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978-1-108-01200-3 - Theatre of the Greeks: A Series of Papers Relating to the History and Criticism of the Greek Drama

John William Donaldson

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I.

### ON THE ORIGIN OF DRAMATIC EXHIBITIONS IN GENERAL.

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*οὐ γάρ τι νῦν γε καὶ χθὲς, ἀλλ' αἰεί ποτε  
ζῆ ταῦτα, κούδεις οἶδεν ἐξ ὅτου 'φανη.*

SOPHOCLES.

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WE cannot assign any historical origin to the Drama. Resulting as it did from the constitutional tendencies of the inhabitants of those countries in which it sprung up, it necessarily existed, in some form or other, long before the age of history; consequently we cannot determine the time when it first made its appearance, and must therefore be content to ascertain in what principle of the human mind it originated. This we shall be able to do without much difficulty. In fact the solution of the problem is included in the answer to a question often proposed,—“how are we to account for the great prevalence of idol worship in ancient times?” for, strange as it may appear, it is nevertheless most true, that not only the Drama, (the most perfect form of poetry,) but all poetry, sculpture, painting, architecture, and whatever else is beautiful in art, are the results of that very principle which degraded men, the gods of the earth, into grovelling worshippers of wood and stone, which made them kneel and bow down before the works of their own hands. This principle is that which is generally called the love of imitation, a definition, however, which is rather ambiguous, and has been productive of much misunderstanding<sup>1</sup>. We would rather state this principle to be that desire to express the abstract in the concrete, that

1. The German reader would do well to consult on this subject Von Raumer's Essay on the Poetry of Aristotle, (Abhandl. der Hist. Philologischen Klasse der Kön. Akad. der Wissensch. 1828). We do not think Dr Copleston's view of this subject (*Prælectiones Academicæ*, p. 28, seqq.) sufficiently comprehensive.

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“striving after objectivity,” as it has been termed by a modern writer<sup>1</sup>, that wish to render the conceivable perceivable, which is the ordinary characteristic of an uneducated mind.

The inhabitants of southern Europe, in particular, have in all ages shewn a singular impatience of pure thought, and have been continually endeavouring to represent under the human form, either allegorically or absolutely, the subjects of their contemplations<sup>2</sup>. Now the first abstract idea which presented itself to the minds of these rude but imaginative men was the idea of God, conceived in some one or other of his attributes. Unable to entertain the abstract notion of divinity, they called in the aid of art to bring under the controul of their senses the object of their thoughts, and willingly rendered to the visible and perishable, the homage which they felt to be due to the invisible and eternal. By an extension of the same associations, their anthropomorphized divinity was supposed to need a dwelling place; hence the early improvements of architecture in these countries. His worshippers would then attempt some outward expression of their gratitude and veneration:—to meet this need, poetry arose among them<sup>3</sup>. The same feelings would suggest an imitation of the imagined sufferings or gladness of their deity; and to this we owe the mimic dances of ancient Hellas, and the first beginnings of the Drama.

Since, therefore, the fine arts and idolatry have had in some measure a common origin, we should expect to find that

1. Wachsmuth *Hell. Alterth.* II. 2, 113.

2. See Wordsworth's *Excursion*. (*Works*, V. p. 160. fol.)

3. Thus Strabo says, that “the whole art of poetry is the praise of the gods,” ἡ ποιητικὴ πάντα ὑμνητικὴ. X. p. 468, (the word οὔσα, which is found in all the editions at the end of this sentence, has evidently arisen from a repetition of the first two syllables of the following word οὔσαύτως, and must be struck out. For the sense of the word ὑμνητικὴ, comp. Plat. *Legg.* p. 700, A.), and Plato, *Legg.* vii. 799. A. would have all music and dancing consecrated to religion. When Herder says, (*Werke* z. *Schön. Lit. und Kunst.* ii. p. 82.) “Poetry arose not at the altars, but in wild merry dances; and as violence was restrained by the severest laws, an attempt was in like manner made to lay hold, by means of religion, on those drunken inclinations of men which escaped the controul of the laws.” he does not seem to deny the fact on which we have insisted, that religion and poetry are contemporaneous effects of the same cause; at all events he allows that poetry was at first merely the organ of religion. And although V. Cousin endeavours to prove that religion and poetry were the results of different necessities of the human mind, he also contends that they were analogous in their origin. “Le triomphe de l'intuition religieuse est dans la creation du culte, comme le triomphe de l'idée du beau est dans la creation de l'art &c.” (*Cours de Philosophie*, p. 21, 2.)

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## DRAMATIC EXHIBITIONS.

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the former attained to the highest degree of excellence in those countries in which idolatry and polytheism have been most prevalent: and, on the other hand, that they were generally neglected by those nations of antiquity, whose established religion was monotheism: and this has been the case; so much so, that when Solomon wished to build a temple to the true God, he was obliged to call in the aid of his idolatrous neighbours: (1 Kings vii. 13.) and may there not have been some connexion between Solomon's patronage of the arts and his subsequent idolatry? The Dramatic art especially, wherever it has existed, has always been connected in its origin with the religious rites of a polytheism, and generally with those of an elementary worship<sup>1</sup>. That such was the case with the Greek Drama we shall see presently: the same is stated of the Indian plays<sup>2</sup>, and the mummeries and mysteries of the middle ages were not very different either in their origin or in their character<sup>3</sup>.

1. In connexion with the phallic rites of Hindostan and Greece, we may mention that in the South-sea Islands, at the time of Cook's second voyage, a birth was represented on the stage. See Süvern über Aristoph. Wolken. p. 63, note 6.

2. "Like that of the Greeks, the Hindu Drama was derived from, and formed a part of, their religious ceremonies." Quarterly Rev. No. 89. p. 39.

3. See Malone's Shakspeare, vol. III. p. 8. foll. Lessing's Geschichte der Engl. Schaubühne (Werke, xv. 209). It has indeed been supposed that the Hebrew poem called Solomon's Song is a Dramatic composition, and it certainly had no religious reference; but Herder has, we think, satisfactorily shewn, (*Werke zur Relig. und Theolog. 4ter Theil.* p. 81.) that the Drama did not exist among the Arabs and the Hebrews, so that no argument against our position can be derived from that poem.

The view which we have taken in the text of the origin of the fine arts, is, we conceive, nearly the same as that of Aristotle; for it appears to us pretty obvious that his treatise on poetry was, like many of his other writings, composed expressly to confute the opinions of Plato, who taking the word *μίμησις*, in its narrowest sense, to signify the imperfect counterfeiting, the servile and pedantic copying of an individual object, argued against *μίμησις* in general as useless for moral purposes. Whereas Aristotle shews that if the word *μίμησις* be not taken in this confined sense, but as equivalent to "representation," as implying the outward realization of something in the mind, it does then include not only poetry, but, properly speaking, all the fine arts: and *μίμησις* is therefore useful, in a moral relation, if art in general is of any moral use. It was, however, as Schleiermacher justly observes, (*Anmerkungen zu Platon's Staat.* p. 543.) not of art absolutely that Plato was speaking, but only of its moral effects; for doubtless Plato himself would have been most willing to assent to a definition of art which made it an approximation to, or copy of, the idea of the beautiful, (*Comp. Plat. Rep.* vi. p. 484. C.) and this is only Aristotle's opinion expressed in other words. Von Raumer justly remarks in the essay above quoted, p. 118. "The *παράδειγμα* (*Poet.* xv. 11. xxvi. 28.) which Aristotle often designates as the object to be aimed at, is nothing but that which is now-a-days called the 'ideal,' and by which is understood the most utter opposite of a pedantic imitation." Herder also was fully aware that although Plato says quite the contrary of Aristotle in regard to the Dithyramb, he was speaking in quite a different connection, "in ganz anderer Verbindung." (*Werke z. Schön. Lit. u. Kunst.* ii. p. 86.) We may add, that our definition of *μίμησις* as a synonym for "art," which has also been

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## ORIGIN OF DRAMATIC EXHIBITIONS.

True it is that the Drama of modern Europe contains little or no religion. This, however, is no argument against its religious origin. The element which originally constituted its whole essence has been overwhelmed and superseded by the more powerful ingredients which have been introduced into it by the continually diverging tastes of succeeding generations, till it has at length become nothing but a walking novel or a speaking jest book. The plays of Shakspeare and Calderon (with the exception, of course, of the *Autos Sacramentales* of the latter) are Dramatic reproductions of the prose romances of the day, with the omission of the religious element which they owed to the monks, just as the tragedies of Æschylus and Sophocles would have been mere Epic Dramas, had they broken the bonds which connected them with the elementary worship of Attica.

been given in direct terms by Müller, (*Hundb. der Archäol. beginn.*) *Die Kunst ist eine Darstellung (μίμησις) d. h. eine Thätigkeit durch welche ein Innerliches äusserlich wird*, "Art is a representation (μίμησις) i. e. an energy by means of which a subject becomes an object," (Comp. Dorians, iv. ch. 7. § 12.) is the best way of explaining the pleasure which we derive from the efforts of the fancy and imagination, which, as has been very justly observed, is always much greater when "the allusion is from the material world to the intellectual, than when it is from the intellectual world to the material." (Stewart's Elements of the Philosophy of the Mind, I. p. 306.)

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## CHAPTER II.

ON THE ORIGIN OF THE GREEK DRAMA.

### SECTION I.

HISTORY OF THE CHORAL ELEMENT.

*Doch hurtig in dem Kreisse ging's  
Sie tanzten rechts, sie tanzten links.*

GÜTHE.

It appears then that Dramatic Exhibitions have always been more or less connected in their earliest form with the celebration of religious rites ; but it must never be forgotten that in Greece they retained to the last the character which they originally possessed. The theatrical representations at Athens, even in the days of Sophocles and Aristophanes, were constituent parts of a religious festival ; the theatre in which they were performed was sacred to Bacchus, and the worship of the God was always as much regarded as the amusement of the sovran people. This is a fact which cannot be too strongly impressed upon the student ; if he does not keep this continually in view, he will be likely to confound the Athenian stage with that of his own time and country, and will misunderstand and wonder at many things which under this point of view are neither remarkable nor unintelligible. How apt we all are to look at the manners of ancient times through the false medium of our every-day associations : how difficult we find it to strip our thoughts of their modern garb, and to escape from the thick atmosphere of prejudice in which custom and habit have enveloped us ! and yet, unless we take a comprehensive and extended view of the objects of archæological

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## THE CHORAL ELEMENT

speculation, unless we can look upon ancient customs with the eyes of the ancients, unless we can transport ourselves in the spirit to other lands and other times, and sun ourselves in the clear light of bygone days, all our conceptions of what was done by the men who have long ceased to be, must be dim, uncertain, and unsatisfactory, and all our reproductions as soulless and un-instructive as the scattered fragments of a broken statue.<sup>1</sup> These remarks are particularly applicable to the Greek stage. For in proportion to the perfection of the extant specimens of ancient art in any department are our misconceptions of the difference between their and our use of these excellent works. We feel the beauty of the remaining Greek Dramas, and are unwilling to believe that productions as exquisite as the most elaborate compositions of our own playwrights should not have been, as ours were, exhibited for their own sake. But this was far from being the case. The susceptible Athenian,—whose land was the dwelling-place of gods and ancestral heroes<sup>2</sup>,—to whom the clear blue sky in which he breathed, the swift-winged breezes which fanned his cheeks, the river-fountains, the Ægean gay with its countless smiles, and the teeming earth<sup>3</sup> from which he believed his ancestors were immediately created, were alike instinct with an all-pervading spirit of divinity;—the Athenian, who loved the beautiful, but loved it because it was divine,—who looked upon all that genius could invent or art execute as but the less unworthy offering to his pantheism; and considered all his festivals and all his amusements as only a means of withdrawing the soul from the world's business, and turning it to the love and worship of God<sup>4</sup>, how could he keep back from the object of his adoration the fairest and best of his works?

We shall make the permanent religious reference of the Greek Drama more clear by shewing with some minuteness how it gradually evolved itself from religious rites universally prevalent, and by pointing out by what routes its different elements converged, till they became united in one harmonious whole of “stateliest and most regal argument<sup>5</sup>.”

1. Niebuhr *Kleine Schriften*, p. 92.

2. Hegesias ap. Strab. ix. p. 396.

3. Æsch. *Prom.* v. 87—90.

4. Strabo, x. p. 467. "Ἦτε γὰρ ἀνέσεις τὸν νοῦν ἀπάγει ἀπὸ τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων ἀσχολημάτων τὸν δὲ ὄντως νοῦν τρέπει πρὸς τὸ θεῖον.

5. Milton's *Prose Works*, p. 101.

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On opening an Attic Tragedy, the first thing that strikes us is the extreme distinctness of its two parts; we find, on the one hand, a set of choral songs, written in the Doric dialect, including almost every variety of metre, and complying with every requisite of lyric poetry; and, on the other hand, dialogues written in the ordinary language of the country, confined to staid and uniform measures, and answering in most respects to the theatrical compositions of modern times. How is this to be accounted for? Is it not evident that these two different parts must have had different origins? That they sprung up in different countries, and took their rise in circumstances as different as themselves? This we shall find, on inquiry, to have been the fact. And in the first place, what was the origin of the Chorus?

In the earliest times of Greece, it was customary for the whole population of a city to meet on stated occasions and offer up thanksgivings to the gods for any great blessings by singing hymns, and performing corresponding dances in the public places<sup>1</sup>. This custom was first practised in the Doric States. The maintenance of military discipline was the principal object of the Dorian legislators; all their civil and religious organization was subservient to this; and war or the rehearsal of war was the sole business of their lives<sup>2</sup>. Under these circumstances, it was not long before the importance of music and dancing, as parts of public education, was properly appreciated: for what could be better adapted than a musical accompaniment to enable large bodies of men to keep time and act in concert? What could be more suitable than the war dance, to familiarize the young citizen with the various postures of attack and defence, and with the evolutions of an army? Music and dancing, therefore, were cultivated at a very early period by the Cretans, the Spartans, and the other Dorians, but only for the sake of these public choruses<sup>3</sup>; the

1. This is the reason why according to Pausan. iii. 11. 9. the *ἀγορά* at Sparta was called *χορός*. We are rather inclined to believe that the Chorus of Dancers got its name from the place. *χορός* is only another form of *χωρ-ος*—*χωρ-α*; and hence the epithet *εὐρύχορος* which is applied to Athens (Dem. Mid. p. 531.) as well as to Sparta (Athen. p. 131. c. in some anapæsts of Anaxandrides). Welcker's derivation of *χορός* from *χείρ* (Rhein. Mus. for 1834, p. 485.) is altogether inadmissible.

2. *στρατοπέδου γὰρ* (says an Athenian to a Cretan, Plato Legg. ii. p. 666.) *πολιτείαν ἔχετε· ἀλλ' οὐκ ἐν ἄστεσι κατωκηκότων*. All the Dorian governments were aristocracies, and therefore necessarily warlike, as Vico has satisfactorily shewn, whatever we may think of his derivation of *πόλεμος* from *πόλις*. (Scienz. Nuov. vol. II. p. 160.)

3. "We and the Spartans," says Clinias, "*οὐκ ἄλλην ἂν τινα δυνάμεθα ᾠδὴν ἢ ἢν ἐν τοῖς χοροῖς ἐμάθομεν ξυνήθεις ᾄδειν γενόμενοι*." Plato Legg. p. 666.

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preservation of military discipline and the establishment of a principle of subordination, not merely the encouragement of a taste for the fine arts, were the objects which these rude legislators had in view; and though there is no doubt that religious feelings entered largely into all their thoughts and actions, yet the god whom they worshipped was a god of war<sup>1</sup>, of music<sup>2</sup>, and of civil government<sup>3</sup>; in other words, a Dorian political deity; and with these attributes his worship and the maintenance of their system were one and the same thing. This intimate connexion of religion and war among the Dorians, is shewn by a corresponding identity between the chorus which sang the praises of the national deity, and the army which marched to fight the national enemies. These two bodies were composed, in the former case inclusively, of the same persons; they were drawn up in the same order, and the different parts in each were distinguished by the same names. Good dancers and good fighters were synonymous terms; those whose station was in the rear of the battle array, or of the chorus, were in either case called *ψιλεῖς*<sup>4</sup>, and the evolutions of the one body were known by the same name as the figures of the other<sup>5</sup>. It was likewise owing to this conviction of the importance of musical harmony, that the Dorians termed the constitution of a state—an order or regulative principle (*κόσμος*). Thus Herodotus<sup>6</sup> calls the constitution of Lycurgus, “the *order* now established among the Spartans,” (*τὸν νῦν κατεστέωτα κόσμον τοῖς Σπαρτιήτησι*), Clearchus<sup>7</sup> speaks of the Lacedæmonians who were prostrated in consequence of their having trodden under foot the most ancient *order* of their civil polity (*οὐ τὸν παλαιότατον τῆς πολιτικῆς κόσμον συμπατησάντες ἐξετραχλίσθησαν*), and

1. Ἀπόλλων—Ἀπέλλων, “the defender,” (Müller’s Dor. ii. ch. 6. § 6.) who caused terror to the hostile army. Æsch. Sept. c. Theb. 147.

2. He was particularly the inventor of the lyre—the original accompaniment of Choral Poetry. (Ἀπόλλων) πόρεν τε κίθαρν διδωσί τε Μοῖσαν οἷς ἂν ἐθέλῃ, ἀπόλεμον ἀγαγὼν ἐς πραπίδας εὐνομίαν.

3. “The belief in a fixed system of laws, of which Apollo was the executor, formed the foundation of all prophecy in his worship.” Müller, Dor. ii. 8. § 10. The Delphian oracle was the regulator of all the Dorian law-systems, hence its injunctions were called, *θέμιστες*, or “ordinances.” See the authorities in Müller, ii. 8. § 8.

4. Müller thinks (Götting. Gel. Anz. for 1821, p. 1051.) that they were so called, because they were not so well dressed as the front-row dancers.

5. See Müller’s Dorians, B. iii. c. 12. § 10; B. iv. c. 6. § 4. And add to the passages cited by him, Eurip. Troad. 2. 3.

— ἐνθα Νηρηῶν χοροὶ  
καλλιστον ἵχνος ἐξελίσσουσιν ποδός.

6. I. 65.

7. ap. Athen. xv. p. 681. C.



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Archidamus, in Thucydides<sup>1</sup>, tells his subjects that their good *order* (τὸ εὐκόσμον) is the reason why they are both warlike and wise; and concludes his harangue to the allied army, when about to invade Attica, with an enforcement of the same principle<sup>2</sup>.

It would appear, then, that music and dancing were the basis of the religious, political, and military organization of the Dorian states, and this alone might induce us to believe that the introduction of choral poetry into Greece, and the first cultivation of instrumental music is due to them. However, particular proofs are not wanting. The strongest of these is the phænomenon to which we have already referred, that the Doric dialect is preserved in the lyric poetry of the other Grecian tribes. Now it has been sufficiently shewn<sup>3</sup> that the lyric poetry of the Greeks was an offspring not of the epos, but of the chorus songs, and if the lyric poetry of the Æolians and Ionians was always (with the exception perhaps of Corinna's Boeotian choruses) written in the Doric dialect, the choral poetry, of which it was a modification, must have been Dorian also<sup>4</sup>. Nor can any argument against this supposition be derived from the fact that the most celebrated of the early lyric poets were not Dorians; for choral dances existed among the Cretans long before the time of the earliest of these poets, and it is no argument against the origin of an art in one country, to say that it attained to a higher degree of perfection in another<sup>5</sup>. With regard to Athens in particular, it appears to us, that we have in some sort positive evidence that choruses were not instituted there until the Athenians had recognized the Dorian oracle at Delphi; for some old Delphian oracles have come down to us<sup>6</sup> particularly enjoining these Doric rites, which could hardly have been necessary, had they existed at Athens from the first.

1. I. 84.

2. II. 11. κόσμον καὶ φυλακὴν περὶ παντὸς ποιούμενοι.....ἐνὶ κόσμῳ χρωμένους φαίνεσθαι. This word κόσμος appears to be appropriated to dancing rather than to music, καὶ γὰρ ἐν ὀρχήσῃ καὶ πορεῖα καλὸν μὲν εὐσχημοσύνη καὶ κόσμος. κ.τ.λ. Athen. xiv. p. 628. D.

3. By Müller, Dor. B. iv. c. 7. § 11.

4. The weight of this argument will be readily appreciated by the readers of Niebuhr's Hist. Rom. I. p. 82. Engl. Transl.

5. See Themistius Orat. xxvii. p. 337. A. Harduin. ἀλλ' οὐδὲν ἴσως κωλύει τὰ παρ' ἐτέροις ἀρχὴν λάβοντα πλείονος σπουδῆς παρ' ἄλλοις τυγχάνειν.

6. Apud Demosth. Mid. p. 531. § 15. Buttm.

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If then all choruses were originally Dorian, there can be little doubt as to the nature of the earliest efforts of the Greeks in this branch of poetry. The dances were religious, but the god in whose honor they were instituted was, as we have seen, Apollo, the god of war and music, the inventor of the lyre; consequently, the dances were originally a representation of military movements, accompanied by the lyre, and calm, sedate and orderly as the Dorian harmony to which they were set. Now all dancing in ancient times was either gymnastic or mimetic; it was gymnastic when intended merely as an exercise, or as a preparation for certain exercises, (and this we conceive to have been originally the nature of the Doric choruses;) it was mimetic when it was designed to express some mental feeling or to represent by corresponding gestures the words of the accompanying chorus song: to the former species of mimic dances we may refer the *nomes* and the *pæans*<sup>1</sup>, to the latter the *hyporcheme*. The *Pyrrhic* and *Gymnopædian* dances belong to the second class of gymnastic dances: for in them an outward object only is imitated, and that too by way of rehearsal or preparation for the objects of imitation; so that they cannot be called mimic in the sense which we have attached to *μίμησις*, i. e. the outward expression of something in the mind. The *Pyrrhic* dance was peculiarly *Lacedæmonian*<sup>2</sup>, as were also the *Gymnopædia*, a festival to which, according to *Pausanias*<sup>3</sup>, the Spartans paid more attention than to any other, and which was especially in honor of Apollo. The *Pyrrhic* dance was in later times like the *Castoreum* and other *embateria*, played to the flute, and is spoken of in connexion with the rites of Jupiter in Crete, and with those of the *Dioscuri* in *Laconia*. We have no doubt, however, that it was both originally connected with the worship of Apollo, like the other genuine Dorian music, and also played to with the lyre. The Dorians always adopted in some measure the religion of the countries which they conquered; they found in Crete a native

1. The *Pæan* became *Bacchic* in the end, and was sometimes mixed up with the *Dithyramb*. See *Plato Legg.* iii. p. 700. D.

2. *Athen.* p. 630. E.

3. *ἐορτὴ δὲ εἴ τις ἄλλη καὶ αἱ γυμνοπαυδαὶ διὰ σπουδῆς Λακεδαιμονίοις εἰσιν.*  
Paus. iii. 11. 9.