

CERTAIN ASPECTS OF THE ELEUSINIAN PROBLEM.¹

BY THE REV. CHARLES JAMES WOOD.

I. PRIMITIVE RITES OF PURIFICATION.

THE Mysteries of Eleusis are among the few secrets of this world that men have never blabbed. We know somewhat of the outer form of the cultus. The ruins of the great hall of initiation (*τελεστήριον*) have been inspected,² and ancient writers recorded some notes of the ranks of membership, or degrees of progress in the occult learning. We know also how the society of Eleusis controlled the affairs, political and social, of all Greece. But the occult teachings and ceremonies of Eleusis were never divulged.

Greek dramas, the plays of Æschylos, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes, were written for the celebration at Athens of what was known as the Lesser Mysteries of Eleusis. The Lesser Mysteries were partly public, and the dramas presented six months later at the conclusion of the Greater Mysteries, echoed the Lesser Mysteries and concluded the rites. After initiation at Eleusis the Athenian returned home, and in concluding the ceremonies of his membership in the secret society he witnessed dramatic representations. Into the Greek theatre were gathered the uninitiated as well as the enlightened. Therefore, while the dramatic author would aim to impress upon the minds of the initiates some of the lessons which they had just before secretly learned, he would do so in a guarded way that he might not be guilty of revealing to the profane any of the secret elements of the Greater Mysteries. The penalty of this was death. It is reasonable therefore to turn to the Greek plays for some hints of the nature of the secret doctrines and liturgy of the Greater Mysteries of Eleusis.

¹ A paper read before the Classical Club of the University of Pennsylvania in 1897.

² Dyer, *The Gods in Greece*, Cap. V.

First of all let us define the function of the Eleusinian Mysteries in Greek social and religious life. The Eleusinian Mysteries constituted the Church of Attica, if not of all Greece. Its claims were arrogant, no less than this: *nulla salus extra ecclesiam*. This feeling is expressed in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*:

"Blest is he of mortal men who has beheld these; for he who is uninitiated and he who partakes not in these rites, have by no means the same fortune although both be dead, beneath the murky darkness."¹

Plutarch gives the later idea of the *opus operatum* theory of the effect of the initiation at Eleusis:

"When a man dies he goes through the same experiences as those who have their consciousness increased in the Mysteries. Thus in the terms *τέλειευσάν* and *τέλειεσθαι*, we have an exact correspondence, word to word and fact to fact. First of all there are wanderings and wearying journeyings and paths on which we look with suspicion, and that seem to have no end; then, before the end, every kind of terror, shuddering, trembling, sweating, stupor; but at last a marvellous light shines out to meet us, pure spots and fair fields welcome us, with song and dance and the solemnities of sacred sounds and holy sights. In which state he who has already perfected himself in all things and received initiation, reaches his full freedom, and passing everywhere at his will, receives the crown and accomplishes his Mystery, in communion with the holy and pure, gazing down upon the unpurified multitude of the uninitiated who are still in life, wallowing in the deep mire and mist [of matter], and herded together, below him, abiding in misery from fear of death and want of faith in the blessedness of the soul-life. For you should know that the intercourse and conjunction of the soul with the body is contrary to nature."—*Fragment*, v, 9, Didot.

The rabbins of the school of Hillel were not more pharisaic; no close-communion Christian sect could be more arrogant. Yet, such is the character of religious secret brotherhoods anywhere in the world. There is a pleasure in the possession of knowledge, or rank, or power not generally distributed.

The association at Eleusis aimed to select the best men of Greece, and to teach them matters not suitable to the receptiveness of the common herd, truths too solemn and holy to risk profanation, ideas too spiritual for the books, doctrines too transcendental for clods to understand, and traditions which were at once incalculably ancient and belonged only to the descendants of heroes to learn. Later, foreigners and women were initiated, even slaves were admitted at public cost.² The Homeric *Hymn*³ says of Demeter as founder of the Mysteries at Eleusis:

"And she went to the law-administering kings, Triptolemus, and horse-goad-ing Diocles, and the might of Eumolpus, and Celeus, leader of the people, and showed them the performance of her sacred rites, and she appointed her hallowed orgies for all, for Triptolemus, and Polyxenius, and, moreover, Diocles,—orgies which it is in no wise lawful to inquire into, or mention; for a mighty reverence of the gods restrains the voice."

¹ The outcome of this thought will appear in Epitaphs quoted later.

² Foucart, *Le culte de Pluton dans la religion hellénique*. Lenormant, *Cont. Rev.*, 1880.

³ Compiled about 600 B. C. of ancient materials.

The purpose of the Mysteries was ethical, and the motives spiritual. The association was a sort of Gnosticism, a Freemasonry, a Nagualism, a secret society of the most conservative spirit, clinging tenaciously to customs, and rites, and beliefs which progress was then rendering obsolete in the ordinary or public life of Greece.¹

The ideas and ceremonies which were thus being driven into the secret shades of Eleusis, there to be cherished as august and sacrosanct, were such religious observances as belonged to the psychic constitution of the people,—we might say of mankind at large, as I expect to show. Evolution had advanced the Greeks but had not entirely abolished the psychic basis of savage observances.² Therefore in hidden places and recondite ways these strange and ancestral customs survived,—as I expect to demonstrate: and the sanctuary of their survival was at Eleusis. Consequently the Eleusinian Mysteries were, accurately speaking, superstition, lurid smoke in the clear sky of Hellenic reasonableness. They were, in fine, the survival of certain religious beliefs and ceremonies that a dominant race and a dominating culture were driving out of common life, and Eleusis was not sole shrine of Greek mysteries.

The ancient folklore of the Hellenic tribes crystallised into Mystery-cults in several localities, of which Eleusis is the most notable. For a long period the rites must have been local in their acceptance, though germane to the springtide and the vintage or harvest festivals at other places. Hesiod speaks of the cult of Demeter at Eleusis (*Frag.* 201, Didot Ed.), but says nothing of any Mysteries. As late as the Persian war it was necessary to explain to a Spartan the meaning of an Eleusinian procession. (Herod., VIII., 65.)

But to return to our search after the secret of Eleusis.

The sixth book of Virgil's *Æneid* and the *Golden Ass* of Apuleius do not reveal the secret ceremonies at Eleusis. And it is of small import if the hierophants did actually cry *Konx om pax* (which corresponds to *ita missa est*) to the mystæ who were thus dismissed after having passed through the ceremonies of initiation. Neither did the Christian fathers, St. Hippolytos for instance, reveal any esoteric wisdom of Eleusis. What we are to know of the

¹ Mr. Dyer, whose opinion in his text is different, virtually concedes the truth of my position *Gods in Greece*, p. 194, note.

² Foucart, *Recherches sur l'origine et la nature des mystères d'Eleusis*, mentions Arcadia and several Ionian islands as early homes of one or another feature of the cult of Eleusis, but M. Foucart thinks that Egypt was the ultimate source of the Eleusinian Mysteries. Cf. Gerhardt, Taf. I., *Bilderkreis von Eleusis*.

character of these ceremonies we must acquire by inference and by analogy.

The theory of the mode of the development of the Mysteries at Eleusis set forth by M. Lenormant has been generally accepted. Provisionally let us assume it for a working plan.

M. Lenormant says that the Eleusinian Mysteries passed through three stages of growth. Of these stages, the first corresponds to the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*. For that poem was the earliest attempt known to us to formulate a myth to account for the Eleusinian rites. At the same time it follows that both the hymn and the rite at Eleusis prove that an age had arrived when the origin of these customs had been forgotten.

To resume Lenormant's theory: At this first stage the chief point of the Mysteries was the celebration of the phenomena of vegetal life, under the myth of Persephone.¹ The primitive form of this cult was simply the corn festival. In the sacred shrines of the Zuñi Indians the holiest object, as Mr. Cushing told me, is an ear of corn. Demeter is the Corn-Mother. We find folklore full of her. The sacred corn-dances of our American aborigines are representative of the same idea. The Corn-Mother or Rye-Woman continues to be a personage of importance in Germany of the peasant. In the markets of York the country people expose for sale about Easter time small cakes baked in the form of a woman. The Harvest Queen in English folk-custom is another form of the Proserpina myth, a form not borrowed but autochthonous.

The myth of Proserpina appears in a Christianised form in the Sicilian popular tale of Spadonia who baked bread every day and sent it to the souls in purgatory. The tale includes a description of the ghost land. A similar custom of eating the god, of baked bread, occurred in the ancient Mexican cults. Both Creuzer and Frazer will afford many other analogues.²

Associated with the Proserpina myths of vegetal life have always been some primitive notions of purification by fire. The Old Testament writings refer many times to the custom. In the Eleusinian legend it seems that this was figured by the fire baptism of Demophon. Several of the plays allude to this, often obscurely.

¹ St. Hippolytus, *Refutation of all Heresies*, V., 115, tells us: "When the Athenians are celebrating the Mysteries of Eleusis, as the grand and marvellous and altogether perfect spectacle to the spectators, in silence, they exhibited a harvested ear of wheat."

² Crane's *Italian Popular Tales*, p. 367. An interesting Teutonic analogue to the Proserpine myth may be found at page 295, Simrock, *Deutsche Mythologie*. The immemorial sowing and reaping rites of the Malay's may be believed to throw some light upon the unrevealed ceremonies of Eleusis. Cf. Skeat, *Malay Magic*, pp. 227, 239 and elsewhere.

The peasantry of Europe long preserved this notion by building fires about their fields and then jumping through the fires. In my part of the country children still observe the custom "for good luck!"

It seems probable that at this earlier state of the Eleusinian Mysteries the Dionysiac rites—which are symbolised by blood and fire—fire and the drink of the gods, constituted a small or no element at all, of the liturgy and theology of Eleusis.¹ As the Greek theatre was a consequence of the Dionysia, the Greek drama corresponds to a later stage of development. The Proserpina element continued to play its part, that of a glorified farmers' festival, down to the end.

The second stage of the evolution of the Mysteries at Eleusis is marked, as I have intimated, by an attraction and absorption of such folklore and special common customs of a religious character belonging to the vintage, as the intellectual and social advance of the people was rendering archaic and obsolescent. So the Mysteries of Eleusis became a Dead Sea of folkfaith and folklore, of prehistoric ceremonies and primitive religious notions. No doubt the hierophants and mystagogues of Eleusis did develop parallel with this folklore some abstruse, transcendental, and rationalised theology,—just as the Gnosticism of the early Church gathered up the occultism, theology, and magic of a dying age and mixed it with abstruse and metaphysical speculations, also as Freemasonry at the present day conserves obsolete symbols and forgotten ceremonies of extinct religions. In addition to this, the psychic development of the Greek tribes had left behind it much crude material not yet assimilated, and so most of what was intense and orgiastic, similar to the hysteria of a religious revival and fierce nervousness of the Salvation Army, flowed down into Eleusis and was there conserved.

With the third stage which began about the time of Alexander the Great, we shall not now concern ourselves. Merely let me observe that Mr. Percy Gardner must surely be wrong in assigning the incorporation of the myth of Dionysos Zagreus to this third period. The topic of that myth is primitive and psychically aboriginal.

We now turn our attention to the first stage of the growth of Eleusinian Mysteries. Here we need be at no painful effort to infer their nature. In the myth of Demeter and Persephone we have the universal mythos of germination and fruitage.

In the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, Rhea says to her daughter:

¹ Cf. A. Kühn, *Feur und die Göttertrinken*.

"Hither, child, loud-thundering, far-seeing Jove calls thee to come to the tribes of the gods. . . . And he has consented that thy daughter shall pass the third part of the rolling year beneath the murky darkness, but the other two with thee and the other immortals. . . . but come, child, and obey. Nor be thou immoderately wrathful against the dark-clouded son of Saturn. But straightway increase the life-bearing fruit for men."

"Thus spoke she, nor did well-crowned Demeter disobey; but she straightway sent forth the fruit from the rich-soiled fields. And all the wide earth was weighted down with leaves and flowers."

Back of this myth lies the folklore of a world. It is not necessary to suppose that this element of Eleusis was imported from Syria, or Egypt, or Babylon. Such theories are erudite but superfluous. The sacred dances of negroes on the banks of the Congo, the whirling dervishes, the ceremonial circuit of the Mayan and of the Aztec tribes (if we rightly decipher their grotesque and complicated art), the spring festivals and harvest homes of India, China, and England, the old Hindu cults such as we find in the Rig Veda, —all these set forth in dramatic-lyric fashion the substantial identity of the folkfaith of "all peoples who on earth do dwell," and that folkfaith is the substance of the Mysteries of Eleusis.

The solar course which has its simplest form of dramatisation in the ceremonial circuit of the North American Indian, and in the *Pradikshna* of the Hindu, had their later and more highly developed form in the dorian, pyrric, gymnopædic, and hyperchematic dances of the Greeks, and in the evolution of the chorus of a Greek play.

Perhaps these various dances, answering to the modes of music, and later to the measures of poetry, were in the beginning but the primitive steps and figures of the war dance, the serpent dance, the torch dance, the corn dance, and so on, which in the secrecy of Eleusis continued to be performed with a half belief in their magic efficacy. From the secret rites they passed into the open drama. Besides, the ceremonial circuit had not only the virtue of propitiating the gods of the world quarters, and thus ensuring good harvests, good health, and good luck in games of chance, but, connected with these dances at the beginning, there was a general attempt to fix divisions of time and to establish a kalendar.

Rome does not appear to have transferred her primitive and archaic ceremonies altogether to secret observance. The Salii and the Arval brothers were secret societies, but their ceremonies together with the Lupercalia, continued to be publicly performed.

The sword dance early dropped out of Hebrew worship. In the fourth chapter of Genesis there is a relic of a "song of the sword" interpellated. The sacred dance among the Hebrews continued probably throughout their history. The Feast of Purim was

celebrated with an orgiastic torch dance. Miriam, the sister of Moses, is said to have taken a timbrel and with her attendant maidens to have celebrated the passage of the Red Sea by a sacred song and dance. David, removing his voluminous robes, clad himself in an ephod and danced mightily before the ark in a public procession through the streets. Probably there was always in the Jewish temple what would answer to a ballet. These girls took regular part in the services of the sanctuary and in the sacred processions. Allusion is made to this ritual in one of the psalms:

"It is well seen how thou, O Lord, goest [in the procession], the singers go before, the minstrels follow after, in the midst are the damsels playing on the timbrels."

The play of *Thesmaphoria* has for a theme this women's dance.

It is at this point that we may profitably begin to scrutinise the Greek plays for hints of doctrines and ritual of the Mysteries.

Two pressing questions, which even primitive peoples endeavor to answer, arise here. First, what are the rights of property, and how settle boundaries in time and space? Allusions to this as a most holy institution may be found in *Philoctetes*, 722; *Ajax*, 602; *Antigone*, 608; *Trachiniae*, 648, and elsewhere.

We read in *Agamemnon*, 507:

"Ye do well to reverence him [Agamemnon] who hath levelled Troy with the spade of equity—dispensing Zeus (τοῦ δικηφόρου Διός)—the spade with which the earth's bounds are measured off" (μακίγγη, τῆ κατεργασται πεδόν).

The second question is the same that occupied the writers of the Book of Job, namely, Does benevolence or malevolence rule the world? Are the gods kind or malicious? Is God stronger than the Devil? Does good or evil dominate in the constitution of things? Is the world an environment suitable and fit for man or no? The one question in several forms. Important to material interests as was the first problem, the second absorbed most of the interest of men, and the tragedies of Æschylos, Sophocles, and Euripides are devoted to the solution of the great spiritual problem,—the problem of evil. Turning to the scenic poetry, I note how the *Choëphoræ*, *Agamemnon*, *Antigone*, and *Philoctetes* make such allusions as appear in these citations:

"Clytæmnestra: Fate, my son, had somewhat to do with these things.

"Orestes: Nay, this very destiny hath Fate ordained" (ἐπέσπενεν).

—*Choëphoræ*, 890.

ἀλλ', ὦ μεγάλαι Μοῖραι, Διόθεν τῆδε τελευτᾶν,
ἢ τὸ δίκαιον μεταβαίνει.

"But, O mighty fates, do ye accomplish this according to Zeus, in whatsoever way is just." —*Choëphoræ*, 297.

τρόμος μ' ὑφέρπει κλύονσαν εὐγμάτων
τὸ μόρσιμον μένει πάλαι,
εὐχομένοις δ' αἶ' ἔλθοι.

"Trembling comes upon me when I hear boastings. That which is fated abideth of old; but to those who pray may it come.—*Choëphoræ*, 450.

"I call upon the gods, who preside over strivings (*αγαθίων Θεῶν*), and especially upon Hermes, my Redeemer,¹ the Beloved Herald, the Holy One of Heralds."—*Agamemnon*, 495.

"Zeus, the Mighty, sent the sons of Atreus against Paris,—Zeus, the avenger of outraged hospitality" (*Ζεὺς ξένιος*).—*Agamemnon*, 61.

"For a basis of justice is set up, and on it Fate forges the swords she makes (for the punishment of transgressors), and offspring upon offspring of former murders (wherewith they are defiled) doth she introduce into houses: the Fury, whose deep counsels become known in time, aims and executes the (heaven-sent) curse.'—*Choëphoræ*, 629.

Compare Isaiah xxx. 33:

"For Tophet is ordained of old. . . . He hath made it deep and large, the pile thereof is fire and wood; the breath of the Lord, like a stream of brimstone, doth kindle it."

Says the *Philoctetes* of Sophocles (446–452) on hearing that Thersites was still alive:

"Be it so,—since naught of evil perisheth, so well do the divine ones fence it round; yea, how gleefully they do turn back from Hades, the cunning and the crafty, and send below the just and the good! How shall I dispose of such facts as these, how offer praise, while even in my prayers to the gods I find the gods to be evil?"

These cardinal doctrines of Eleusis teach that this is the best possible world, which is the same as to say, "Justice rules," God is King. Of the many lines of Greek plays that might be cited to this point, I quote but one passage, typical if difficult. It runs from line 51 to line 57 of the *Choëphoræ* and says:

"Prosperity among men is god and more than god. But if the swift sweep of Justice watches over some in broad daylight, yet others punishment awaits wearing away the time, delaying in the middle way of darkness, these impracticable night holds fast."

These words remind me of 1 Tim. v. 24:

"Some men's sins are open beforehand going before to judgment, and some men they follow after. Likewise also the good works of some are manifest beforehand, and they that are otherwise cannot be hid."

There emerge here and there through the language of the Greek plays certain and clear allusions to ideas which are involved in the chief element of all dramatic Mysteries, i. e., the sacred dances, of every primitive tribe from Alaska to Lake Van, from Greece to Guatemala. I mean such elements as: (1) Reverence for the gods of the world-quarters (which from the beginning has made the cross a holy symbol); (2) Conjectures touching the origin of the world; (3) Beliefs about the origin of the tribe or of mankind; and (4) Guesses about what will happen to man after death.

¹ Τιμάωρον Ἑρμῆν. See Hebrew Goel. Job. xix. 25, Ruth. Judges, pass.

For instance, the *Choëphoræ*, 314-316, 343-350, 503, insists upon human consciousness after death :

"You, the ferocious maw of the fire devours not the consciousness of the dead, but back of it shines the meadow."—*Choëphoræ*, 314. (Cf. Plutarch, cited above.)

"With thine own dead there in peace thou, as an august prince, art preëminent in the under world, hierarch of the greatest earth-lords there, for king thou wert whilst thou lived, over those who in their lands administered what fate appointed them, even the scepter which claims the submission of mortals."—*Choëphoræ*, 343-350.

Certain knowledge of immortality was sought in the mysteries. Verbal instruction alone was not adequate. Orgiastic or frenzied dances took place, because they induced trance and vision. Allusions are common to these exciting dances which resemble the dance by which the Mongolian shaman seeks ecstasy and clairvoyance. Akin to this was the dancing mania of the Middle Ages, the holy dance of Eisenach, the convulsionaries of St. Médard and the early phenomena of the spiritual life of the Shakers and Quakers. In primitive sacred mysteries another common method of gaining a vision into the unseen world and of having revelations, is by means of some narcotic or spirituous drink. The very words spirit, spirituous, embalm the primitive idea. Intoxication is regarded by primitive people as inspiration or divine possession. The tribes of the Gold Coast, the American Indians, the Tibetans, and South Sea Islanders initiate by the use of maddening drinks. The fast, the mystic drink and meat, and the consequent visions are esoteric to some extent among all savages. The American Indian takes his name (appellation) at this time. Some such a custom belonged to Eleusis. The Negro also becomes a citizen of his tribe through this initiation. It belongs to this experience to see visions of gods or devils, and by them faith in God, immortality, and future retribution are confirmed. There as at St. Patrick's Purgatory is the hallucination of descent into the lower world. Whether all this was shown the initiates, mystae, or the beholders, eoptae, is undetermined. At all event there were visions both direct and in a mirror.³ The curious reader may further consult Plato, *Phædros*,

1 τέκνον, φρόνημα τοῦ θανόντος οὐ δαμάζει
πυρὸς μαλερὰ γνάθος,
φαίνει δ' ὕστερον ὄργας.
—*Choëphoræ*, 314.

2 φίλος φίλοισι τοῖς ἐκεῖ καλὸς θανούσιν
κατὰ χθονός, ἐμπρέπων
σεμνότιμος ἀνάκτωρ,
πρόπολος τε τῶν μεγίστων
χθονίων ἐκεῖ τυράννων·
βασιλεὺς γὰρ ἦσθ', ὄφρ' ἕξης,
μόριμον λάχος πιπλάντων
χεροῖν πεισιβροτῶν τε βάκτρον· κ. τ. λ.

—*Choëphoræ*, 343-350.

³Cf. 1 Cor. xiii. 12; 2 Cor. iii. 18.

for the "beatific visions," *ἑυδαίμονα φάσματα*, Plutarch (*Frag.* VI., 1), for "holy phantasms," "sacred representations," *ἅγια φαντάσματα*, *ἱερα δεικνύματα*, and Aristides (*Orat.*, XIX) for the unutterable apparitions, *ἄρρητα φάσματα*, and Dio Chrysostomos for the "mystic sights," *μυστήκη θεάματα*.

Clement of Alexandria quotes from the Eleusinian liturgy a passage, possibly pronounced near the close of the ceremonies, which is interesting in this connexion :

"I have fasted, I have drunk of the cup; I have received from the box; having done, I put it into the basket, and out of the basket into the chest."

"And what are these mystic chests?"—Clement goes on—"for I must expose their sacred things and divulge things not fit for speech. Are they not sesame cakes, and pyramidal cakes, and globular and flat cakes, embossed all over, and lumps of salt, etc.?"

Upon the stage of the Attic theatre appeared strange masks and customs; goat skins and leopard skins were worn. Dionysos appeared as a bull. Birds, frogs, and serpents came singing. In these and their like I suspect we have vestiges of an original totemism.¹

A visit to any ethnological museum, such as that at Berlin and our National Museum at Washington, will bring all these masks of the sacred dance dramas of tribes in various stages of culture before you. It will suggest the genesis of Greek comedy, the origins of Aristophanes and Plautus, of the Mediæval Miracle-Plays and Mystery-Plays, of Hroswitha, and of the Dance of Death. In another direction the line of development will reach to the Javanese puppet and shadow plays, the Chinese opera, and the Persian Mystery-play of Hassan and Hussein. Here was no borrowing or loaning, but various developments from the one psychic basis of humanity.

The most comprehensive, typical mystery-play of a primitive folk which is accessible is the creation-myth as it is dramatised by the Zuñi Indians. Taking Mr. Frank Cushing's account² of that cycle of sacred dances, we detect therein most of the ethical elements of the Greek drama. Œdipus and Medea are there, Orestes and Demeter are characters of the Zuñi cycle of creation-plays. The same may be truly said of the characters in Mr. Jeremiah Curtin's *Creation Myths of the New World*.

¹ Brinton, *Myths of the New World*, p. 269.

² *Thirteenth Annual Report U. S. Bur. Ethnology*, p. 325.