THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES.

BY THE REV. CHARLES JAMES WOOD.

II. PRIMITIVE RITES OF ILLUMINATION.

ON the psychologic or pathological side, now, we find the same parallel between the primitive sacred dramatic dance and the Eleusinian rites as implied in the Attic theatre. For if we examine closely into the methods and means of a sacred secret organisation, say that of the Sioux and of the Nagualists of the Pueblo Indians, we find all the factors of character transformation, purifications by water and by fire, fasts and sweats, ordeals of pain and terror, auricular confession, narcotic and intoxicant food and drinks, prescribed dances protracted to point of frenzy or hysteria, all followed by trance, vision, and dread vows to secrecy. Less and more obscurely we see allusions to these characteristics of the Eleusinian Mysteries in the Greek plays. The playwright had to be excessively guarded, but said in effect to the mystæ or to the epoptæ, "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear."

Lobeck, in his *Aglaophamus*, quotes from Formicus, *De Err. Pr. Relig.*, p. 45, an account of the consummation of certain mystic rites, in which the priest "whispers in a gentle murmur" certain words of a like tenor—the god, however, and not the neophyte, strangely enough, being represented as the sufferer of severe trials

"Be of good cheer, ye initiates, in that the god is delivered; for the deliverance from his evil is of you."

Take an instance. It is evident that Euripides wrote the *Bacchae* as an apology for the Dionysiac cult. The chorus sings

"Oh blessed and fortunate is he, who having come to know the mysteries of the gods, keeps safe from polluting sin, joining Bacchic rites upon the mountains with holy purifications."

Here is an allusion to the preliminary purifications of the can-

[1] θαρρεῖτε μύσται τοῦ Θεοῦ σεσωσμένου, ἔσται γαρ ὑμῖν ἐκ πόνων σωτηρία·

didates at Eleusis, by lustration or baptism. Again in the same play, lines 902–905, the chorus sings meaningly:

"Happy is he who hath known storm at sea and found the shore. Happy also is he who hath surmounted severe ordeals." (Cf. Lobeck, *Aglaophamus*, 648; Sandy, *Bacchae*, 199.)

In connexion with other things that follow I take this as an allusion to some Eleusinian form of initiation.

It is not insignificant that in a fragment of the *Tympanistæ* of Sophocles, the identical thought occurs in nearly the same words, viz.:

"Ah me, what greater joy couldst thou have than attaining the beach, and that hardly, and afterward beneath the roof with mind tranquilised, to listen to the mighty tempest."

Add also this unmistakably dogmatic and pointed statement of the chorus of the *Iphigeneia at Tauris*, 1193:

Θάλασσα κλύζει πάντα τ' ἀνθρώπων κακά.

"The sea cleanses away all the sins of men."

At another place we are told that from a distance, the torches of those who were celebrating the Mysteries of Eleusis appeared at night like the host of stars about the shores of the bay.

The reasonable inference from this is that in the Eleusinian mysteries there was a rite of baptism, or lustration, or ordeal by water and possibly all in one, as in all the sacred dances and primitive cults of the world, these baptisms or lustrations occur. Often they are for the purpose of causing rain, at other times they are simply ceremonial purifications.

Euripides seems to have supposed that the worship of bread began prior to the adoration of wine, for Tiresias in the *Bacchae*, 274, delivers himself of this statement:

"Two, young man, are the first elements of human life; Demeter the goddess; she is earth, call it whatever name you choose, she nourishes men with dry viands; but the son of Semele, who comes as her mate, has discovered the moist drink of the grape, and introduced it among mortals."

To any student of folklore it is apparent that at this place Euripides touches upon the primitive worship of bread and wine. It is true that the already developed theology of this cultus is found in the ancient religions of India and Persia. But it is not necessary to suppose with Euripides that the mystagogues of Eleusis derived their ceremonies from thence. The Inca of Peru was also a pontifex maximus of the sacred chalice. The cup of the holy grail is the central point of most solemn Walpi, Moki, and Zuñi ceremonials.

The Spaniards, when first in Mexico, were horrified at what they took for a mocking travesty of the Mass. The Nagualists were found to have a Eucharist where they administered a narcotic mushroom, and fiery pulque. In reality this was not invented to caricature the Mass, as De la Serna supposed. To the Indians it was a pious immemorial rite, but the Spaniards regarded it as the orthodox of to-day would regard a black Mass of Canon Docre or of Abbé Constant, or of any other declared Satanist at Rome, Paris, or Chicago.

Aristophanes (*Birds*, line 436) ventures upon the irreverence of a humorous allusion to this grail worship in the Mysteries, for he recommends Peisthetairos to arm himself with pots and bowls. The worship of bread and wine was not imported into Greece. Folklore demonstrates that it is primitive and autochthonous. The bowls of the Zuñi Spider Woman, and the so-called magic bowls of the Jews brought from Niffer, belong to the original and universal worship of the divine Potter, whether at Eleusis, or at Thebes, or at Jerusalem.

Being primitive its antiquity is past all calculation. Is it anterior to the stone age? Probably. The hoary antiquity of this rite invests it with a sacredness and solemnity that enshrines it upon the high altars of all the occult mysteries and secret brotherhoods of the world.

When you read in the *Avesta* and the Vedic hymns how holy and sanctifying is the drink of the Haoma or Soma, when you trace in the more solemn and hidden worship of the Hindus, Navajos, Moki, Sioux, and Peruvians, the adoration of the holy grail, containing the elixir of life, the blood of the gods; when you perceive how by development of doctrine the divine drink of Persia and India became the divine Being, even God himself, you can without difficulty understand Euripides when he declares:

"This god is poured out in libations to the gods in order that men may thereby acquire blessings." *Bacchae*, 284.

The divine drink is the cup of wisdom as well as life. Folklore of Magyars and Bretons, of Russians and Arabs amply illustrate this. How often have we witnessed the final remnant of that notion in divination by the teacups! Primitive culture universally, I think, reverences the cup of wisdom. That it occured as a factor in the Mysteries of Eleusis we need not doubt. The peculiar drink of Demeter at Eleusis was called κυκεών. Though we do not know exactly the character or ingredients of this draught, we may conjecture from the fact that the word κυκεών is elsewhere used to de-

note a magic philter. It is the bowl of a Circe and of a Kriemhilda. Aristophanes (*Peace*, 712) implies that it was drunk by the mystae to counteract the effects of the severe nervous strain to which they had been subjected during their initiation at Eleusis. Teresias in his address to Pentheus speaks of the divine drink under veiled language, and the chorus of the *Bacchae* 298 goes on to chant:

"This divinity [wine] is a prophet, for Bacchic raving and mania have much soothsay in them."

In the world's folklore the idea of divine life or wisdom in a mystic drink is often associated with the worship of fire. The cults of fire and of the drink of the gods belong together. In the Veda the heavenly bird descends upon the tree and the liquor of that tree became a divine and inspiring draught. The divine bird was the fire from heaven, lightning. (Hillebrant, *Vedische Mythologie.*)

Æschylus undertook to explicate exoterically the esoteric fire doctrines of Eleusis. The theme of the Promethean trilogy was the theft of the fire of the gods. The first play of this trilogy was entitled Προμηθεὺς Πύρφορος. No wonder that Æschylus was charged with divulging the secret of the Mysteries. He was too plain in his allusions. Prometheus is from the Sanscrit root of *pramantha*, a fire-mill. He was at the same time the special patron of potters, who made wine jars. His analogy to the serpent of Genesis is suggestive. He gives wisdom as well as life, and teaches divination by fire.

Rightly then is Iacchos, another name for Dionysos, the wine god, addressed in that fine chorus of Sophocles's *Antigone* as (line 1146)[1] "leader of the fire-breathing stars, president of the nightly music of the spheres, begotten child of Zeus," and "leader also of the torch-bearing revellers of the sacred Mysteries, who roam all night the mountain sides." From this we may infer that fire as well as the holy grail was an element of the Mysteries of Eleusis.

According to the myth, which is at any time a summation of folklore, the Eleusinian Dionysos, in his birth and infancy, had been nourished at the fountains,—"the fountains of Dirke and the springs of Ismenos."

This tradition is quite consistent. That which renders the water or wine life-giving and wisdom-giving is the spirit from lower unseen regions, the ghost-land, the region of spirits who rising up

1 ἰώ πῦρ πνεόντων
χοράγ' ἄστρων, νυχίων
φθεγμάτων ἐπίσκοπε.
παῖ Ζηνὸς γένεθλον.
—*Antigone*, 1146.

thence in the waters, and then into the vine as sap, at length may become wine, the medium through which the god or the spirit enters into man, or the manes of the departed takes possession of him, so that he becomes *gott-trunken*, a maniac, a god's fool, or an inspired prophet. Personal responsibility is lost at such a time.

In the *Bacchæ* you see how the raging women, celebrating their Mysteries, even Agave, are not reckoned the murderers of Pentheus, but it is said to be the god in them, even Dionysos from Hades with the ghosts' chalice and with murky fires.

Christian art has inherited something from this folkfaith, for Saint John, the Evangelist of the Word, the Logos or Wisdom principle, is represented often with a chalice, the holy grail, out of which a serpent erects himself. Gnosticism carried this symbol from folkfaith or from Eleusis into Christian art.

Since all wisdom-drinks come from the Under World, because the springs well up from the earth, and the blood of the trees and vines comes up from the ground, we need not feel surprise to find that Dionysos merges at times into an infernal deity. I think that it was a Christian father who points out that Dionysos is the Greek Osiris, at once the king and judge of the ghosts, and also the divine wine, the life-blood of the universe, who is celebrated in the quatrains of Omar Khayyam.

According to Egyptian lore the soul of the dead became united with Osiris, so that in the *Per-em-hru*, commonly called the Book of the Dead, which is the compend of Egyptian theology, the dead person in question is termed always Osiris N. This same belief concerning the dead is expressed by Sophocles in the *Electra* II., 837–840. There Amphiaraos, though defunct, still inspires the oracles, for he has become identical with the Soul of the world (840 παμψύχος ἀνάσσει).

Shelley utters the same belief in his *Adonais*, and Tennyson verges upon it in *In Memoriam*. I believe this to have been one of the higher doctrines of Eleusis. In some instances the rites of Dionysos are plainly a propitiation of the souls of the dead and of the god of dead souls.

The *Philoctetes* of Sophocles, lines 448–450, makes a covert allusion to this,

"How the gods rejoice to send back from hell the wicked and the crafty!"

Also in the same play, line 797, there is an evocation of death.

"O Death, Death! Day by day, forever I call upon thee,—canst thou never come? O child, O thou of noble birth, come, whelm me in the Lemman, the

wished-for fire, O high-born. I, even I, thought meet to do this office for the son of Zeus, for the sake of those weapons which now thou keepest safe."[1]

The same occurs in *Ajax*, line 854. Perhaps then necromancy survived in the Mysteries of Eleusis. I mean a necromancy similar to our modern spiritism. For hypnotic suggestion was not then unknown, even if it was not understood.

Now in undertaking to twist together these strands of folkfaith and folklore of the Mysteries of Eleusis, to which covert references occur in the Greek drama, some casual repetitions of detail may be pardoned me. The substance of my inferences from the Greek plays is that the occult ceremonies at Eleusis were a highly-developed and dramatic sacred dance,—using the term *sacred dance* as it is used of the liturgy and ritual of a corn festival or a wine festival, or rain or fire festivals of primitive culture.

The sacred dance is the most important institution of primitive peoples, for it conserves and expresses their chief civil and religious beliefs. It is the foundation of the primitive State and Church. In regions as far apart as the Niger and the Yukon valley, the Nez Perces Indians and the Arabs, the sacred dances with their liturgies enshine all the folklore and theology, all the politics and religion of the several peoples. Still amongst us the sacred dance survives, in the revival meetings, in the ecclesiastical processions, in beating the parish bounds, in civic, political, and military processions, in the lodges of secret brotherhoods, in the cake-walk, and in the triumphal pomps of kings and emperors.

Out of the sacred dance came the drama. As the stage of Athens developed, conservatism bore away the primitive sacred folklore of the Greeks to Eleusis, and there hid it with exaggerated secrecy. In primitive culture it is everywhere necessary that one should be initiated into the correct steps of the ceremonial circuit or sacred dance before he becomes an acknowledged citizen or member of tribe, or of his brotherhood, be it craft-guild, soldiery, or priesthood.

Chinese freemasonry, I am told, and Mormonism, and the tribal constitution of Congo negroes, make the learning of the secret and traditional steps and figures of the sacred dance a condition of fellowship. In the Abyssinian Christian Church the sacred dance

[1] ὦ Θάνατε, Θάνατε· πῶς ἄει καλούμενος
οὕτω κατ' ἦμαρ οὐ δύνᾳ μολεῖν ποτε;
ὦ τέκνον ὦ γενναῖον, ἀλλὰ συλλαβὼν
τῷ Δημίῳ τῷ δ' αγκαλουμένῳ πυρὶ
ἔμπρησον, ὦ γενναῖε· κἀγώ ποι ποτὲ
τὸν τοῦ Διὸς παιδ ἀντὶ τῶνδε τῶν ὅπλων,
ἃ νῦν σὺσώζεις, τοῦτ ἐπηξίωσα δρᾶν·

is a *peculium* of the clergy. Something like this is the concern of the Sacred Congregation of Rites at Rome and of the *Rituale Romanum*. The Mysteries of Eleusis were probably a glorified sacred dance, which dramatised the most ancient of the religious ideas common to all men, and legends peculiar to the Greek tribes. Some loans also may have been made, but it is unnecessary to assume them. The psychic unity of mankind is enough to account for similarities.

Into this secret brotherhood, which like the freemasonry of our own time preserved in sacred secrecy the ideas, symbols, customs, and ceremonies of folk of remote antiquity, the best men of Greece were elected and initiated. They were taught the sacred dance of Eleusis and all that dance comprehended. The step was learned, which fixed their social and religious rank. This we are justified in concluding from the opening words of the *Bacchæ* of Euripides, —where the god Dionysos relates how

"Throughout Persia, Arabia, and all Asia (Minor) he had established his mysteries by dancing them (i. e., teaching the mystic steps of the holy dance), in order that he might be an epiphany of god unto men."

Further passages from the plays it is superfluous to adduce. This is sufficient to show the general character of the Dionysiac rite at Eleusis.

Later development of Eleusinian doctrine ascribed to the Mysteries power to save beyond the grave. Like the Egyptian Book of the Dead, they assumed to teach the soul how to reach heaven after death.

In the *Frogs* of Aristophanes, Hercules describes to Bacchus the Under-World, associating the Mysteries very clearly with the doctrine of the life after death.[1]

"Hercules: Afterwards thou shalt see snakes and all manner of frightful monsters.

Bacchus: O, don't try to frighten me; you shan't turn me back.

Hercules: Then a vast swamp and eternal cesspool. And within are those who have done evil. . . . Farther on, there will be heard on all sides a sweet concert of flutes, a brilliant light, as here, bowers of myrtle, happy groups of men and women, and the loud clapping of hands.

Bacchus: Who are the happy ones?

Hercules: The initiated."

Foucart gives a mortuary inscription from Petilia which lies parallel with the above.[2]

[1] Mr. Cecil Smith, "Orphic Myths on Attic Vases," in *Journ. Hellenic Studies*, XI., 346, gives testimony to the faith that initiates had in their immunity from *post mortem* penalties.

[2] Ἐυρήσεις δ᾽ Ἀιδαο δόμαν ἐπ᾽ ἀριστερὰ κρήνηκ. κ. τ. λ.

"In the house Hades you will come upon a well at the left and a white cypress; take care not to approach this well. You will discover on the other side a spring of cool water flowing from the Lake of Memory. Before it are sentinels. Say to them, I am the child of the earth and the starry sky, but my origin is celestial. This you know. I perish of thirst, give me quickly of the water which flows from the Lake of Memory. They will give you to drink from this divine source, and you will reign forever with the other heroes."

Here we find several elements of the Mysteries, a descent into hell, the drink of everlasting life, and the twofold path. Curiously this twofold path stands at the beginning of the *Didache*, or Teaching of the Twelve.

M. Foucart recognises another fragment of the Eleusinian ritual in an epitaph from Thurii, which runs:

"When thy soul has left the light of the sun, take the right-hand path as every guarded person will. . . . Take the right-hand path to the fields and sacred groves of Persephone."

The *Antigone* of Sophocles takes as its theme this cultus of the dead. So sacrosanct does Antigone regard the right of sepulture that she declares that it belongs to the "unwritten laws of the gods," *νόμιμα ἄγραπτα Θεῶν*,—"which are not of to-day or yesterday, but abide eternally."

It is found upon examination that usually the sacred dances of primitive peoples are accompanied with fastings, sweat baths, and narcotic or inebriating drinks. These customs have the object of putting the candidate into a condition to submit to hypnotism and to such visions as may be suggested to him in such a state.

It is curious, even if quite reasonable according to the theory which I have broached, that in the Dionysiac rites we should come across a survival of the primitive serpent-dance. The serpent and water-spring upon the Acropolis of Athens would naturally be near Athene, the goddess of wisdom. But Dionysos himself is supposed to have assumed at times the form of a dragon (lines 101, 1019 of *Bacchae*). Also the Bacchantes are crowned with snakes, etc.

For a like reason the frogs whom Aristophanes introduced in covert derision, belong to the lower regions where are the wise dead, the Under World, into which descends Bacchus to hear the controversy between Æschylos and Euripides.

Now in primitive culture these snake-dances and frog-dances were performed not only to dramatise a tradition, a myth, or a legend, but also for a material purpose, namely, to cause rain—rain enough for copious harvests.[1] The notion of sympathetic

[1] Cf. Tusayan Snake Ceremonies, J. W. Fewkes.

magic accompanied the performance. From more passages in Greek plays than I need quote, we may see that this notion of sympathetic magic had not become completely extinct in Greece, but preserved in the esoteric functions of the Eleusinian Mysteries.

The mention of magic suggests another point hinted at in the drama. The *Knights*, 409, and the *Birds*, 510, hint that the scepter of the Eleusinian mystagogue was crowned with the head of a bird. But that is not my point. What in origin were the rods of the mystae of Eleusis, the wands of the Buddhist bonze, the rods of the chiefs of the Walpi in the flute-dance, the thyrsæ of the bacchantes,—what were these originally but the arrow,—the arrow which stood for its owner, hence the chief instrument of magic and divination, the conjuring stick which belongs to the cosmic quarters? The folklore of the divining rod and the wizard's wand is familiar. It probably had some place in the Mysteries of Eleusis, and was symbolised by the thyrsos.

Another reason for the conjecture that the primitive sacred dance was the origin of Greek drama, and the essential character of the Greater Mysteries at Eleusis, has been already hinted. It is the use of masks. These masks in both cases are strictly traditional and conventional. The katçina of the Moki and the prosopon of the Athenians are essentially identical.[1]

Examine the collection of masks in the National Museum and you will be struck with their identity, mask for mask, of many and widely separated races. One idea underlies all: it is the primitive conviction, that he who dons a mask, *persona*, becomes thereby the personage, human, diabolical, or divine, that the mask represents.

If it be true that the Greek theatre was separated from the Greater Mysteries only by the process of differentiation in the course of evolution, then we may infer that the sacred dance with masks formed the basis of the secret ceremonies at Eleusis. Consequently on the Greek stage all the players were masked.

It is possible that at Eleusis this liturgic dance—though expanded into a dramatic ritual lasting throughout days—still retained something of its primal purpose as a ceremonial circuit, a circuit made to unify the gods of the world-quarters. I have given some reasons for suspecting that the central object of this ceremonial circuit was at one time bread, at another wine. In some cases primitive people unite the two in the cosmic cup. The wine-cup

[1] Tusayan Katçinas, J. W. Fewkes.

of Dionysos and the corn of Demeter were brought forth as by Melchizedek of the Semetic tradition.

Not seldom is the sacred chalice a magic cup. After primitive man has propitiated the spirits of the world-quarters, drawing upon the sand, or painting upon a skin of beast, a cross, or a swastika, he sets in the centre the mystic cup, the world chalice, the prototype of the Sangreal, and then begins the solemn circuit. Perhaps he intends to learn the temper of the gods of the world-quarters, four, six, ten, or sixty-four, according to his notion. Hence arises magic, sortilege, divination and divinatory games. I suppose these practices naturally had their place at Eleusis. All gambling, games of chance, were originally for the purpose of divination.[1]

As a sample of contemporary folklore derived from these early rites, let me instance the custom of a card-player who to change his luck rises and walks around the table or around his chair. It is a survival of the ceremonial circuit and of propitiating the gods of the world-quarters.

Associated with crude customs and the most barbaric ceremonies are always anywhere in the world profound and subtle religious ideas, fine feelings, and exalting aspirations. No doubt the intellectual progress of Greece sublimated the cruder doctrines at Eleusis, and theosophy developed there alongside folklore. Nevertheless, the student of language becomes amazed at the spirituality implied in the most ancient word-forms of the Indo-Germanic languages, because these forms reveal that our Aryan ancestors, whether on the shores of the Baltic sea, or on the slopes of the Himalaya mountains, or on the southern coast of the Mediterranean were capable of ideals and speculations as transcendental or spiritual as those of Meister Eckhart and Robert Browning. The anthropologist gladly testifies to the spirituality of the religious thought of the Pueblos and the Bushmen.

We need not fear to recognise a lofty spirituality in the sacraments and symbols, in the liturgic dances and prehistoric mystery plays, which constituted the esoteric Mysteries of Eleusis. Is not God the All-Father? And were not the ancient Greek and Hindus and Finns and Mayas his children as well as we? And when they adored God, should He scorn them because their forms of worship were grotesque and mingled with crudities?

St. Hippolytus, in connexion with the passage relating to the exhibition of an ear of wheat in the Eleusinian celebration, goes on

[1] Cf. *Korean Games, Chess, and Playing Cards*, by Stewart Culin.

to speak of the esoteric doctrines, taught by the hierophant; which Hippolytus at once contrasts with the "Lesser Mysteries," and associates with Christian doctrine.

"But the Inferior Mysteries, he (the hierophant) says, are those of Proserpine below; in regard of which Mysteries, and the path which leads thither, which is wide and spacious, and conducts those that are perishing to Proserpine, the poet likewise says:

"'But under her a fearful path extends,
Hollow, miry, yet best guide to
Highly-honored Aphrodite's lovely grove.'

"These, he says, are the Inferior Mysteries, those pertaining to carnal generation. Now those men who are initiated into these Inferior Mysteries ought to pause, and then be admitted into the great or heavenly ones. . . . For this, he says, is the gate of heaven; and this is a house of God, where the Good Deity dwells alone. And into this gate, he says, no unclean person shall enter, nor one that is natural and carnal; but it is reserved for the spiritual only. And those who come hither ought to cast off their garments, and become, all of them, bridegrooms, emasculated through the virginal spirit. For this is the virgin who carries in her womb and conceives and brings forth a son, not animal, not corporeal, but blessed forevermore."

Pindar says:

"Happy is he who has seen them (the rules of Eleusis) before going to the infernal regions; he knows the end of life, indeed; but he knows the God-given beginning."

So also Sophocles (*Fragm.*, 348):

"O thrice happy are those mortals who having beheld these mysteries depart to Hades; for to them alone there is life given; but to all the rest all things there are evil."

The point now reached seems to be so evident that the wonder is why have subsequent ages not guessed the general topic of the mystic and occult doctrines of Eleusis. Those doctrines are ecumenical and Catholic. They belong to the psychic substratum of human nature. Consequently they are common to all sacred and significant ceremonials. They belong to all secret rites both ancient and modern.

In a future paper I may present some cases of survival and revival, at our own day, and of influence of occult methods of the Association of Eleusis.