middle Ages, which witnessed the greatest concessions made by the Church to the demands of popular faith.

According to Rhys<sup>1</sup> many churches dedicated to Mary were built on spots where tradition speaks of the discovery of a wooden image, probably a heathen statue which was connected with her.

In the seventh century Pope Sergius (687–701) expressly ordered that the festivals of the Virgin Mary were to take place on heathen holy days in order that heathen celebrations might become associated with her<sup>2</sup>. The festivals of the Virgin to this day are associated with pilgrimages, the taste for which to the Frenchman of the Middle Ages appeared peculiarly German. The chronicler Froissart, writing about 1390, remarks ‘for the Germans are fond of performing pilgrimages and it is one of their customs<sup>3</sup>.’

Mary then, under her own name, or under the vaguer appellation of *Our Lady* (Unser liebe frau, Notre Dame, de heilige maagd), assimilated surviving traditions of the heathen faith which were largely reminiscences of the mother-age; so that Mary became the heiress of mother-divinities, and her worship was associated with cave, and tree, and fountain, and hill-top, all sites of the primitive cult.

‘Often,’ says Menzel<sup>4</sup>, ‘a wonder-working picture of the Madonna is found hung on a tree or inside a tree; hence numerous appellations like “Our dear Lady of the Oak,” “Our dear Lady of the Linden-tree,” etc. Often at the foot of the tree, upon which such a picture is hung, a fountain flows to which miraculous power is ascribed.’

In the Tyrol we hear of pictures which have been discovered floating in a fountain or which were borne to the bank by a river<sup>5</sup>.

As proof of the Virgin Mary’s connection with festivals, we find her name associated in Belgium with many pageants held on the first of May. Throughout German lands the Assumption of the Virgin comes at the harvest festival, and furnishes an occasion for some pilgrimage or fair which preserves many peculiar and perplexing traits of an earlier civilization.

The harvest festival is coupled in some parts of Germany with

<sup>1</sup> Rhys, J., *Lectures on the origin and growth of religion as illustrated by Celtic Heathendom*, 1888, p. 102.

<sup>2</sup> Frantz, C., *Versuch einer Geschichte des Marien und Annencultus*, 1854, p. 54 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Froissart, *Chronicle*, c. 162, in English translation; also Oberle, K. A., *Ueberreste germ. Heidentums im Christentum*, 1883, p. 153.

<sup>4</sup> Menzel, *Christ. Symbolik*, 1854, article ‘Baum.’

<sup>5</sup> Oberle, K. A., *Ueberreste germ. Heidentums im Christentum*, 1883, p. 144.