

THEATER, DEMOCRACY, AND THE MYSTERIES. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE NORMALIZATION OF THE IRRATIONAL

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Orbis Idearum, Vol. 7, Issue 1 (2019), pp. 13-28.

ABSTRACT

The paper aims at illustrating how the line of esoteric thinking that posits the Mysteries as foundational of dramatic performances could have a sound and provable basis. It is argued that the Mysteries, belonging to a very ancient substratum of matriarchal beliefs, were once normal, Dionysian, and openly-observed celebrations that went underground as rational, patriarchal thought emerged in the cultural scene of the Mediterranean during the Hellenic Middle Ages. To normalize such Mystic impulses, irrational spurs and celebrations were partly made into staged drama, a more rational scenery which, however, was inevitably based upon mythical topics and therefore retained a partly irrational facet. The paper aims to show in which way magical thinking, including its exile into a chthonic setting, is an integral part of the evolution of Hellenic politics and, as a consequence, of the idea of democracy.

According to mainstream critical and historical interpretations, the birth of drama coincides with the collective reflection on the birth of the political State intended as a self-governing community of freemen. Richard Buxton, for example, devotes an entire chapter of his recent, valuable essay on myth and tragedy to the mutual relationship of time, space, and ideology in Athenian theatrical spectacles (Buxton 2013, 145–160). He presents an exhaustive overview of the main tragic themes and of the way they were wrought out in the Attic context. The original rationale of the tragic drama is, however, much deeper than the one that may be argued from purely political elements.

At the climax of his mystical maturation, in 1907, Édouard Schuré agreed that Rudolf and Maria Steiner set onstage *Le Drame sacré d'Éleusis* (complete edition, 1926), a play versified, staged, and later also edited by the Steiners themselves. Schuré held that the theater and the Mysteries were at the very core of Western thought, and that the very genesis of the tragedy

was to be attributed to a peculiar development of Mystic themes and styles. In *Les Grands Initiés* (1889), he had claimed that Plato himself would have been an initiate to mystery religions, and that many of his most important philosophical tenets, such as the immortality of the soul, metempsychosis, and the Cave Myth, would have been devised on the basis of his awareness of the relationship between mystery practices and theatrical performances.

Schuré and Steiner's goal was to reconstruct the Eleusinian Mysteries in order to revive an alleged quasi-theurgic tradition, with no pretense of scientific correctness (Lingan 2014, 23). Given his purposes, which served his mystical leanings, Schuré's conclusion was not corroborated by punctual argumentation. It is to be admitted, though, that his idea that the religious performances of the Mysteries should actually be equated to theatrical representations could be further investigated, this time in scientific terms. Since it is a vast and magmatic topic, we shall only furnish a few bases to postulate a possible relationship between the Mysteries and the dramatic performances that may contribute to the ongoing debate on the origin of theatrical spectacles and their significance in the evolution of Western tradition. Considering the repercussions of the Hellenic dramatic principles on Western culture, it seems appropriate to set some possible lines of reasoning that concern the relationship between theater and religion in a historical and structural perspective, with a view to further reflections that may go into the details of theater forms and contents.

In *Die Geburt der Tragödie* [The Birth of Tragedy] (1872), Nietzsche reconstructed those that must have been the main passages in the origination of drama, giving of it a symbolic interpretation that was strongly related to his aims of philosophical renovation. Hyper-simplifying, it may be said that according to Nietzsche tragedy would have originated from a representational need urged 1) by the recognition of a common genetic and cultural history, affected by myths and religion, and 2) by the tragic, traumatic nature of foundational myths¹.

Greek myth is, more than in other cultures, closely linked to the geographical and political aspect of Hellas². It transcends its own fictional character and takes on a realistic one, both psychologically (the perception of the believers, of historical Greeks) and physically. Mythical narrative contains and refers to locales and peoples that are historically defined and definable, with multiple variants of the same myth likely deriving from different local traditions. It has been observed that "a variant of a basic story lends itself to

¹ See especially pars. 15–20.

² See the recent essay by Greta Hawes, *Myths on the Map: The Storied Landscape of Ancient Greece* (2017).

tragedy and [...] others lend themselves to other genres” (Berke 1982, 82). While the latter statement is particularly true when it comes to the reception of Hellenic myths in subsequent times (as in the Baroque age), in Classical times the majority of myths tend to substantiate exquisitely as tragic dramas; the outcome of mythical tradition is, therefore, rather univocal. The relevance of myth (an irrational element) and its tragic transposition on the scenes in democratic Greece (the cradle of rational thought) has led some scholars to wonder whether the Greeks believed in the truthfulness of their myths.

The question would seem trivial, considering that according to prevalent anthropological paradigms, all ancient peoples present themselves as invariably believing in their own doctrines, and only the advent of rational thinking, in relatively recent times, would have brought about a change in this respect. Paul Veynes, in an essay that is now a classic, explains such a coexistence of opposite elements by using a psychological paradigm: practical imagination and the need to metaphorize the object of one’s reflections and feelings would have been hierarchically superior to the need to distinguish material reality from mental constructs (Veynes 1988, 117–120). Without discussing the merits of such an issue, it is noteworthy that Hellas is the sole area in which the notion of democracy first developed, and that such a development took place concomitantly with the public staging of politically-focused mythical dramas.

Thus, regardless of whether the Greeks of *Hellas Felix*, so advanced in terms of dialectics and rational thinking, believed or not each one in the gods or in the specific mythical—and, therefore, irrational—contents of their tragedies, what matters is the importance of tragic drama in the creation process of the notions of politics and democracy. The democratic system seems virtually to find a kind of legitimization or confirmation in the tragedies, and in the act of performing them, through the spectators’ psychological co-participation.

At the dawn of democratic institutions, significantly marked by the tyrannical government, the civil authorities openly employed religious figures cast in a theatrical setting. According to Herodotus³, Pisistratus dressed up an unusually tall woman and armed her like Athena. Then she made her ride into Athens announcing that she was giving the rule back to him. Comments Nancy Evans:

The earliest theater produced in Athens in the sixth century likewise relied on a dramatic conceit in which costumed actors impersonated the gods; Pisistratus simply played off this traditional cultural pattern, and let the *dēmos* par-

³ *Hist* I 60.

ticipate alongside him in the civic drama (Evans 2010, 25).

Pisistratus' move denotes an instrumental utilization of a consolidated 'cultural pattern', showing that the theatrical representation of mythical figures and plots was highly cherished and already had a grip on civil consciences. In the δῆμος should be included both the supposedly superstitious commoners and the allegedly more philosophically-minded aristocrats.

The value of the masquerade was so highly symbolic that it was intended as a factual representation of power. In time, the theater came to represent the principle and hierarchy of power, where the interplay of those who held authority, the fighters and defenders of the city, and the populace was "placed in a context with an all-inclusive dimension which moderates the structures of dominance" (Kavoulaki 1999, 301), thus preventing a social upheaval. Simply put, a process of total identification in one civil, political, and territorial whole was achieved through the staging of commonly known and shared mythical matter.

The abovementioned representational need is a peculiarity not found in other cultural traditions, not even in the ones that later played an important role in the formation of Western thought. For instance, although attempts have been made to equate the *Song of Songs*, especially in older Italian criticism, with a theatrical script or set of dialogues and *choroi* (Castelli 1892, 28)⁴, in Hebrew and, subsequently, in strictly Jewish tradition theater is virtually nonexistent. There seems to be no need to create someone other than oneself (an actor) having the duty symbolically to stage origins, happenings, and impulses in which the community's individuals can collectively mirror themselves.

The term 'impulses' is to be intended here in its symbolic, not psychoanalytical, sense in relation to those myths that though being at the basis of society, are a shadow, a foreglimpse, of the dangers society would face if such impulses, leaning "toward the bestial and the sublime [...] terrifyingly inter-related" (Morford and Lenardon 1999, 220), were not duly bridled. The establishment of humankind's social organization is expressed, in the Hebrew narrative, by Cain's fratricide. However, in Jewish culture the killing is not theatrically represented. It is narrated, first orally and later, still in very ancient times, in the written form. So it is μῦθος, divine word, but also ἔπος, narrated word. Nevertheless, it does not become τραγωδία, the tragic drama, which, if not staged before the community, loses its socially didactical value.

It may be posited that in Hebrew thought, monotheistic faith—an all-inclusive notion—caused such ancestral tensions to merge or be mitigated within an ethical and religious system, so much so that a collective purge

⁴ See also Cicognani 1911, 229, 234-235.

such as the one brought about by tragedy would have been useless. As Paul recognizes, the Law itself functioned as a ‘tutor’, a guardian that preserved Israel’s collective body⁵. The opposite occurs in Greek culture. The force of myth, which is often violent, overwhelming, and dangerous, has no release in the divinely-set legalistic system; this one, in fact, makes behavioral principles and social customs absolute and impermeable, thus reducing the possibility that they be questioned by the law-abiding devotee.

Differently from the Jerusalemite, the Athenian is a citizen, or, literally, a political individual. He is part of a system founded upon a compact and upon laws which are sacred in that they are socially accepted and useful in preserving the community from damage and dissolution. This individual has an inherent “need [...] to find an outlet for certain concerns, which may well run contrary to the people’s more immediate desires or impulses” (Galer 2008, 69). Therefore, the Hellenic system, in its more advanced form, may be viewed as a way of creating a societal net that ought to restrain the irrational.

A word for caution, though, is needed in adopting such a notion of restraint. In introducing a broader reasoning on the didactical role of Hellenic mythology, Emily Katz Anhalt (2017) observes that

over the centuries [the Greeks’] myths laid the groundwork for humane social relationships and political interactions. Ancient Greek myths emphasize the self-destructiveness of rage and undermine the traditional equation of vengeance with justice. [...] They promote discussion and debate as an alternative to violent conflict (5),

and she concludes: “In cultivating rational thought and the capacity for empathy, ancient Greek myths thwart the desire to celebrate or emulate those who succumb to rage or commit atrocities” (5). The implication of this view is that myth itself, before being expressed in and through the genre of tragedy, developed almost teleologically out of a need to fight destructive inclinations.

The argument is fascinating, but it is also problematic in many respects. For instance, it seems too narrowly focused on the Hellenic experience. In fact, from a structural point of view, there is no difference between Indian myths and Greek myths, or between these and Sumerian or even more distant mythologies, as more recently highlighted, among others, by Robert Mondi (1990, 151 ff) and Charles Penglase (1994). The mythopoietic ‘format’, regardless of geographical or contents-related variations, seems to originate with a basic need that is the same for all human societies. It is an

⁵ Gal 3, 24.

urge to express, explain, and convey in allegorical terms substantial truths, sentiments, and sometimes even actual experiences. It does not appear to have been expressly devised with the purpose of warning against dangerous individual or collective behaviors, such as vengeance and war. It is true that myth has been utilized since ancient times to instruct about values and dis-values. But this is no peculiarity of Greece. Rather, Katz Anhalt's assumption can be accepted and upheld in retrospect: the Greeks of democratic times employed their mythology recognizing that it dealt with 'dangerous matters' and built around it a didactical system that entailed and 'embroiled' the citizens as a collective whole.

The ensuing process of catharsis experienced by the body of citizens, however, should not be conceived as a form of self-consciousness *avant la lettre*, as the scholar's argument would rather seem to indicate. It is too optimistic—as well as, perhaps, positivistic—to surmise that thanks to their innovative way of reflecting on myth, the Greeks succeeded in avoiding debased spurs and urges in their political and social life. It is doubtful whether the path toward democracy actually ended in successful terms, and the debate on the effectiveness of Hellenic democracy is still very lively today, as exemplified by Eric W. Robinson's valuable and ongoing work on the topic (2004, 117 ff).

Catharsis amounted to a profound sentimental experience where the irrational foundations of the people's common origins conjugated the rational reenactment of foundational myths, achieving "both the somatic-emotional" and "the cognitive-emotional component" (Scheff 1979, 68 ff). The fight against the dangers of the irrational was therefore carried out by use of the irrational itself, which was partly purged and partly re-infused as a necessary component of communitarian identity. As both Haigh and Flickinger surmised well over a century ago, Athenian citizens perceived the act of attending spectacles as something that related more to religion than to secular affairs⁶. The peculiarity of the way the Greeks handled their mythical matter is to be found precisely in the turning of myth into a staged drama, a development that, throughout the Mediterranean, affected the Hellenes alone in such a systematic fashion.

In this regard, it is telltale that speaking of tragedy and democracy, it is possible to observe—now with greater awareness—the coexistence of philosophical and civil thought, which concerns public tragic representations, and the religious-irrational thought, which concerns initiatory and mystery practices, thereby touching on the ampler question of the relationship between myth and ritual (Kowalzig 2007, 80 ff).

⁶ The founding essays in the field are Haigh's *The Attic Theatre* (1889) and Flickinger's *The Greek Theater and Its Drama* (1918).

The Mysteries hold some key elements in common with public tragedy: the enactment of a symbolic plot; the acting-out of a role, that is, the impersonation of certain figures; a dramatic development; a climax; and a final dénouement. Giorgio Galli employs those similarities in a wider context to show the influence of esoteric (or alternative) thinking on so-called rational thinking, which would have been time by time rejected and forced to take underground forms as the struggle between magism and rationalism went on. He maintains that a coexistence can be observed

between the development of democratic institutions and the cultural import of theatrical representation—namely, between the real and the imaginary. [...] Such a co-presence occurs both in the Dionysian period (the birth of tragedy) and at the time of witches (Shakespeare’s theater), which find a correspondence in the democracy of the *polis* in Athens and representative parliamentary democracy in England (Galli 1995, 194)⁷.

The method of analysis adopted partly follows Edgar Morin’s studies on the nature of visual representation and partly draws upon Jung’s well-known theories concerning meaningful coincidences, collectively named ‘synchronicity’⁸. The argument, corroborated by accurate quotations and brilliant observations spanning almost 1,500 years of Western history, sounds convincing, and it gives the opportunity and the means of attempting a more specific comparison between representational modes whose aims are different, but the actual performance of which is outstandingly analogous.

Morin’s and Galli’s lines of reasoning mainly refer to structured drama and, concomitantly, the establishment of Hellenic democracy. A relatively blank space is left as to what kind of representations existed before the ‘invention’ of the tragic form and its being finally linked to civic purposes. However, evidence has been found of various patterns of representation even in prehistoric times that suggest the existence of an early, though already developed, notion of theatrical space and function. The conclusion of specialists is that through such theater “the human sense of Self in our ancestors emerged from a prototo core self [...] to an autobiographical identity through intuition, mirror, and canonical neurons, using inner simulations of the Other to form the conscious Self” (Pizzato 2013, 131). Thanks to representation

⁷ “compresenza [...] tra sviluppo delle istituzioni democratiche e rilievo culturale della rappresentazione teatrale – cioè tra reale e immaginario [...] Tale compresenza si verifica sia nel periodo dionisiaco (nascita della tragedia), sia in quello delle streghe (teatro shakespeariano), ai quali corrispondono democrazia della *polis* ad Atene e democrazia rappresentativa parlamentare in Inghilterra” (English translation ours).

⁸ The basis of Galli’s argument is Edgar Morin, *Introduction à la pensée complexe* (1990), as well as Carl Gustav Jung, *Synchronicity. An Acausal Connecting Principle* (2006).

and enactment, which stimulate a precise area of the brain, the spectators or participants would have come out of their undifferentiated and collective state, first becoming aware of their unique identity as single individuals and, finally, re-recognizing themselves as parts of the societal whole, now with a renovated and conscious sense of self. It is therefore a form of identity construction.

The process, at a primitive level, was inherently religious, so much so that ritual practices and theatrical ones in Antiquity cannot be clearly separated. As M.L. Varadpande argued, "primitive religion and its system of rituals gave the dramatic art many necessary ingredients to evolve itself into a separate entity" (Varadpande 1983, 2). His observation serves as a premise to his in-depth analysis of ancient Indian theater, but it may be generalized to other traditions and, possibly, carried to a conceptual extreme. Instead of the dramatic art having evolved from religious reality, it is plausible that the two forms of representation were originally joined in one form of 'dramatic ritual', the aims and scopes of which, judging from prehistoric evidence, had a cultic function.

The subsequent 'Indo-European' historical theater, especially in the Classical instance of ancient Greece, culturally closer to and foundational of our concept of drama, did maintain its religious connotation, being imbued as it was with mythical, folkloric, and ancestral matter. At this point, if we were to look back into an even more distant Hellenic past while applying Galli's model, we should posit that when the Athenian democracy did not yet exist and irrational, religious thinking still dominated over more rational, dialectical thinking, purely religious rituality held the place later occupied by the staged drama. We can infer the abovementioned connection by analyzing the relics of religious rituals that predate the advent of the theater and of civilly-oriented worship, that is, the tradition of the Mysteries.

Mystery cults and initiatory rites are a highly structured relic of an age in which myth was not represented or performed onstage, but experienced or re-activated as an act of worship. That age would coincide with a time when communion with the divine was carried out in a more natural and direct way, without an overly structured mediation; a world where, in the Eastern fashion, power corresponded to the divinely-granted right to exercise it. It is, therefore, a political and cultic form that is distant from the Classical Hellenic arrangement, which provided for the freemen's participation in government and the citizens' and the inferior classes' submission to laws set out by men, not by a supernatural entity. This democratic model, which became successful, has been amply recognized as a result of male hegemony first exerted by tyrants (in the Greek sense) and later by the male-oriented assembly of citizens within a power-sharing system.

The adverse, succumbing positions, belonging to an older substratum, are

considered feminine or matriarchal and associated by both victors and losers with generative, i.e. sexual, i.e. irrational powers, the very same powers handed down in secret unto Late Antiquity through the repetition of Mystery initiations. The advent of this struggle between the male and the female elements should apparently be set around 1,600 B.C.E., with the injection of patriarchal tribal elements during the new invasions of Hellas and the nearby areas by peoples of Indo-European descent (Barnes 2006, 122). Generally speaking, this fact is recognized also by those who are against the hypothesis that such irrational trends would have survived organically to our day, such as the detractors of Margaret Murray's witch-cult hypothesis. For this very reason, it is worthwhile to research the present theme in critical and hermeneutical terms⁹.

From what we can gather from available sources such as the *Homeric Hymn to Demetra* and the testimony of Hippolytus, the Classical Mysteries mainly concerned and celebrated the discovery of agriculture, which would correspond to the inception of civilization, since farming is a way of supporting life that actually 'domesticates' the ground for human purposes. Domestication, however, would contrast with the libertinism that underlies many practices and myths associated with the celebrations. In the case of the Eleusinian Mysteries, we find the rape of Persephone; in the festivities in honor of Dionysus, we find the semi-erotic and violent figure of the Maenads. Agriculture and sex do find a contact point in the notion of fertility as represented by the farmer's plowing the soil and cultivating it. Farming is a way of embroiling the great power to produce crop and offspring, making sex a productive activity.

In the Levant, much earlier than in Europe, this pattern is found in the orgies in honor of the Baals and their consorts, which were aimed at arousing the deities and securing the fertilization of the ground and the worshippers. Such rites differ notably from those that developed in Hellas. They were not performed secretly and their goal was not that of normalizing impulses, but rather tended to enhance their effect.

In other areas of the Levant, the rites were not strictly sexual in nature and yet were public and had a mystical overtone. In Babylon, for example, the spring celebration, which marked the beginning of the year, entailed the exhibition of statues of Marduk and his son Nabû, whose exploits were recollected by priests, rulers, and commoners by means of ritual processions that supposedly represented the gods' doings and mythical travels. Ritual purges—which in modern terms we may call 'psychodramas'—took place

⁹ For an overview, see *Hidden Intercourse* (2008), edited by Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Jeffrey J. Kripal, a collection of essays on the relationship between sex, magic, and, in some instances, the resurgence of the Mysteries in the modern context.

that made the festivity actual mystery plays; they served to “remake and affirm a specific series of relationships among the king, the priests, the citizens, and the gods of Babylon” (Ristvet 2015, 153).

Processions of this kind, similar to a staged ritual, are not widespread in the West before the contact with the Eastern and the Egyptian religious systems, which were already well structured and consolidated several centuries before the advancement of Greek civilization. In some areas, certain Mystery rites become codified and come to be regulated by the State. For instance, in the city of Messene, official inscriptions have been found that meticulously detail the outward organization of the Mysteries. In Andania, purification rites took place openly, “either in the grove of Lykos or, more spectacularly, in the theatre” (Graf 2003, 244)¹⁰. A spatial juxtaposition can thus be observed between the Mystery rituals and the theater, with some stages of the rites being carried out as a public spectacle. These examples of State-regulated religious performances date to the early part of the first century B.C.E.

Disputed though it may be, then, the origin of Greek Mysteries may be rooted in a Levantine kind of religiosity that was transplanted in the West and developed its own distinctive traits. It is true that in Babylon, as well as in Egypt, public rituals were counterpointed by ‘hidden’ ones. But the issue is why such initiatory cults, which elsewhere were practiced openly, in the Greek world were only received as or made into secret forms of worship.

A corollary of the arguments expounded above is that the Mysteries should no longer be viewed as ‘secret’ since their inception (which would also make it possible to criticize semantically the identification of *μυστήριον* and *secretum*, as the conflation of the two would therefore be a later juxtaposition). In the beginning, they would have been performed openly, either in the fashion of the Canaanite rites, as an expression of pure ecstatic natural life, or in the fashion of the more elaborate and symbolic Chaldean festivals. In many cases, the myth reenacted was predominantly characterized by eroticism, with its inherent dual destructive-creative side and instinct-driven violence reflecting the actions of the gods.

In simple terms, Mystery practices would be to primitively and wildly libertarian society what tragic dramas were to democratic Greek society. Once the orgiastic aspect of the celebrations came to contrast with social order as developed in the West, these festivities were made secret, and their sexual overtone was sublimated through a highly ritualized set of initiatory practices. A further proof of such a process can be found in the way the Romans came to handle Mystery practices in the context of their Italic and State-oriented worship.

¹⁰ See also Paus., *Descr Gr* VI xxxiii 4.

In 186 B.C.E., at the climax of Greek penetration into Roman culture, the Senate issued the famous *senatus consultum de Bacchanalibus*. The decree was prompted by the conviction that this celebration, observed in secret (as was already the standard in Greece) by chosen and high-ranking citizens, posed a danger to the social and moral order of the Republic¹¹. Although during the Punic Wars certain measures had been taken against un-Roman cults, this time Roman territories and allies were subjected to a harsh repression that would remain unprecedented until the persecution against Christians. Aside from its political motives, such a dreadful response suggests that those ‘foreign’ and ‘disorderly’ festivals were sensed as impossible to normalize, to the point that their suppression, even in the private sphere, was favored over their institutionalization (Burkert 1987, 51–52). Much later, in Imperial times, when the Eastern influx could no longer be restrained, the celebration of all kinds of Mysteries in Rome became normal, but it was never really institutionalized and remained confined to underground spaces.

If it is difficult to find reliable materials concerning the real contents of the Mysteries secretly practiced in the Greco-Roman world, it is practically impossible to discern what the real object of the more ancient proto-mysteries was. Nevertheless, these celebrations *must* have taken place, as the initiatory practices attested in historical times are ascribed by the sources themselves to an age older than the adoption of writing in Homeric times, a process that likely occurred through the recuperation of elements of advanced pre-Greek cultures (Haarmann 1995, 175). In the case of the Eleusinian Mysteries, the Kore “myth seems to have been created sometime in the early Early Iron Age. It could be as early as the ninth century, as by the eighth century Persephone has already been established as the undisputed queen of the Underworld, and Hesiod’s reference to her abduction suggests the existence of earlier hexameter poems” (Cosmopoulos 2015, 8)¹², which leads us once again to the Eastern influence on indigenous Hellenic religion. In turn, the ritualization resulting from the underground codification of the initiatory system acquired a pattern or formal structure which, certainly in the eyes of a modern observer and perhaps, at this point, also of an ancient one, would have resembled a dramatic performance.

The starting point has been Nietzsche’s assumption, later developed independently by such political thinkers as Carl Schmitt¹³, that tragedy and drama in general amounted to the need to express (*ex-primere*, entailing a

¹¹ Liv., *Ab Urbe cond.*, XXXIX 17–18. Well-known is the role of Paculla Annia, a priestess of Bacchus, in promoting the kind of violent worship that prompted reaction from the authorities.

¹² See Hes., *Theog* 912–914.

¹³ Notably in *Hamlet oder Hekuba. Der Einbruch der Zeit in das Spiel* [Hamlet or Hecuba: The Intrusion of the Time Into the Play] (1956).

release of tension) impulses still present in civilized nature so that such an obscure side might not prevail over the human arrangement; it would amount to an attempt to purge humanity of its most undesirable aspects.

Tragic plots come from myth, are often cruel, and even sordid. Also, they often revolve around deities, heroes, and characters adopted into the civil structure (Dionysus, Athena, Apollo, to name just a few) but likely originating in an un-Hellenic environment. In theater, there is a clear-cut division between the spectators and the stage, but not between actor and character:

Having sported the mask of a deity or ancestral hero in a ritual performance, the performer's rapid descent to earth and the quotidian present can trigger a case of spiritual bends. From this perspective, the human performer appears to function merely as the temporary vehicle of the mask, the disposable servant of the performance (Sheppard 2001, 244).

Therefore, the very use of the mask may be interpreted as a way of 'de-personalizing' the actor for ritual purposes, filling him up with the spirit of the character he embodied.

Differently from what occurs in tragedy, in the Mysteries the notion of spectator usually coincides with that of initiation candidate, who along with the co-celebrants is both an actor and an object of the scene. The priest or priestess sometimes puts on a mask¹⁴. In historical times, the very plan of the *iepón* where the rites were carried out resembled a covered theatrical stage (Kerényi 1967, 83–87). Accepting the idea that such rites were once practiced openly, one might wonder which purpose they specifically served.

The model presented would induce to infer that their object was similar to the one of dramas that developed at a much later time. A play by Euripides can be used to give a token of early key elements that survived in the Classical theater into historical times. In the drama named after him, Hippolytus refuses to worship Aphrodite, clearly presented as a goddess of lust. Instead, he decides to render honor to Artemis, goddess of the hunt, whose virgin and anti-erotic nature makes her more congenial to Hippolytus' vow of chastity¹⁵. Apart from providing the ideal occasion for the development of the plot, this initial situation may be seen as a relic of the dualism existing between ordered and institutionalized drama and more libertarian impulses, which would point to a less secularized substratum re-emerging, unwittingly or not, in the plays of Classical tragedians. Loose Aphrodite is here somewhat 'dis-owned' in favor of more conservative Artemis. Indicatively, though, the play follows the rationale of myth: it is finally Aphrodite, with her unrestrainable

¹⁴ Paus., *Descr Gr* VIII xv 1; see also Mylonas 1961, 301–302.

¹⁵ *Hipp* vss. 1-85.

power, who overwhelms pious Hippolytus, to the point of annihilating him. Therefore, what takes on a decisive importance is, also symbolically, the element of sexuality as mitigated through codified practices but resurfacing in awful terms.

In the Mysteries, the gods ideally retain many loose and unbridled aspects. Further, there is not just one series of Mysteries and no univocal set of rituals. The rather invariable subject matter they center on, though, supports the interpretation proposed: the respective stories of Dionysus and Orpheus, to mention just two of the most important ones, follow patterns of dismemberment, violent death, bloodshed, and orgiastic behavior. Confinement of the mysteries to chthonic spaces may have favored the development of further cultic models based upon the notion of darkness as recalled by the term $\mu\acute{o}\omega$ and its derivatives: not just a reference to the shutting of eyes and ears, but the very metaphor of obscurity. Irrespective of where they were originally performed, the celebrations aimed at causing the worshipper to tend toward an inward self that contrasted with the outer eye. He could be able to do so by walking in the footsteps of the deity in this one's journey into death or Hades and subsequent resurgence or resurrection. It is for this reason that he was described as blind: he had to quit looking on the outside and blindly throw himself into a different, abysmal reality.

Thus, the Mystery itself should not be viewed as a primitive practice in the low sense of the term. Rather, it is a well-structured ritual that in historical times becomes the receptacle of Oriental influxes time after time received and revisited, having its chthonic turning point in the so-called Hellenic Middle-Ages. At that stage, Dionysus (likely from Thrace), or similar deities, would have been juxtaposed to former deities with a feminine, fertility-oriented matriarchal nature, with the consequent ghettoization in favor of the male-centered model. For sure, feminine or androgynous elements can be detected in Dionysus' pedigree, which may also account for his being partially rejected or obliterated in some contexts. Apollo, on the other hand, becomes a champion of the order and alleged harmony associated with his name despite his violent side, so well described in the *Iliad* (I, 8-52) when he brings the plague into the camp of the Achaeans.

It is not by chance, looking back again to the *Hippolytus* scene, that the favorite deity, though feminine, is Artemis, Apollo's sister, who shares with him a rational character that Aphrodite, by nature, would not display. In addition, Apollo's figure is a dual emblem of the perceived order associated with male hegemony—brought about by the marginalization of the matriarchy—and the destructive power that such an order is capable of unleashing. In these terms, paradoxically, sex and its uncontrollable urges as associated with the feminine side ultimately present a minor danger in comparison to iron-like, Apollonian, 'rational', and male-governed democratic structure.

The drama performed during initiations remained highly erotic in nature, and can be interpreted hyperbolically as an early breaking of the fourth wall. Its emotional grip, enhanced by the underground environs, is different from the process of catharsis in the normalized Classical tragedy, this being more a psychical process than a bodily one and therefore exerting a lesser force on the physical senses. Both have a theatrical connotation; both employ the spectator's or the actor's involvement to induce a process of recognition and mitigation of certain impulses embodied by Dionysus and, more covertly, by Apollo, a much more fearful deity. So "Delphi emerges, either as a theatre of complementary rituality or as a special place in the imagination of tragedians" (Isler-Kerényi 2007, 252), a setting that was later standardized. Such impulses are rooted in an ancestral, instinctive aspect viewed, in different times and ways, as dangerous for the communitarian structure.

The coexistence of public spectacles and religious representations suggests that the normalization process did not take place in a rigorous, disciplined manner. Some religious rituals, such as those related to the Athenian Thyades, were still practiced openly in democratic times. These Dionysian mountain-related celebrations feature

a reversal of normal values, as the women wander free, thanks to a temporary legitimization of 'madness'. But this ritual is no myth: the women commit no crime, tear no nephew, behead no poet, and return afterwards to their loom. Through ritual the wildness of the mountain (and of women) is both acknowledged and controlled (Buxton 2013, 24).

The latter conclusion is convincing: the emotional charge of the cult was "both acknowledged and controlled". But the fact that the emotional charge was thus bridled does not automatically mean that the ritual was "no myth". Simply, former bloody myths went through the process of mitigation illustrated above, to the point of becoming harmless while retaining the theatrical or spectacular appearance that is entwined both with religious and with civic life. Dionysus was buried underground, whereas Apollo was normalized and civilly framed by the underscoring of his more 'tamed' side.

The point of divergence in the character of the representations, whether more magical and 'mysteric' or more 'civic' in nature, would depend on the rationale of the reference community: whether female or rather male-oriented and governed. In the former case, the related positions became subterranean; in the latter, they got to be structured in a civil sense and became an integral part of democratic life.

The elements that have been de-structured here can be recomposed according to two common denominators: on the one hand, the orgiastic-religious or violent impulses; on the other, the need to release such tensions

through the *Darstellung*, the multifaceted and staged performance of violent drama, of the myth of blood, of the dark secret of fertility (here returns the feminine), or even of rational annihilation, though normalized, which is at the basis of the community, whether *χώρα* or *πόλις*.

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