READING FOR MODULE 8: Jane Harrison

In the reading for this module, Jane Harrison outlined her thesis on the roots of mythology and art in the ritualistic behavior of ancient peoples. Write a minimum of 250 words regarding human instinctual behavior and its connections to art and the mythic narrative. What role does imitation play in this process?

ANCIENT ART AND RITUAL

CHAPTER I

ART AND RITUAL

By Jane Ellen Harrison

The title of this book may strike the reader as strange and even dissonant. What have art and ritual to do together? The ritualist is, to the modern mind, a man concerned perhaps unduly with fixed forms and ceremonies, with carrying out the rigidly prescribed ordinances of a church or sect. The artist, on the other hand, we think of as free in thought and untrammelled by convention in practice; his tendency is towards licence. Art and ritual, it is quite true, have diverged to-day; but the title of this book is chosen advisedly. Its object is to show that these two divergent developments have a common root, and that neither can be understood without the other. It is at the outset one 10and the same impulse that sends a man to church and to the theatre.

Such a statement may sound to-day paradoxical, even irreverent. But to the Greek of the sixth, fifth, and even fourth century B.C., it would have been a simple truism. We shall see this best by following an Athenian to his theatre, on the day of the great Spring Festival of Dionysos.

Passing through the entrance-gate to the theatre on the south side of the Acropolis, our Athenian citizen will find himself at once on holy ground. He is within a temenos or precinct; a place “cut off” from the common land and dedicated to a god. He will pass to the left two temples standing near to each other, one of earlier, the other of later date, for a temple, once built, was so sacred that it would only be reluctantly destroyed. As he enters the actual theatre he will pay nothing for his seat; his attendance is an act of worship, and from the social point of view obligatory; the entrance fee is therefore paid for him by the State.

The theatre is open to all Athenian citizens, but the ordinary man will not venture to seat himself in the front row. In the front row, and that only, the seats have backs, and the central seat of this row is an armchair; the whole of the front row is permanently reserved, not for individual rich men who can afford to hire “boxes,” but for certain State officials and these officials are all priests. On each seat the name of the owner is inscribed; the central seat is “of the priest of Dionysos Eleuthereus,” the god of the precinct. Near him is the seat “of the priest

of Apollo the Laurel-Bearer," and again "of the priest of Asklepios," and "of the priest of Olympian Zeus," and so on round the whole front semicircle. It is as though at His Majesty's the front row of stalls was occupied by the whole bench of bishops, with the Archbishop of Canterbury enthroned in the central stall.

The theatre at Athens is not open night by night, nor even day by day. Dramatic performances take place only at certain high festivals of Dionysos in winter and spring. It is, again, as though the modern theatre was open only at the festivals of the Epiphany and of Easter. Our modern, at least our Protestant, custom is in direct contrast. We tend on great religious festivals rather to close than to open our theatres. Another point of contrast is in the time allotted to the performance. We give to the theatre our after-dinner hours, when work is done, or at best a couple of hours in the afternoon. The theatre is for us a recreation. The Greek theatre opened at sunrise, and the whole day was consecrated to high and strenuous religious attention. During the five or six days of the great Dionysia, the whole city was in a state of unwonted sanctity, under a taboo. To distrain a debtor was illegal; any personal assault, however trifling, was sacrilege.

Most impressive and convincing of all is the ceremony that took place on the eve of the performance. By torchlight, accompanied by a great procession, the image of the god Dionysos himself was brought to the theatre and placed in the orchestra. Moreover, he came not only in human but in animal form. Chosen young men of the Athenians in the flower of their youth—epheboi—escorted to the precinct a splendid bull. It was expressly ordained that the bull should be "worthy of the god"; he was, in fact, as we shall presently see, the primitive incarnation of the god. It is, again, as though in our modern theatre there stood, "sanctifying all things to our use and us to His service," the human figure of the Saviour, and beside him the Paschal Lamb.

But now we come to a strange thing. A god presides over the theatre, to go to the theatre is an act of worship to the god Dionysos, and yet, when the play begins, three times out of four of Dionysos we hear nothing. We see, it may be, Agamemnon returning from Troy, Clytemnestra waiting to slay him, the vengeance of Orestes, the love of Phædra for Hippolytos, the hate of Medea and the slaying of her children: stories beautiful, tragic, morally instructive it may be, but scarcely, we feel, religious. The orthodox Greeks themselves sometimes complained that in the plays enacted before them there was "nothing to do with Dionysos."

If drama be at the outset divine, with its roots in ritual, why does it issue in an art profoundly solemn, tragic, yet purely human? The actors wear ritual vestments like those of the celebrants at the Eleusinian mysteries. Why, then, do we find them, not executing a religious service or even a drama of gods and goddesses, but rather impersonating mere Homeric heroes and heroines? Greek drama, which seemed at first to give us our clue, to show us a real link between ritual

and art, breaks down, betrays us, it would seem, just at the crucial moment, and leaves us with our problem on our hands.

Had we only Greek ritual and art we might well despair. The Greeks are a people of such swift constructive imagination that they almost always obscure any problem of origins. So fair and magical are their cloud-capp'd towers that they distract our minds from the task of digging for foundations. There is scarcely a problem in the origins of Greek mythology and religion that has been solved within the domain of Greek thinking only. Ritual with them was, in the case of drama, so swiftly and completely transmuted into art that, had we had Greek material only to hand, we might never have marked the transition. Happily, however, we are not confined within the Greek paradise. Wider fields are open to us; our subject is not only Greek, but ancient art and ritual. We can turn at once to the Egyptians, a people slower-witted than the Greeks, and watch their sluggish but more instructive operations. To one who is studying the development of the human mind the average or even stupid child is often more illuminating than the abnormally brilliant. Greece is often too near to us, too advanced, too modern, to be for comparative purposes instructive.

Of all Egyptian, perhaps of all ancient deities, no god has lived so long or had so wide and deep an influence as Osiris. He stands as the prototype of the great class of resurrection-gods who die that they may live again. His sufferings, his death, and his resurrection were enacted year by year in a great mystery-play at Abydos. In that mystery-play was set forth, first, what the Greeks call his agon, his contest with his enemy Set; then his pathos, his suffering, or downfall and defeat, his wounding, his death, and his burial; finally, his resurrection and "recognition," his anagnorisis either as himself or as his only begotten son Horus. Now the meaning of this thrice-told tale we shall consider later: for the moment we are concerned only with the fact that it is set forth both in art and ritual.

At the festival of Osiris small images of the god were made of sand and vegetable earth, his cheek bones were painted green and his face yellow. The images were cast in a mould of pure gold, representing the god as a mummy. After sunset on the 24th day of the month Choiak, the effigy of Osiris was laid in a grave and the image of the previous year was removed. The intent of all this was made transparently clear by other rites. At the beginning of the festival there was a ceremony of ploughing and sowing. One end of the field was sown with barley, the other with spelt; another part with flax. While this was going on the chief priest recited the ritual of the "sowing of the fields." Into the "garden" of the god, which seems to have been a large pot, were put sand and barley, then fresh living water from the inundation of the Nile was poured out of a golden vase over the "garden" and the barley was allowed to grow up. It was the symbol of the resurrection of the god after his burial, "for the growth of the garden is the growth of the divine substance."

The death and resurrection of the gods, and pari passu of the life and fruits of the earth, was thus set forth in ritual, but—and this is our immediate point—it was also set forth in definite, unmistakable art. In the great temple of Isis at Philæ there is a chamber dedicated to Osiris. Here is represented the dead Osiris. Out of his body spring ears of corn, and a priest waters the growing stalk from a pitcher. The inscription to the picture reads: This is the form of him whom one may not name, Osiris of the mysteries, who springs from the returning waters. It is but another presentation of the ritual of the month Choiak, in which effigies of the god made of earth and corn were buried. When these effigies were taken up it would be found that the corn had sprouted actually from the body of the god, and this sprouting of the grain would, as Dr. Frazer says, be "hailed as an omen, or rather as the cause of the growth of the crops."

Even more vividly is the resurrection set forth in the bas-reliefs that accompany the great Osiris inscription at Denderah. Here the god is represented at first as a mummy swathed and lying flat on his bier. Bit by bit he is seen raising himself up in a series of gymnastically impossible positions, till at last he rises from a bowl—perhaps his "garden"—all but erect, between the outspread wings of Isis, while before him a male figure holds the crux ansata, the "cross with a handle," the Egyptian symbol of life. In ritual, the thing desired, i.e. the resurrection, is acted, in art it is represented.

No one will refuse to these bas-reliefs the title of art. In Egypt, then, we have clearly an instance—only one out of many—where art and ritual go hand in hand. Countless bas-reliefs that decorate Egyptian tombs and temples are but ritual practices translated into stone. This, as we shall later see, is an important step in our argument. Ancient art and ritual are not only closely connected, not only do they mutually explain and illustrate each other, but, as we shall presently find, they actually arise out of a common human impulse.

The god who died and rose again is not of course confined to Egypt; he is world-wide. When Ezekiel "came to the gate of the Lord's house which was toward the north" he beheld there the "women weeping for Tammuz." This "abomination" the house of Judah had brought with them from Babylon. Tammuz is Dumuzi, "the true son," or more fully, Dumuzi-absu, "true son of the waters." He too, like Osiris, is a god of the life that springs from inundation and that dies down in the heat of the summer. In Milton's procession of false gods,

"Thammuz came next behind, Whose annual wound in Lebanon allured The Syrian damsels to lament his fate In amorous ditties all a summer's day." Tammuz in Babylon was the young love of Ishtar. Each year he died and passed below the earth to the place of dust and death, "the land from which there is no returning, the house of darkness, where dust lies on door and bolt." And the goddess went after him, and while she was below, life ceased in the earth, no flower blossomed and no child of animal or man was born.

We know Tammuz, “the true son,” best by one of his titles, Adonis, the Lord or King. The Rites of Adonis were celebrated at midsummer. That is certain and memorable; for, just as the Athenian fleet was setting sail on its ill-omened voyage to Syracuse, the streets of Athens were thronged with funeral processions, everywhere was seen the image of the dead god, and the air was full of the lamentations of weeping women. Thucydides does not so much as mention the coincidence, but Plutarch tells us those who took account of omens were full of concern for the fate of their countrymen. To start an expedition on the day of the funeral rites of Adonis, the Canaanitish “Lord,” was no luckier than to set sail on a Friday, the death-day of the “Lord” of Christendom.

The rites of Tammuz and of Adonis, celebrated in the summer, were rites of death rather than of resurrection. The emphasis is on the fading and dying down of vegetation rather than on its upspringing. The reason of this is simple and will soon become manifest. For the moment we have only to note that while in Egypt the rites of Osiris are represented as much by art as by ritual, in Babylon and Palestine in the feasts of Tammuz and Adonis it is ritual rather than art that obtains.

We have now to pass to another enquiry. We have seen that art and ritual, not only in Greece but in Egypt and Palestine, are closely linked. So closely, indeed, are they linked that we even begin to suspect they may have a common origin. We have now to ask, what is it that links art and ritual so closely together, what have they in common? Do they start from the same impulse, and if so why do they, as they develop, fall so widely asunder?

It will clear the air if we consider for a moment what we mean by art, and also in somewhat greater detail what we mean by ritual.

Art tells us in a famous passage of the Republic, is imitation; the artist imitates natural objects, which are themselves in his philosophy but copies of higher realities. All the artist can do is to make a copy of a copy, to hold up a mirror to Nature in which, as he turns it whither he will, “are reflected sun and heavens and earth and man,” anything and everything. Never did a statement so false, so wrong-headed, contain so much suggestion of truth—truth which, by the help of analysing ritual, we may perhaps be able to disentangle. But first its falsehood must be grasped, and this is the more important as Plato’s misconception in modified form lives on to-day. A painter not long ago thus defined his own art: “The art of painting is the art of imitating solid objects upon a flat surface by means of pigments.” A sorry life-work! Few people to-day, perhaps, regard art as the close and realistic copy of Nature; photography has at least scotched, if not slain, that error; but many people still regard art as a sort of improvement on or an “idealization” of Nature. It is the part of the artist, they think, to take suggestions and materials from Nature, and from these to build up, as it were, a revised version. It is, perhaps, only by studying those rudimentary forms of art

that are closely akin to ritual that we come to see how utterly wrong-headed is this conception.

Take the representations of Osiris that we have just described—the mummy rising bit by bit from his bier. Can any one maintain that art is here a copy or imitation of reality? However "realistic" the painting, it represents a thing imagined not actual. There never was any such person as Osiris, and if there had been, he would certainly never, once mummified, have risen from his tomb. There is no question of fact, and the copy of fact, in the matter. Moreover, had there been, why should anyone desire to make a copy of natural fact? The whole "imitation" theory, to which, and to the element of truth it contains, we shall later have occasion to return, errs, in fact, through supplying no adequate motive for a widespread human energy. It is probably this lack of motive that has led other theorizers to adopt the view that art is idealization. Man with pardonable optimism desires, it is thought, to improve on Nature.

Modern science, confronted with a problem like that of the rise of art, no longer casts about to conjecture how art might have arisen, she examines how it actually did arise. Abundant material has now been collected from among savage peoples of an art so primitive that we hesitate to call it art at all, and it is in these inchoate efforts that we are able to track the secret motive springs that move the artist now as then.

Among the Huichol Indians, if the people fear a drought from the extreme heat of the sun, they take a clay disk, and on one side of it they paint the "face" of Father Sun, a circular space surrounded by rays of red and blue and yellow which are called his "arrows," for the Huichol sun, like Phœbus Apollo, has arrows for rays. On the reverse side they will paint the progress of the sun through the four quarters of the sky. The journey is symbolized by a large cross-like figure with a central circle for midday. Round the edge are beehive-shaped mounds; these represent the hills of earth. The red and yellow dots that surround the hills are cornfields. The crosses on the hills are signs of wealth and money. On some of the disks birds and scorpions are painted, and on one are curving lines which mean rain. These disks are deposited on the altar of the god-house and left, and then all is well. The intention might be to us obscure, but a Huichol Indian would read it thus: "Father Sun with his broad shield (or 'face') and his arrows rises in the east, bringing money and wealth to the Huichols. His heat and the light from his rays make the corn to grow, but he is asked not to interfere with the clouds that are gathering on the hills."

Now is this art or ritual? It is both and neither. We distinguish between a form of prayer and a work of art and count them in no danger of confusion; but the Huichol goes back to that earlier thing, a presentation. He utters, expresses his thought about the sun and his emotion about the sun and his relation to the sun, and if "prayer is the soul's sincere desire" he has painted a prayer. It is not a little curious that the same notion comes out in the old Greek word for "prayer,"

euchè. The Greek, when he wanted help in trouble from the “Saviors,” the Dioscuri, carved a picture of them, and, if he was a sailor, added a ship. Underneath he inscribed the word euchè. It was not to begin with a “vow” paid, it was a presentation of his strong inner desire, it was a sculptured prayer.

Ritual then involves imitation; but does not arise out of it. It desires to recreate an emotion, not to reproduce an object. A rite is, indeed, we shall later see, a sort of stereotyped action, not really practical, but yet not wholly cut loose from practice, a reminiscence or an anticipation of actual practical doing; it is fitly, though not quite correctly, called by the Greeks a dromenon, “a thing done.”

At the bottom of art, as its motive power and its mainspring, lies, not the wish to copy Nature or even improve on her—the Huichol Indian does not vainly expend his energies on an effort so fruitless—but rather an impulse shared by art with ritual, the desire, that is, to utter, to give out a strongly felt emotion or desire by representing, by making or doing or enriching the object or act desired. The common source of the art and ritual of Osiris is the intense, world-wide desire that the life of Nature which seemed dead should live again. This common emotional factor it is that makes art and ritual in their beginnings well-nigh indistinguishable. Both, to begin with, copy an act, but not at first for the sake of the copy. Only when the emotion dies down and is forgotten does the copy become an end in itself, a mere mimicry.

It is this downward path, this sinking of making to mimicry, that makes us now-a-days think of ritual as a dull and formal thing. Because a rite has ceased to be believed in, it does not in the least follow that it will cease to be done. We have to reckon with all the huge forces of habit. The motor nerves, once set in one direction, given the slightest impulse tend always to repeat the same reaction. We mimic not only others but ourselves mechanically, even after all emotion proper to the act is dead; and then because mimicry has a certain ingenious charm, it becomes an end in itself for ritual, even for art.

It is not easy, as we saw, to classify the Huichol prayer-disks. As prayers they are ritual, as surfaces decorated they are specimens of primitive art. In the next chapter we shall have to consider a kind of ceremony very instructive for our point, but again not very easy to classify—the pantomimic dances which are, almost all over the world, so striking a feature in savage social and religious life. Are they to be classed as ritual or art?

These pantomime dances lie, indeed, at the very heart and root of our whole subject, and it is of the first importance that before going further in our analysis of art and ritual, we should have some familiarity with their general character and gist, the more so as they are a class of ceremonies now practically extinct. We shall find in these dances the meeting-point between art and ritual, or rather we shall find in them the rude, inchoate material out of which both ritual and art, at least in one of its forms, developed. Moreover, we shall find in pantomimic

dancing a ritual bridge, as it were, between actual life and those representations of life which we call art.

http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/17087