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Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion

Jane Ellen Harrison (1850–1928) was a pioneer in the academic study of myth in its historical and archaeological context, and was also one of the first women to make a full-time career as an academic. In her introduction to this book (1903), making the point that ‘Greek religion’ was usually studied using the surviving literary retellings of myths and legends, she states: ‘The first preliminary to any scientific understanding of Greek religion is a minute examination of its ritual.’ Using the then emerging disciplines of anthropology and ethnology, she demonstrates that the specific mythological tales of the Greeks embody systems of belief or philosophy which are not unique to Greek civilisation but which are widespread among societies both ‘primitive’ and ‘advanced’. Her work was enormously influential not only on subsequent scholars of Greek religion but in the wider fields of literature, anthropology and psychoanalysis.

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Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion

by

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INTRODUCTION.

THE object of the following pages is to draw attention to some neglected aspects of Greek religion.

Greek religion, as set forth in popular handbooks and even in more ambitious treatises, is an affair mainly of mythology, and moreover of mythology as seen through the medium of literature. In England, so far as I am aware, no serious attempt has been made to examine Greek ritual. Yet the facts of ritual are more easy definitely to ascertain, more permanent, and at least equally significant. What a people *does* in relation to its gods must always be one clue, and perhaps the safest, to what it *thinks*. The first preliminary to any scientific understanding of Greek religion is a minute examination of its ritual.

This habit of viewing Greek religion exclusively through the medium of Greek literature has brought with it an initial and fundamental error in method—an error which in England, where scholarship is mainly literary, is likely to die hard. For literature Homer is the beginning, though every scholar is aware that he is nowise primitive; for theology, or—if we prefer so to call it—mythology, Homer presents, not a starting-point, but a culmination, a complete achievement, an almost mechanical accomplishment, with scarcely a hint of *origines*, an accomplishment moreover, which is essentially literary rather than religious, sceptical and moribund already in its very perfection. The Olympians of Homer are no more primitive than his hexameters. Beneath this splendid surface lies a stratum of religious conceptions, ideas of evil, of purification, of atonement, ignored or suppressed by Homer, but reappearing in later poets and notably in Aeschylus. It is this substratum of religious conceptions, at once more primitive and more permanent, that I am concerned

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to investigate. Had ritual received its due share of attention, it had not remained so long neglected.

I would guard against misapprehension. Literature as a starting-point for investigation, and especially the poems of Homer, I am compelled to disallow; yet literature is really my goal. I have tried to understand primitive rites, not from love of their archaism, nor yet wholly from a single-minded devotion to science, but with the definite hope that I might come to a better understanding of some forms of Greek poetry. Religious convention compelled the tragic poets to draw their plots from traditional mythology, from stories whose religious content and motive were already in Homer's days obsolete. A knowledge of, a certain sympathy with, the *milieu* of this primitive material is one step to the realization of its final form in tragedy. It is then in the temple of literature, if but as a hewer of wood and drawer of water, that I still hope to serve.

As the evidence to be set before the reader is necessarily somewhat complex in detail, and the arguments of the successive chapters closely interdependent, it may be well at the outset to state, as simply as may be, the conclusions at which I have arrived, and to summarize briefly the steps of the discussion.

In Chapter I. it is established that the Greeks themselves in classical times recognized two forms of ritual, Olympian and Chthonic. It is further seen that the characteristic ritual of Homeric days was of the kind known to them as Olympian. Sacrifice in Homer takes the form of an offering to the god to induce his favour. Its formulary is *do ut des*. Moreover the sacrificial banquet to which the god is bidden is shared by the worshipper. In sharp contradistinction to this cheerful sacrificial feast, when we examine the supposed festival of Zeus at Athens, the Diasia, we find rites of quite other significance; the sacrifice is a holocaust, it is *devoted*, made over entirely to the god, unshared by the worshipper, and its associations are gloomy. The rites of the Diasia, though ostensibly in honour of Zeus, are found really to be addressed to an underworld snake on whose worship that of Zeus has been superimposed.

In the three chapters that follow, on the festivals of the

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Anthesteria, Thargelia, and Thesmophoria, held respectively in the spring, summer, and autumn, the Olympian ritual superimposed is taken as known and only alluded to in passing. The attention is focussed on the rites of the underlying stratum.

In the Anthesteria, ostensibly sacred to Dionysos, the main ritual is found to be that of the placation of ghosts. Ghosts, it is found, were placated in order that they might be kept away; the formulary for these rites is not, as with the Olympians, *do ut des*, but *do ut abeas*. The object of these rites of Aversion, practised in the spring, is found to be strictly practical; it is the promotion of fertility by the purgation of evil influences.

The ritual of the Thargelia is even more primitive and plain-spoken. In this festival of the early summer, ostensibly dedicated to Apollo, the first-fruits of the harvest are gathered in. The main gist of the festival is purification, necessary as a preliminary to this ingathering. Purification is effected by the ceremonial of the pharmakos. Though the festival in classical days was 'sacred to' Apollo, the pharmakos is nowise a 'human sacrifice' to a god, but a direct means of physical and moral purgation, and again with a view to the promotion and conservation of fertility.

Thus far it will be seen that the rites of the lower stratum are characterized by a deep and constant sense of evil to be removed and of the need of purification for its removal; that the means of purification adopted are primitive and mainly magical nowise affects this religious content.

This practical end of primitive ceremonies, the promotion of fertility by magical rites, comes out still more strongly in the autumn sowing festival of the Thesmophoria. Here the women attempt, by carrying certain magical *sacra*, the direct impulsion of nature. In connection with these *sacra* of the Thesmophoria the subject of 'mysteries' falls to be examined. The gist of all primitive mysteries is found to be the handling or tasting of certain *sacra* after elaborate purification. The *sacra* are conceived of as having magical, i.e. divine, properties. Contact with them is contact with a superhuman potency, which is taboo to the unpurified. The gist of a mystery is often the removal of a taboo. From the Olympian religion 'mysteries' appear to have been wholly absent.

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In Chapter V. we pass from ritual to theology, from an examination of rites performed to the examination of the beings to whom these rites were addressed. These beings, it is found, are of the order of sprites, ghosts, and bogeys, rather than of completely articulate gods, their study that of demonology rather than theology. As their ritual has been shown to be mainly that of the Aversion of evil, so they and their shifting attributes are mainly of malevolent character. Man makes his demons in the image of his own savage and irrational passions. Aeschylus attempts, and the normal man fails, to convert his Erinyes into Semnai Theai.

In Chapter VI. the advance is noted from demonology to theology, from the sprite and ghost to the human and humane god. The god begins to reflect not only human passions but humane relations. The primitive association of women with agriculture is seen to issue in the figures of the Mother and the Maid, and later of the Mother and the Daughter, later still in the numerous female trinities that arose out of this duality. In Chapter VII. the passage from ghost to god is clearly seen, and the humane relation between descendant and ancestor begets a kindness which mollifies and humanizes the old religion of Aversion. The culminating point of the natural development of an anthropomorphic theology is here reached, and it is seen that the goddesses and the 'hero-gods' of the old order are, in their simple, non-mystic humanity, very near to the Olympians.

At this point comes the great significant moment for Greece, the intrusion of a new and missionary faith, the religion of an immigrant god, Dionysos.

In Chapter VIII. the Thracian origin of Dionysos is established. In his religion two elements are seen to coexist, the worship of an old god of vegetation on which was grafted the worship of a spirit of intoxication. The new impulse that he brought to Greece was the belief in *enthusiasm*, the belief that a man through physical intoxication at first, later through spiritual ecstasy, could pass from the human to the divine.

This faith might have remained in its primitive savagery, and therefore for Greece ineffective, but for another religious impulse, that known to us under the name of Orpheus. To the

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discussion of Orphism the last four chapters IX.—XII. are devoted.

In Chapter IX. I have attempted to show that the name Orpheus stands for a real personality. I have hazarded the conjecture that Orpheus came from Crete bringing with him, perhaps ultimately from Egypt, a religion of spiritual asceticism which yet included the ecstasy of the religion of Dionysos. Chapter X. is devoted to the elucidation of the Orphic and Dionysiac mysteries. It has been shown that before the coming of the Orphic and Dionysiac religion the mysteries consisted simply in the handling of certain *sacra* after elaborate purification. By handling these *sacra* man came into contact with some divine potency. To this rudimentary mysticism Orphism added the doctrine of the possibility of complete union with the divine. This union was effected in the primitive Cretan rite of the Omophagia by the physical eating of the god; union with the divine was further symbolically effected by the rite of the Sacred Marriage, and union by adoption by the rite of the Sacred Birth. The mission of Orphism was to take these primitive rites, originally of the crudest sympathetic magic, and inform them with a deep spiritual mysticism. The rite of the Omophagia found no place at Eleusis, but the other two sacramental rites of union, the Sacred Marriage and the Sacred Birth, formed ultimately its central mysteries.

With the doctrine and ritual of union with the divine there came as a necessary corollary the doctrine that man could attain the divine attribute of immortality. Orphic eschatology is the subject of Chapter XI. Its highest spiritual form, the belief that perfect purity issued in divinity and hence in immortality, is found expressed in the Orphic tablets. Its lower expression, the belief in a Hades of eternal punishment as contrasted with the shadowy after-world of Homer, is seen in the vases of Lower Italy and the eschatology denounced by Plato.

Finally in Chapter XII. it is shown how, as a concomitant to their Eschatology, the Orphics, unlike Homer, evolved a Cosmogony, and with this Cosmogony was ultimately bound up a peculiar and philosophic theology. In the fifth century B.C. the puppet-show of the Olympians was well-nigh played out, but the two gods of the Orphics remained potent. In ritual they worshipped Dionysos, but their theoretical theology recognized

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Eros as source of all things. The Eros of the Orphics was a mystery-being, a *daimon* rather than a *theos*, a potency wholly alien to the clear-cut humanities of Olympians.

With the consideration of Orphism it has become, I hope, abundantly clear why at the outset attention was focussed on the primitive rites of Aversion and Purification rather than on the Service of the Olympians. The ritual embodied in the formulary *do ut des* is barren of spiritual content. The ritual embodied in *do ut abeas* contains at least the recognition of one great mystery of life, the existence of evil. The rites of the Olympians were left untouched by the Orphics; the rites of purification and of sympathetic magic lent them just the symbolism they needed. Moreover even in theology the crude forms of demons were more pliant material for mysticism than the clear-cut limitations and vivid personality of the Olympians. Orphism was the last word of Greek religion, and the ritual of Orphism was but the revival of ancient practices with a new significance.

The reader will note that in the pages that follow, two authors, Plutarch and Euripides, have been laid under special contribution. Plutarch's gentle conservatism made him cling tenaciously to antique faith. According to him, one function of religion was to explain and justify established rites, and in the course of his attempted justification he tells us many valuable ritual facts. Euripides, instant in his attack on the Olympian gods, yet treats with respect the two divinities of Orphism, Dionysos and Eros. I have suggested that, born as he was at Phlya, the ancient home of Orphic mysteries, his attitude on this matter may have been influenced by early associations. In any case, a religion whose chief divinities were reverently handled by Euripides cannot be dismissed as a decadent maleficent superstition.

I would ask that the chapters I have written be taken strictly as they are meant, as Prolegomena. I am deeply conscious that in surveying so wide a field I have left much of interest untouched, still more only roughly sketched in. I wished to present my general theory in broad outline for criticism before filling in

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details, and I hope in the future to achieve a study of Orphism that may have more claim to completeness. If here I have dwelt almost exclusively on its strength and beauty, I am not unaware that it has, like all mystical religions, a weak and ugly side.

If in these Prolegomena I have accomplished anything, this is very largely due to the many friends who have helped me; the pleasant task remains of acknowledging my obligations.

My grateful thanks are offered to the Syndics of the University Press for undertaking the publication of this book; to the Syndics of the University Library and the Fitzwilliam Museum for the courtesy they have shown in allowing me free access to their libraries; to my own College, which, by electing me to a Fellowship, has given me for three years the means and leisure to devote myself to writing.

For the illustrations they have placed at my disposal I must record my debt to the Trustees of the British Museum, to the Hellenic Society, the German Archaeological Institute, and the École Française of Athens. The sources of particular plates are acknowledged in the notes. The troublesome task of drawing from photographs and transcribing inscriptions has been most kindly undertaken for me by Mrs Hugh Stewart.

Passing to literary obligations, it will be evident that in the two first chapters I owe much, as regards philology, to the late Mr R. A. Neil. His friendship and his help were lost to me midway in my work, and that loss has been irreparable.

It is a pleasure to me to remember gratefully that to Sir Richard Jebb I owe my first impulse to the study of Orphism. The notes in his edition of the *Characters* of Theophrastos first led me as a student into the by-paths of Orphic literature, and since those days the problem of Orphism, though often of necessity set aside, has never ceased to haunt me.

To Professor Ridgeway I owe much more than can appear on the surface. The material for the early portion of my book was collected many years ago, but, baffled by the ethnological problems it suggested, I laid it aside in despair. The appearance

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of Professor Ridgeway's article, 'What people made the objects called Mycenaean?' threw to me an instant flood of light on the problems of ritual and mythology that perplexed me, and I returned to my work with fresh courage. Since then he has, with the utmost kindness, allowed me to attend his professorial lectures and frequently to refer to him my difficulties. I have thought it best finally to state my own argument independently of his ethnological conclusions, first because those conclusions are, at the time I write, only in part before the public, but chiefly because I hoped that by stating my evidence independently it might, in the comparatively narrow sphere in which I work, offer some slight testimony to the truth of his illuminating theories.

To all workers in the field of primitive religion Dr Frazer's writings have become so part and parcel of their mental furniture that special acknowledgement has become almost superfluous. But I cannot deny myself the pleasure of acknowledging a deep and frequent debt, the more as from time to time I have been allowed to ask for criticism on individual points, and my request, as the notes will show, has always met with generous response.

Mr F. M. Cornford of Trinity College has, with a kindness and patience for which I can offer no adequate thanks, undertaken the revision of my proof-sheets. To him I owe not only any degree of verbal accuracy attained, but also, which is much more, countless valuable suggestions made from time to time in the course of my work. Many other scholars have allowed me to refer to them on matters outside my own competency. Some of these debts are acknowledged in the notes, but I wish specially to thank Dr A. S. Murray, Mr Cecil Smith and Mr A. H. Smith of the British Museum for constant facilities afforded to me in my work there, and Mr R. C. Bosanquet and Mr M. Tod for help in Athens; and, in Cambridge, Dr Haddon, Dr Hans Gadow, Mr Francis Darwin, Mr H. G. Dakyns and Mr A. B. Cook.

My debt to Dr A. W. Verrall is so great and constant that it is hard to formulate. If in one part of my book more than another I am indebted to him it is in the discussion of the Erinyes. Chapter V. indeed owes its inception to Dr Verrall's notes in his edition of the *Choephoroi*, and its final form to his unwearied criticism. Throughout the book there is scarcely a literary difficulty that he has not allowed me to refer to him, and

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his sure scholarship and luminous perception have dissipated for me many a mental fog.

Mr Gilbert Murray has written for me the critical Appendix on the text of the Orphic tablets, a matter beyond my competence. Many verse translations, acknowledged in their place, are also by him, and uniformly those from the *Bacchae* and *Hippolytus* of Euripides. It is to Mr Murray's translation of the *Bacchae* that finally, as regards the religion of Dionysos, I owe most. The beauty of that translation, which he kindly allowed me to use before its publication, turned the arduous task of investigation into a labour of delight, and throughout the later chapters of the book, the whole of which he has read for me in proof, it will be evident that, in many difficult places, his sensitive and wise imagination has been my guide.

JANE ELLEN HARRISON.

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