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The Semantics of Fertility: Levels of Meaning in the Thesmophoria[1]

Abstract: During the last 100 years, several interpretations of the Thesmophoria have been advanced. Following the typology of H.S. Versnel, we can classify these interpretations as substantive, functionalist and cosmological. The three approaches can be seen as complementary, but in practice they are hardly ever pursued simultaneously. This article examines how they fit together. In particular, it re-examines the subject of fertility, asking how it fits in with the wider social and ideological issues to which Detienne and others have drawn attention and which, to our mind, have little connection with agriculture or human reproduction. As a response this paper offers a synthetic interpretation that places fertility in a wider cosmological context and shows it as interconnected with all the other levels of the festival.

Résumé : Plusieurs interprétations des Thesmophories ont été proposées depuis un siècle. En suivant la typologie d'H.S. Versnel, on peut les qualifier de substantives, de fonctionnalistes et de cosmologiques. Les trois approches peuvent être complémentaires, mais, en pratique, elles sont difficilement assumées en même temps. L'article examine la manière dont elles fonctionnent ensemble. Il reprend en particulier le thème de la fertilité, en posant la question de savoir comment il s'insère dans les thèmes sociologiques et idéologiques plus larges sur lesquels Detienne et d'autres ont attiré l'attention et qui, dans notre esprit, ont peu de rapport avec l'agriculture et la reproduction humaine. En réponse à ce problème, on offre une interprétation synthétique qui situe la fertilité dans un contexte cosmologique plus vaste et en montre les relations avec les autres niveaux de la fête.

My article would like to address a problem which I find looming behind a number of present-day interpretations of the Thesmophoria. Our testimonies strongly suggest that the festival had something to do with fertility of both crops and humans. Concern for the fruitfulness of women is strongly suggested by the goddess Kalligeneia, Fair Birth, who gave her name to the third day of the festival. Agricultural fecundity is implied in the most extravagant rite attested for the festival: the exhumation of slaughtered pigs which had been thrown by the participants into a pit some time earlier. According to the Lucian

[1] This article would never have been finished without the support of my student Tereza Vohryzková, who spent dozens of hours discussing the Thesmophoria with me. A number of subjects which I only touch superficially are treated in greater depth in her excellent M.A. thesis *The Laugher of Women. The Meaning and Function of the Ludicrous in a Greek Female Ritual* (2005), available for download at http://ufar.ff.cuni.cz/prace/VT_Laughter_of_Women.pdf. I am also immensely grateful to H.S. Versnel, who has kindly read the draft of this paper and has provided a number of comments and points of criticism.

scholiast it was believed that whoever takes some of their rotten remains and scatters them on the ground "will have a good harvest" (εὐφορίαν ἕξειν).[2] We may wonder whose interpretations this was and to what extent it would have been shared by the Greeks (whether the acting females or the distant males) in the Classical period.[3] Nevertheless, there seems no reason to deny that fertility was an important issue involved, though probably not being seen as the main reason for performing the ritual.[4]

Modern scholars at first eagerly seized on this aspect and in accordance with the prevailing Frazerian paradigm did their best to relate the fertility motive to as many features of the festival as possible.[5] However, many details of the Thesmophoria seemed to resist this one-dimensional model.[6] It is not surprising, therefore, that since the 1970s scholars increasingly started to focus on an entirely different aspect. Thanks to the Paris structuralists it has been recognized that the Thesmophoria are concerned not just with fertility but also with certain features of the position of women in Greek society and of the way women were construed in the ideology of the *polis*.[7] The new approach has been successful and by now no serious interpreter can do without it. The question is how exactly it is related to the fertility explanation.

Few contemporary scholars would wish to deny the importance of fertility. Nevertheless, they frequently have little to say about it. In most cases they are aware that rituals are complex institutions with a wealth of different meanings. But as fertility seems to be the most obvious of these, they find it useless to dwell on it more than necessary, preferring to delve into the more sophisticated issues involved. A good recent example is Barbara Goff, who in her remarkable study of Greek female ritual practice devotes one paragraph to the subject, concluding that "so many rituals convene adult women, and so many different

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[2] *Scholia in Lucianum*, 276, 8 (ed. RABE).

[3] Doubts are expressed by N.J. LOWE, "Thesmophoria and Haloa: Myth, Physics and Mysteries," in S. BLUNDELL and M. WILLIAMSON (eds.), *The Sacred and the Feminine in Ancient Greece*, London/New York, 1998, p. 149-173. Lowe emphasizes (p. 154) that the scholiast refuses the "magical" view just quoted and offers and alternative "physical" interpretation of his own. Yet this does not change anything about the fact that at "folk" level at least the "magical" attitude was common – otherwise the scholiast would have no need to criticize it. Contra Lowe see now the prudent remarks by R. PARKER, *Polytheism and Society at Athens*, Oxford/New York, 2005, p. 275-277.

[4] The primary "native" reason, of course, would be to please Demeter, all the other issues being but side-products. *Cf.* PARKER, *ibid.*, p. 277.

[5] A good example is the classic account of L. DEUBNER, *Attische Feste*, Berlin, 1932, p. 50-59.

[6] Some of these recalcitrant features are summarized by H.S. VERSNEL, *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion II. Transition and Reversal in Myth and Ritual*, Leiden, 1994, p. 236-239.

[7] M. DETIENNE, *The Gardens of Adonis. Spices in Greek Mythology*, tr. by Janet Lloyd, Princeton, 1994; *id.*, "The Violence of Wellborn Ladies: Women in the Thesmophoria," in M. DETIENNE and J.-P. VERNANT (eds.), *The Cuisine of Sacrifice among the Greeks*, tr. by P. Wissing, Chicago/London, 1989.

tropes are employed to figure fertility, that we may suspect that fertility is not all that is at issue".[8] It is not my aim to denigrate sociological approaches and plead for the monopoly of the fertility model in the style of Noel Robertson.[9] I believe that the method of exegesis initiated by M. Detienne and others is correct and that we should try to recover as many meanings of the Thesmophoria as possible. Yet, while fully endorsing the polysemy of ritual, I am convinced that it is not enough to accumulate various levels of meaning. We should also try to show how they are interconnected. We ought to inquire why it is that a festival performed in support of fertility should take precisely the form it does and why it should implicitly address ideological issues which to our mind have little connection with agriculture or human reproduction. To discover this, we will have to analyse what fertility means and how it relates semantically to other aspects of human experience.

In trying to answer these questions, my paper will say little that is new and will mostly be based on famous facts and ideas. Despite this, I am hopeful that it might clarify some methodological issues and help us see more clearly some interesting points about the Thesmophoria which have been noticed before but have not been put together clearly enough.[10]

H.S. Versnel and Three Types of Interpretation

As a starting point I shall take the excellent analysis of H.S. Versnel, one of the few scholars who have raised the same issue and have tried to reconcile the "fertility paradigm" with other types of interpretation.[11] While taking it for granted that "the core of the Demeter festival is the concern for the promotion of human and cereal fertility",[12] Versnel shows that many of its aspects – such as the antaphrodisiac *vitex agnus castus* or the liberation of prisoners on the second day – cannot be explained in this way and require a different approach. In Versnel's view, this does not mean that the fertility explanation should be abandoned but rather that it should be complemented by other approaches. Ritual is essentially polyvalent and no single exegetical method can exhaust its meaning. As a methodological tool, Versnel suggests three basic levels of interpretation one should follow in approaching any Greek ritual. (1) The first level

[8] B.E. GOFF, *Citizen Bacchae. Women's Ritual Practice in Ancient Greece*, Berkeley, 2004, p. 122.

[9] *Cf.* e.g. N. ROBERTSON, "The Magic Properties of Female Age-groups in Greek Ritual," *Ancient World* 26 (1995), p. 193-203.

[10] This remark applies particularly to Froma Zeitlin's article "Cultic Models of the Female: Rites of Dionysus and Demeter," *Arethusa* 15 (1982), p. 129-157, which is packed with fruitful ideas but whose structure is so dense and complex that many of its points remain undeveloped and are difficult to understand in full.

[11] VERSNEL, *Inconsistencies II*, particularly the "Introduction," p. 6-14, and "The Roman Festival for Bona Dea and the Greek Thesmophoria," p. 238-288.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 236.

is *substantive*, seeing ritual as a form of *communication* with the higher beings the action is directed to, and focusing on the benefits that the participants wish to receive from them.[13] In the case of the Thesmophoria, fertility is the main such benefit. (2) The second level is *functionalist* – what rites *do for* society and how they help to sustain it. (3) The third level is *cosmological* or *semiotic* – what rites *say about* society and how they help to create an orderly world of meaning.[14] In Versnel's view all these levels are equally important and should not be separated from one another. He recognizes that the substantive perspective is less sophisticated than the other two, yet it would be absurd to downplay it on that account:

> [W]hoever throws pigs into a chasm and after some time places the putrefied remains on an altar before spreading them over the fields is acting in an essentially substantive manner. Ignoring, neglecting or playing down this aspect, as overenthusiastic addicts to the social [i.e. functionalist] or cultural [i.e. semiotic] interpretation of religion are sometimes tempted to do, cannot but result in desperately cramped interpretations. However, this does not mean that different connotations of the ritual do not deserve serious attention, nor that the "fertility" interpretation should reign supreme.[15]

To give an example from our own culture, Versnel refers to the Indian anthropologist Rajendra Pradhan, who analyses the Dutch obsession with talking about the weather.[16] Pradhan's three answers to this peculiar trait of Dutch manners correspond to the three levels of ritual exegesis mentioned above: 1) Substantive: the Dutch talk about weather because – as they stress themselves – their weather *is* very bad and worth discussing. 2) Functionalist: weather is a neutral topic useful to establish or maintain conversation. 3) Cosmological: the Dutch are obsessed with weather because they are irritated

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[13] The term "substantive" is borrowed from the related discussion of different ways to define religion, substantivists being those who delimit it by singling out a number of essential features that a phenomenon has to posses to be designated as "religious" (the classic example being E.B. Tylor's definition of religion as "belief in spiritual beings"). *Cf.* W.E. ARNAL, "Definition," in W. BRAUN and R.T. MCCUTCHEON (eds.), *Guide to the Study of Religion*, London/New York, 2000, p. 21-34. Applied to ritual, the term is meant to suggest that the actors see their sacred actions as a form of communication with those beings or objects that form the substance of religion. From the "substantive" perspective, the religious explanations of ritual actions offered by the actors should be taken at their face value and should not be interpreted symbolically as referring to social or cognitive problems. In anthropology, this approach usually takes the form of "neo-Tylorean" intellectualism, which sees religion as a technique for understanding the world and bringing its powers under partial control. *Cf.* R. HORTON, "Neo-Tyloreanism: Sound Sense or Sinister Prejudice?," *Man* n.s. 3 (1968), p. 625-634.

[14] Versnel, *Inconsistencies II*, p. 6-10.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

[16] R. PRADHAN, "Mooi weer, meneer: Why do the Dutch speak so often about the weather?," *Etnofoor* 2 (1989), p. 3-14.

by its unpredictability, preferring everything to be ordered and regular.[17] It is obvious that all three levels coexist and there is no point discounting any of them. By way of analogy, the desire of women to promote fertility is just as important as all the social aspects of the Thesmophoria.

Versnel's theoretical defence of the polyvalence of ritual is brilliant, but it raises some further questions. While the functionalist and the cosmological interpretation are natural and easy to grasp for the modern reader, the substantive one seems less so. It is understandable that the Greeks were concerned about fertility and that they wanted to do *something* to support it. What is less intelligible is the nature of this something. What made the Greeks believe that they would support fertility precisely by separating women from men and letting them do a series of rather odd ritual acts none of which are obviously connected with agriculture?

The problem becomes clear if we return to the Dutch weather example and compare the Thesmophoria with what Versnel propounds as a modern version of "substantive" behaviour:

> If you arrive soaking wet (*and* late) at work, you will talk about the rain, but *not* necessarily in order to foster communication, What you really (want to) do is to curse your beastly climate. This perfectly substantive behaviour may even lead to a direct communication with the rain, such as by cursing it all the way to your office in a *monologue intérieur*.[18]

Charming as this analogy is, it is deficient in several respects. While the motivation to curse the rain might be akin to the desire to perform a fertility rite, the difference is in the means of doing so. Cursing the rain is a straightforward operation the point of which is quite comprehensible. It is a natural way to vent one's anger which requires no cosmological background. Performing a rite as elaborate as the Thesmophoria is a much more complex matter. Unlike our secular rain curse, it is supported by the actors' belief in the efficacy of the ritual. Moreover, it is set in a cosmological context. It is true that the participants would hardly have been able to provide a coherent explanation for all the details of the ritual, taking them simply as traditional and god-given. Yet they certainly must have perceived the ritual acts as somehow meaningful and in accordance with their basic cosmological principles. They must have felt that the things done at the Thesmophoria did have some relevant connection with the problem of fertility. In other words, while not denying the importance of the substantive level, I would hold that this level in principle cannot exist without the semiotic or cosmological one. You cannot ask the gods for support unless you know how to do so, i.e. unless you see the gods as part of a

[17] VERSNEL, *Inconsistencies II*, p. 6-7.
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

meaningful universe in which there exist certain natural connections and analogies between human activity and the cosmos.

Thus I would go further than Versnel in claiming that not only do all three levels of ritual deserve equal attention, but that they are inseparable and should be interpreted in terms of one another. Contrary to this, Versnel appears to envisage them as independent and wants to see them in a historical perspective as emerging one after another, being "ideal illustrations of … the shift of meaning in the age-long cultural, social and political evolution".[19] He would locate the "roots" of the ritual in the "ideology of fertility", this being possibly the only meaning of the festival in its original form.[20] In the second stage, originating still in the context of primeval socio-economic conditions, the festival could be seen as acquiring a functionalist overtone, becoming concerned with social tensions between men and women.[21] The last stage of development is supposed to have come with the rise of urban civilisation and complex political systems. At this point the positions of women and men in society must have changed substantially, which generated a new level of meaning in the Thesmophoria.[22]

Now, it can hardly be doubted that rituals take up new meanings with the development of society. It is clear, for instance, that in small rural communities, where everyone is in daily contact with all the others and where most problems are dealt with face to face, the functionalist aspect of female festivals will be much more prominent than in large cities with complex political institutions. The Thesmophoria were celebrated all over the Greek world, and are thus likely to go back to the 11th century at the least, before the Ionian migration. At this early stage they were probably a small village festival and their overall connotations must have been very much different from what we can reconstruct for the Classical period. Yet, even in their primitive rural form they must have had *some* functional and cosmological connotations, for these seem to be characteristic of ritual in general. As anthropological studies have amply demonstrated, even primitive rural communities have to deal with social tensions between the sexes and even the crudest types of magic depend on some cosmological context which resonates with the acts performed.[23] What happens as societies develop is simply that the meaning of all three levels is reinterpreted.[24]

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[19] *Ibid.*, p. 287.

[20] *Ibid.*

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 288. In Versnel's view, a similar development has taken place in modern Greek women's festivals where the element of fertility has almost disappeared but indecent behaviour and imitations of male sexual organs are still a rule (*ibid.*, p. 244).

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 288.

[23] *Cf. e.g.* Victor Turner's studies of the Ndembu in Zambia discussed bellow.

[24] For a good example of this, *cf.* M. BLOCH, *From Blessing to Violence. History and Ideology in the Circumcision Ritual of the Merina of Madagascar*, Cambridge, 1986. Bloch analyses the circumcision ceremony of the Merina and after giving a functional and symbolic interpretation of the ritual in

Evolving as the Thesmophoria certainly were over the centuries, this does not mean that at any stage of their development they were devoid of social and symbolic meanings (no ritual ever is), but simply that under different social conditions these meanings were different too. Unfortunately, we shall never know in what cosmological terms the Greeks of the Dark Age understood the fertilizing aspect of the festival, but we can ask how it was understood in the Classical period. The result of this enquiry will tell us little about the original role of fertility in the Thesmophoria, but it will indicate how fertility made sense from the 5th century onward, which is equally interesting. It is my conviction that the diachronic approach is not to be divorced from the synchronic one. While being aware of historical changes, we are still entitled to see ritual as an interconnected whole at each particular moment. Ritual is remarkable not just for absorbing different connotations in the course of time, but for being able to connect them with one another and make them seem inseparable, divergent though they frequently are.[25] What happens in its evolution, therefore, is not just that new meanings emerge but that by doing so they shed new light on the older ones, often changing them in turn. The point is well put by Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood:

> A fundamental characteristic of religion … is that it forms a structured, articulated system of interacting elements, each of which is defined by its relationship with the others. … No element (no belief or cult act, no deity or facet of a deity's personality) has a fixed value which remains unchanged whatever the context. Each is defined by, and acquires meaning through, its relationships with the other elements which make up the nexus of which it is a part (for example, the whole ritual, when the element under consideration is a ritual act or gesture). … In these circumstances, it becomes clear that when one or more elements in the system change, all the other elements are affected. … It should not be imagined that certain needs, such as the need for food and fertility of the earth, are so basic that they remain constant, and that the relevant religious representations and practices remain unchanged. For all needs, however, basic, manifest themselves in culturally determined forms, and are established and changed by social processes.[26]

Accordingly, in trying to understand the role of fertility in the Thesmophoria, we can profit greatly from relating it synchronously to the other dimensions of the festival, despite its being more ancient than them. It is useful to ask how the "magical" level of the Thesmophoria was socially and cosmologically grounded in the Classical period, what role fertility played in the ideology of the

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its contemporary form, he attempts to trace its historical transformations during the last 200 years, showing that while the basic symbolic elements remained more or less the same over the years, the social and cosmological role of the ritual changed completely several times.

[25] This is e.g. the implication of Victor Turner's theory of ritual, which I recount bellow.

[26] C. SOURVINOU-INWOOD, *"Reading" Greek Death. To the End of the Classical Period*, Oxford, 1995, p. 20-22.

polis, and how exactly it was symbolically connected with the position of women in Greek society.

The Semantics of Fertility

Our problem can be restated as follows: in the Thesmophoria, we find a cluster of symbolic actions that were seen by the Greeks as supporting fertility. At the same time, modern interpreters have shown convincingly that these selfsame symbolic actions can be related to wider social and ideological issues, being connected with problems stemming from the position of women in Greek society. Since neither of these levels of meaning is to be doubted, it follows that the two things have to be related. What is the nature of this relation and why did women seem ideal actors for a fertility ritual?

At first sight it might appear that the answer to the latter question is obvious: since women have the fascinating ability of giving birth, who else should know the secret of making things proliferate? Yet the power of women to secure fertility can hardly be explained in this straightforward manner. No doubt their motherhood was important, but rather than the starting-point of the Thesmophoria it seems to have been their aim. As we shall see bellow, matrons actually had to play the part of virgins during the festival and it was only at the end of a complicated ritual process that they resumed their motherly status. The implication is that fertility is not something women automatically possess in virtue of their biological disposition. Rather, it is something they too need to acquire from the goddess.[27] While their potential to become mothers clearly predisposed women for participating in a festival of Dê-mêtêr, in itself it does not tell us how their fertility support worked.

To discover this, we must first ask what "fertility" means. Surprisingly, most interpreters leave this question unanswered and assume that the concept is somehow obvious. In a very general manner it is, but to understand a fertility rite we need to strive for precision. If a peasant performs a magical operation, how exactly does this action fit in with his other farming activities and what aspect of the agricultural cycle is the rite meant to support? One possible answer was offered long ago by Bronislaw Malinowski in his famous analysis of Trobriand garden magic. While Frazer understood magic as primitive science, a childish way of achieving technological results, Malinowski showed this armchair conception as illusory and ethnocentric. The Trobrianders make a

[27] It is therefore fallacious to claim, as Robertson does ("The Magic Properties of Female Age-groups in Greek Ritual," p. 194-195), that to "make babies, which is easy, helps to grow crops, which is difficult". As Susanne Cole has recently shown, reproductive anxiety was widespread in ancient Greece, being a frequent subject of oracles and medical treatises; *cf.* her *Landscapes, Gender, and Ritual Space*, Berkeley, 2004, ch. 5. Accordingly, the Lucian scholiast repeatedly claims that the festival was meant to promote the fertility of 'both crops and men' (276, 14-15; 21-22).

clear distinction between technological procedures based on empirical knowledge of natural processes on the one hand and magical acts on the other. The necessary technical procedures are always executed with great care, but the native knows well that technology is not enough. His experience taught him

> … that in spite of all his forethought and beyond all his efforts there are agencies and forces which one year bestow unwonted and unearned benefits of fertility, making everything run smooth and well, … and another year again these same agencies bring ill luck and bad chance, pursue him from beginning till end and thwart all his most strenuous efforts and his best-founded knowledge. To control these influences and these only he employs magic. Thus there is a clear-cut division: there is first the well-known set of conditions, the natural course of growth, as well as the ordinary pests and dangers to be warded off by fencing and weeding. On the other hand there is the domain of the unaccountable and adverse influences, as well as the great unearned increment of fortunate coincidence. The first conditions are coped with by knowledge and work, the second by magic.[28]

If we accept Malinowski's description, fertility will be seen as opposed to agricultural work *sensu stricto*. Fertility is connected with what cannot be achieved by technological means, with the unaccountable and the precarious. It is perceived as an unpredictable power standing outside the reliable structures of man's world. Fertility rites are means to deal with external powers which are beyond our control but on which we depend. By performing rituals, men try to domesticate them at least partly and bring them to their side.

How do women relate to this? We can take a clue from another anthropologist, Max Gluckman, who in his classic article "Rituals of Rebellion in South-East Africa" analysed Zulu female rituals which in some respects bear striking similarities to the Thesmophoria. In them, contrary to the norm, girls and their mothers temporarily asserted their dominance over men.[29] Gluckman interpreted these rituals in sociological terms,[30] but he could not overlook that in the eyes of the Zulu themselves the purpose of the rites was wholly different:

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[28] B. MALINOWSKI, "Magic, Science and Religion," in *id.*, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, Prospect Heights, 1992 [1948], p. 28-29.

[29] M. GLUCKMAN, "Rituals of Rebellion in South-East Africa," in *id.*, *Order and Rebellion in Tribal Africa. Collected Essays with an Autobiographical Introduction*, London, 1963, p. 113: "The girls donned men's garments, and herded and milked the cattle, which were normally taboo to them. ... At various stages of the ceremonies women and girls went naked, and sang lewd songs. Men and boys hid and might not go near." Interestingly, the festival also bears resemblance to the Adonia in one respect (*ibid.*): "Their mothers planted a garden for the goddess far out in the field, and poured a libation of beer to her. Thereafter this garden was neglected."

[30] He saw them as an illustration of "rituals of rebellion," i.e. institutionalized protests which publicly display conflicts inherent in the social structure, but do so on behalf of the whole community, asserting a deeper unity which exists despite the conflicts (*ibid.*, p. 114). Gluckman speaks of a "catharsis" being achieved in this way (*ibid.*, 126), but he emphasizes that the catharsis is *social*, not psychological. Its aim is to resolve a conflict in the social structure, not to deal with tensions in human psyches, which are beyond the competence of the anthropologist. *Cf.* Gluckman's "Introduction" to *Order and Rebellion*, p. 26-27.

they were performed in honour of the Heavenly Princess Nomkubulwana, who was associated with rains and fertility, personifying "the fickleness of nature". What was the connection between the agricultural framework and the social tensions involved? In Gluckman's view, one of the answers lay in the character of Nomkubulwana, an elusive goddess symbolizing the unstable aspect of agriculture. "She is propitiated when the crops begin to grow and when they are attacked by pests, *so that the women and their goddess are associated with the most uncertain stages of agriculture*."[31] What women have in common with the inscrutable power of fertility is element of *uncertainty*. In the case of women, this uncertainty relates to their being perceived as a source of "potential instability of domestic life and groups".[32] The peculiar nature of female fertility rites is best seen by contrast with the first-fruit ceremony, which celebrates the opposite aspect of the agricultural cycle: the time of *confidence* when crops are ripe and ready to be stored. As we might expect, the ceremony is a political ritual organized by the state in honour of the king and the ancestral spirits. Nomkubulwana, who granted fertility, is ignored this time and women make no offering to her. The "period of agricultural certainty … is thus associated with the king and the political system", i.e. with the stable skeleton of the society.[33]

Gluckman's account is inspiring, though it cannot be transferred to Greece mechanically. Demeter and Persephone are far more complex personalities than the shadowy figure of Nomkubulwanu[34] and the connection between ritual and agriculture was less straightforward in ancient Greece than in African village communities. As Lin Foxhall has argued, in Greece it is in fact "inappropriate to talk about the 'sowing' or 'harvest' festivals as if these celebrations happened simultaneously with the seasonal tasks in hand."[35] Rather than coinciding with crucial agricultural tasks, rituals fill in the transitional periods between them, serving "as markers before and after periods of intensive and critical work. They are moments in which the community ritually takes a deep breath before the rush hits, or lets out a sigh of relief when it has finished."[36] Different as this is from the Zulu situation, the basic idea seems to be the same. What we see in Greece is that growing crops requires two different activities: the technological

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 133, my italics.

[32] *Ibid.* Gluckman interprets this instability mainly in functionalist terms: it consists in the strains produced by women's marital situation, frequently leading to psychological disorders and spirit-possession. Yet we could even more productively describe it from the cosmological point of view, taking account of how women are construed by the Zulu rather than what social and psychological tensions they are exposed to.

[33] *Ibid.*

[34] Who, incidentally, is the only developed deity of the Zulu pantheon (*ibid.*, p. 112).

[35] L. FOXHALL, "Women's Ritual and Men's Work in Ancient Athens," in R. HAWLEY and B. LEVICK (eds.), *Women in Antiquity. New Assessments*, London/New York, 1995, p. 106.

[36] *Ibid.*

work of male farmers and the ritual activity of their women.[37] While men, who wield political power, take care of that part of agriculture which is controllable and predictable, women are associated with dangerous transitional periods which are a constant source of uncertainty, being at the mercy of nature and the gods. Clearly, the association is due to the fact that the social position of women was equally uncertain and ambivalent.[38] It has been frequently demonstrated that women were conceived by Greek males as semi-wild, irrational creatures who are by nature unreliable, hedonistic, and obsessed with sex. As such, they represent a week point in the structure of the *polis*. They are necessary to its existence, yet they also threaten to disrupt it. In this regard, they are ideal representatives of the unpredictable power of fertility, which may be a blessing but may just as well become a source of destruction – as the Demeter myth shows all too well. In view of this fact it seems natural that a festival in support of fertility must also be concerned with classificatory ambivalence of the female sex. Social problems and cosmic anxieties are two sides of the same coin, being conceived in terms of one another.

The Pigs, Aischrologia, and the Paradox of Chaste Obscenity

Let me try to illustrate my thesis by interpreting some particular features of the Thesmophoria. We can start from the pigs, which are described by the Lucian scholiast as the main fertility symbol of the festival. In his view, it is due to their ability to produce many offspring (διὰ τὸ πολύτοκον) that they foster "the generation of both crops and men".[39] He is not alone in taking note of the pig's fecundity,[40] and it is clear that it played an important part in the choice of this animal.[41] Yet, a symbol's meaning is never exhausted by one interpretation only and we may expect the pigs to have more to tell us. It has been argued by M. Detienne that the Greeks considered the pig (together with the goat) "the wildest of the domesticated animals."[42] Pigs lived "in herds in the open spaces of the uncultivated ground at some distance away from the human group and

[37] An important exception were the Thargelia, the only Greek festival to be plausibly connected with harvest (though again just in the sense of taking place before it). As Foxhall remarks, "it is perhaps significant that it has been appropriated by Apollo, the ultimately masculine deity" (*ibid.*, p. 104). The parallel with the masculine harvest ritual of the Zulu is noteworthy.

[38] As Froma Zeitlin observes with respect to the Thesmophoria ("Cultic Models of the Female," p. 139), it was the women's marginal position in Greek society that made them "ideal ritual actors at this precarious time of the year which looks to transition and renewal of the social cycle."

[39] *Scholia in Lucianum*, 276, 21-22.

[40] *Cf.* Aristotle, *Gen. An.* IV 774b 19-26; *Hist. An.* X, 637a 10-11.

[41] Moreover, pregnant sows were particularly popular in sacrifices for Demeter. *Cf.* J. BREMMER, "The sacrifice of Pregnant Animals', in R. HÄGG and B. ALROTH (eds.), *Greek Sacrificial Ritual, Olympian and Chthonian*, Stockholm, 2005, p. 155-165.

[42] DETIENNE, *The Gardens of Adonis*, p. 54.

its dwellings."[43] The subject was further investigated by Mark Golden, who has shown that the popular image of the pig was rather mixed. On the one hand, the pig was a valuable domestic animal which was easy to breed, being satisfied by all kinds of food.[44] On the other hand, it was wild by its original nature and there were stories of wild pigs behaving disruptively.[45] Eventually this even gave rise to the idea that the pig was sacrificed to Demeter deities "per contrarietatem" as her foe, being prone to trample the harvest.[46] While hardly a convincing theory of the origin of the pig sacrifice, it does tell us something about the pig's ambivalent position in the system of Greek thought. The pig was seen as a creature on the border between Nature and Culture. It was tamed and useful in most cases at present, but was hostile and dangerous by its original nature. In Golden's words, "the pig stands for a potentially hostile natural force which can be tamed to benefit human society".[47] Hence its aptitude for symbolizing fertility – a power standing outside the reliable structures of human world but lending itself to co-operation.

Linguistically, the pig (*choiros*) is associated with female genitalia. This brings us to another aspect of the Thesmophoria traditionally connected with fertility: the diverse sexual symbols appearing throughout the ritual. The Lucian scholiast mentions cakes fashioned in the shape of male genitalia that the "Bailers" brought out of the Megara. Models of female vagina are also attested.[48] What is more, women indulged in ritual joking, commemorating the jests by which Iambe cheered up Demeter in her mourning.[49] As the term αἰσχρολογία reveals,[50] the jokes were obscene, "similar to things one might hear from a brothel".[51] The joking also took place on the bodily level. In one version of the Demeter myth Baubo made the goddess laugh by revealing her private

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[43] *Ibid.*

[44] *Cf.* e.g. Aristotle, *Hist. An.* VIII, 595a 18-21.

[45] For references see M. GOLDEN, "Male Chauvinists and Pigs," *EMC* 32 (1988), p. 8-9. A good example is Plutarch, *Moralia,* 580f.

[46] Servius, *In Verg. Georg.* II, 380: *Victimae numinibus aut per similitudinem aut per contrarietatem immolantur: per similitudinem, ut nigrum pecus Plutoni; per contrarietatem, ut porca, quae obest frugibus, Cereri… Cf. Scholia in Aristoph. Ranas*, ad 338: θύουσι γὰρ ἐν τοῖς μυστηρίοις τοῦ Διονύσου καὶ τῆς Δήμητρος τὸν χοῖρον, διότι λυμαντικός ἐστιν ἀμφοτέρων. As Golden argues ("Male Chauvinists and Pigs," p. 4), the idea may be an old one, having a connection with Pythagoreanism (*cf.* Ovid, *Met.* XV, 110-115) and being possibly implied in a fragment of Aeschylus (618a, ed. METTE).

[47] GOLDEN, "Male Chauvinists and Pigs," p. 8.

[48] Theodoretus, *Graecarum affectionum curatio* III, 84.

[49] Apollodorus, *Bibl.* I, 5, 3: ... γραῖά τις Ἰάμβη σκώψασα τὴν θεὸν ἐποίησε μειδιᾶσαι. διὰ τοῦτο ἐν τοῖς θεσμοφορίοις τὰς γυναῖκας σκώπτειν λέγουσιν.

[50] Diodorus Sic., *Bibl.* V, 4, 7: ἔθος δ' ἐστὶν αὐτοῖς ἐν ταύταις ταῖς ἡμέραις αἰσχρολογεῖν κατὰ τὰς πρὸς ἀλλήλους ὁμιλίας διὰ τὸ τὴν θεὸν ἐπὶ τῇ τῆς Κόρης ἁρπαγῇ λυπουμένην γελάσαι διὰ τὴν αἰσχρολογίαν.

[51] Cleomedes, *De motu circulari corporum caelestium* II, 1, 91.

parts,[52] an act likely to have been imitated by the women. Indeed, we may safely suppose that the models of genitalia were used for comic effect too, this being the standard usage in Greek ritual.[53]

Since the time of James Frazer all of these ritual acts have been seen as symbolic fertilizers, being an attempt "to quicken the seed by sympathetic magic".[54] Since sex is the instrument of procreation, it can easily be seen as a natural symbol of fertility.[55] Yet again, one suspects there might be further, more interesting aspects to the mimetic link between sexuality and fertility. I have argued that in agricultural context the concept of fertility is connected not so much with the tilling of soil as with the various unpredictable factors that can spoil the whole thing. If we apply the same scheme to human procreation, it becomes obvious that the source of fertility can hardly be sexuality in itself. Carrying out the sexual act as such is more or less in human power. It corresponds to the hard but manageable labour executed by the farmer (an analogy drawn explicitly by the Greeks, who used to liken the begetting of children to ploughing the earth and sowing seed in it). What reproductive anxiety there was, it related not to the controllable act but to the precarious result: for having intercourse in no way guarantied that conception would take place. The concept of fertility has to do with the helplessness one experiences facing this uncertainty. Once again, it is perceived as an unaccountable power transcending the structures of our world.

In my view, it is only by taking this into account that the sexual aspects of the Thesmophoria can be fully appreciated. Straightforward as the association between reproductive organs and fertility might appear, a closer look at the context suggests there are other interesting factors at play. As Walter Burkert emphasizes in his discussion of *aischrologia*, "the Geek evidence … always points most conspicuously to the absurdity and buffoonery of the whole affair: there is a conscious descent to the lower classes and the lower parts of the anatomy."[56] The Thesmophoria confirm this. It is significant that their sexual elements occurred precisely in the context of *joking*. What does a joke consist in? Contemporary theories of humour frequently see its essence in the element of incongruity between two different patterns. As Mary Douglas put it in her famous article on joking, a "joke is a play upon form. It brings into relation disparate elements in such a way that one accepted pattern is challenged by the

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[52] Clement, *Protr.* II, 21.

[53] *Cf.* W. BURKERT, *Greek Religion*, tr. by J. Raffan, Cambridge, Mass., 1985, p. 104-105.

[54] Thus J. Frazer in his Loeb edition of Apollodorus, note 3 on I, 5, 3 (p. 37). *Cf. id.*, *The Golden Bough*, vol. IX, London, 1925, p. 234-252.

[55] *Cf.* e.g. H.W. PARKE, *Festivals of the Athenians*, London, 1977, p. 83: "The male organs again suggest fertility." Similarly A. BRUMFIELD, "Aporreta: Verbal and Ritual Obscenity in the Cult of Ancient Women," in R. HÄGG (ed.), *The Role of Religion in the Early Greek Polis*, Stockholm, 1996, p. 69-70.

[56] BURKERT, *Greek Religion*, p. 105.

appearance of another which in some way was hidden in the first."[57] The result is a momentary subversion of standard power relations which is liberating in that it frees us from form. "The joke … affords opportunity for realising that an accepted pattern has no necessity. Its excitement lies in the suggestion that any particular ordering of experience may be arbitrary and subjective."[58] In jokes, two patterns are confronted in such a way that the arbitrariness of both becomes apparent and behind them we can glimpse for a moment the chaotic fullness of all other possible patternings of reality. As a result, joking "creates a chaos which is creative, but short-lived",[59] passing off quickly to let regular structures regain their sway.

Even this brief résumé makes it easy to see what makes joking an ideal symbolic medium for fertility rites. If fertility is to be understood as an unpredictable power standing outside the structures of man's world, it is clear that ritual joking evokes precisely such a creative power. That the jokes are sexual in content is to be explained not by the procreative connotations of sexuality as such, but by the way sex relates to other elements of the festival. The ritual acts are not just sexual, they are *obscene*, using sexuality in a provocative manner to attack some other dominant pattern. It is important that the joking is meant to imitate Iambe, the archetypal "scoffer", always ready to deride the established forms in the manner of the iambic poets.[60] The jests exchanged in her honour were "shameful" (*aischra*) not just in being sexual but in that they attacked the official discourse of the *polis*. Aristophanes pictures recommendations for adultery as their main subject in the *Thesmophoriazusae*, and while his dramatic depiction cannot be taken as a faithful portrayal of ritual practice, we have reasons to believe that he was not wide of the mark.[61] The aim of the *aischrologia* was to go against standard categories of behaviour, opening up a space for chaos to burst out briefly.[62] It is this liminal outburst that is mimetically connected with fertility, serving as a crucial ritual symbol.

It is not accidental that the ritual subversion was entrusted to women, who were themselves perceived as a disruptive element in the *polis*. As Mark Golden has persuasively argued, it is due to their analogous position in Greek cosmol-

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[57] M. DOUGLAS, "Jokes," in *ead.*, *Implicit Meanings. Essays in Anthropology*, London/New York, 1975, p. 96. *Cf.* R. JOHNSON, "Two Realms and a Joke. Bisociation Theories of Joking," *Semiotica* 16:3 (1976), p. 195-221.

[58] DOUGLAS, "Jokes," p. 96.

[59] I.S. GILHUS, "Religion, Laughter and the Ludicrous," *Religion* 21 (1991), p. 258.

[60] *Cf.* Hesychius, *s.v.* ἰαμβίζειν· τὸ λοιδορεῖν, *κακολογεῖν· ἀπὸ Ἰάμβης τῆς λοιδόρου*.

[61] *Cf.* the ritual recommendations for adultery attested by the Lucian scholiast for the Haloa (280, 16-17).

[62] *Cf.* ZEITLIN, "Cultic Models of the Female," p. 145: the efficacy of *aischrologia* "is increased by the fact that the laughter is itself subversive. It breaks through the façade of the reserved and chaste wife, a sign ... of the role inversion which functions, in Greece and elsewhere, as a creative transgression of order, a return to chaos at a critical phase of passage and renewal."

ogy that both the pig and female vagina can be referred to as *choiros*. If "the pig stands for a potentially hostile natural force which can be tamed to benefit human society",[63] the same holds for women – or, to be more precise, for female sexuality, which was a source of both fascination and dread for the Greeks. It was through the first woman, Pandora, that sexuality entered the human world, being a punishment for the Promethean theft of fire. As such it was a boon and plague in one.[64] It was necessary for the reproduction of the city, but it could easily get out of hand and disrupt the moral order. "The message is that women's sexuality, like the pig, could help or harm."[65] The purpose of the ritual is to convert the harmfulness into a blessing, incorporating it into the structures of the *polis* and turning it into an agent of fertility. "The pigs, otherwise destructive of Demeter's crops, are in this rite transformed into agents of creation. … Men learn to tame nature … and themselves are tamed."[66]

How exactly is the taming of female sexuality accomplished? A glimpse at our festival shows that the process is far from direct. It corresponds to the strange fate of the piglets, who in turn imitate that of Persephone and her journey through the Underworld. To see what this journey means and how it is realized in ritual, let us turn to one last important feature of the Thesmophoria. While some aspects of the rite were openly sexual, there were others that pointed strictly in the opposite direction. Not only were the participants forbidden to have intercourse with men, they even acted in a positively antaphrodisiac manner, chewing garlic[67] and sleeping on beds made of the

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[63] GOLDEN, "Male Chauvinists and Pigs," p. 8.

[64] The ambivalence of female sexuality is well expressed by the image of the "wandering womb" which is the source of female wildness but on which all procreation ultimately depends (Plato, *Tim.*, 91c). *Cf.* H. KING, *Hippocrates' Woman. Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece*, London/New York, 1998, p. 214-225. King draws an illuminating parallel between the "womb" and Pandora's insatiable "belly" (Hesiod, *Th.*, 599), γαστήρ having both meanings (*ibid.,* 24-26).

[65] GOLDEN, "Male Chauvinists and Pigs," p. 9. For sexuality as a dangerous weapon in the hands of women Golden refers to Aristophanes, *Lys.*, 682-685, where the chorus of women swears by Demeter and Kore to "unleash the ὖν, the vagina, and give their male adversaries such a shearing that they will run crying to their demesmen for help" (*ibid.,* 9-10). *Cf.* below for my interpretation of female martial activity in the Thesmophoria.

[66] *Ibid.,* 6. That pig sacrifice was interpreted in terms of a transition from Nature to Culture is obvious from the Lucian scholiast's remark that the pigs are "thank-offerings for Demeter because she civilized the race of men by giving us her fruit" (276, 22-24).

[67] *Cf. IG* II², 1184 on the supply of garlic for the Thesmophoria. Women also chewed garlic at the Skira, "so that they do not smell of perfume and can abstain from sexual intercourse" (Philochorus, 328 F 89 [ed. JACOBY]). Interestingly, however, Aristophanes has Euripides' In-law claim that women chew garlic after having spent the night with their lovers, so that their husbands do not get suspicious (*Thesm.*, 493-496). The anaphrodisiac meaning of garlic could thus be easily inverted into its opposite, and I find it likely that the women made use of this in their ritual joking.

"chaste" *vitex agnus castus*.[68] In other words, they behaved in ways that were *both chaste and obscene*.

This paradox has been often treated by modern scholars. Sociologically minded interpreters have pointed out that it mirrors analogous inconsistencies actually existing in Greek society and its ideology. As Froma Zeitlin puts it, the rite "acts out the contradictions of female roles which are defined by chastity, on the one hand, and obscenity, on the other. … The coexistence of these two within a single ritual expresses … the inherent 'double bind' under which the woman operates. This double bind demands chastity from the wife and yet insists on her sexual nature."[69] A different perspective has been offered by H.S. Versnel, who further notes that the matrons at the festival were in several respects represented as *virgins*. In one of the aetiological myths it was to the virgin daughters of King Melisseus that the secret ritual had first been revealed.[70] From that time on, all the women celebrating the rites bore the ritual name of "bees" (*melissai*),[71] i.e. of animals notorious for their chastity and life-long virginity.[72] Even the "Greek term *choiros* is predominantly applied to *young* pigs and, accordingly, to (parts of) young girls",[73] thus suggesting that the matrons are to return temporarily to the status of girls before marriage. To account for this, Versnel sees the main paradox of the Thesmophoria not so much in the tension between chastity and obscenity as in the fact that while the festival was only open to married women, they did things unthinkable for a matron, indulging in obscenities and usurping man's political roles.[74] This created an anomaly which was cognitively unbearable and was resolved by introducing the mediating element of chastity, temporarily reducing the matrons "to the status of virgins before marriage: though sexually mature they are not (yet) available for consummation".[75] It was only as virgins that women could do things otherwise unthinkable for them.[76]

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[68] For its antaphrodisiac effects see Aelianus, *Nat. An.* IX, 26: ὁ ἄγνος. τοῦτόν τοι καὶ ἐν Θεσμοφορίοις ἐν ταῖς στιβάσι τὰ γύναια τὰ Ἀττικὰ ὑποστόρνυται. καὶ δοκεῖ μὲν καὶ ἐχθρὸς εἶναι τοῖς δακέτοις ὁ ἄγνος, ἤδη δὲ καὶ ὁρμῆς ἀφροδισίου κώλυμά ἐστι. *Cf.* Dioscorides, *De materia medica* I, 103, 3.

[69] ZEITLIN, "Cultic Models of the Female," p. 149.

[70] Apollodorus, 244 F 89 (ed. JACOBY).

[71] *Cf.* Porphyry, *De antro nympharum*, 18; Callimachus, *In Apollinem*, 110.

[72] *Cf.* VERSNEL, *Inconsistencies II*, p. 251-253.

[73] *Ibid.,* p. 257.

[74] In Versnel's view the Greeks considered the ritual "*beneficial and necessary* from a socio-biological [= functionalist] point of view but *wrong and undesirable* from a socio-cultural [= cosmological] point of view" (*ibid.,* p. 275), i.e. they found it healthy for the functioning of society that occasionally their women behave contrary to the norm, but at the same time saw such behaviour as violating some of the basic principles of Greek ideology.

[75] *Ibid.,* p. 246. Versnel's approach is inspired by Mary Douglas' classic analysis of classificatory anomalies. According to her, anomalies are generally perceived as dangerous and every culture has to find some means of dealing with them. They can be tabooed, labelled dangerous,

Convincing as these interpretations are, we need to demonstrate how exactly they relate to our problem of fertility.[77] To do so, we must make one more general point concerning this concept. For Frazer and his successors, fertility seems to have been understood as the material ability of things to multiply abundantly. One look at agriculture shows, however, that the situation is more complex. When a farmer prays for fertility, he does not pray for the abundance of anything whatsoever but of his crops only. It makes no sense to speak of fertility in the case of weeds or pests. Fecund as these may be, they go against the farmer's effort, and are thus seen as opposed to fertility proper. Accordingly, fertility is not a neutral term referring to natural processes, but an ideological concept singling out a small number of these processes and setting them in opposition to others. This is particularly important once we focus on human reproduction. Since agriculture is parallel to marriage, what corresponds to agricultural fertility on the level of humans is not the capacity to beget children in general but to beget *legitimate children within marriage*.[78] Ritual appeals for fertility do not extend to prostitutes because their children are not lawful, being a human analogy to weeds in the field.

Marriage as such, however, cannot grant fertility. Being a human institution, it belongs to the realm of controllable structures. Fertility, on the other hand, is a power that transcends human structures but on which these structures

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eliminated, or sanctified (M. DOUGLAS, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo*, with a new preface by the author, London/New York, 2002 [1966], p. 48-49). They can also be re-classified, and this is precisely what seems to happen in the Thesmophoria. If matrons must transgress standard categories, they "*cannot do so as matrons*" but must assume the status of virgins (VERSNEL, *Inconsistencies II*, p. 285).

[76] To support this conclusion, Versnel gives examples of other sacred roles that could only be performed by virgins – or at least by women who masked as virgins, such as the Delphic Pythia. Greek ideology construed matrons as essentially dependent on men, and whenever women were to exercise sacred authority independent of male dominance, the situation was easier to think if they did so as virgins, who were seen as wild and Amazonian in their nature (*ibid.,* p. 282-283). Versnel's interpretation appears correct and I shall build upon it later. Yet for the Thesmophoria it does not seem sufficient. If fear of cognitive disturbance were the only reason for turning matrons into virgins, the resulting paradox would have no meaning in itself, being but an attempt to avoid the even more paradoxical situation that would result if sexuality and motherhood were not separated. In my view, we must go further and look for some positive meaning of the paradox and of the women's virginal features, seeing it as one of the important sources of the festival's power.

[77] Burkert's claim (*Greek Religion*, p. 244) that the women's abstinence "is an antithetic preparation which seeks fulfilment in procreation and birth" is too simple to count as an explanation. More to the point are the words of Froma Zeitlin ("Cultic Models of the Female," p. 148): "sexual promiscuity and sexual abstention are polar categories which are, in fact, homologues of one another, one from above the norm (too much) and one from bellow (too little)." Unfortunately, Zeitlin does not explain why this should be so. *Cf.* my own interpretation below.

[78] *Cf.* DETIENNE, "The Violence of Wellborn Ladies," p. 138: "the 'Thesmophoria' must reproduce the city, the whole political body, both in the human species by producing legitimate children and in the cultivated space with fructifying seeds."

depend. To evoke fertility one needs to work with the antistructural. This is precisely what happens in the Thesmophoria. It has been amply demonstrated by M. Detienne and others that the Thesmophoria celebrate the institution of marriage.[79] Nevertheless, while marriage does appear as the framework of the festival, most of the ritual actions are rather associated with categories that negate it. Women indulge in obscenities and possibly make jokes about their presumed lovers. At the same time they fight men off and sleep on the antaphrodisiac *agnus castus*. In other words, while the festival leads toward marriage, it does so by drawing power from its contraries. In Greek ideology, these are of two kinds, both summarized pregnantly by J.-P. Vernant:

> When a young girl enters into marriage she enters the domain that belongs to the deity of cereals. To enter this domain and remain there she must rid herself of all the "wild" character inherent in the female sex. This wildness can take two, opposed, forms. It might make the woman veer towards Artemis, falling short of marriage and refusing any sexual union or, on the other hand, it might propel her in the opposite direction, beyond marriage, towards Aphrodite and unbridled erotic excess.[80]

Women at the Thesmophoria embody precisely these two extreme types which are the very opposites of marriage: that of the Amazon, avoiding men and fighting against them,[81] and that of the courtesan, seeking men's company but being unable to produce legitimate offspring.[82] Both of these forms of the feminine are immensely powerful, endangering the orderly world of the *polis*. Yet in themselves, both are infertile. The Amazonian world is full of power, but

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[79] *Cf.* M. DETIENNE, *The Gardens of Adonis*, p. 78-81.

[80] J.-P. VERNANT, "Introduction" to M. DETIENNE, *The Gardens of Adonis*, p. xv. The two extremes are strictly opposed, and yet can easily turn one into the other, as Detienne has demonstrated for the myth of Atalanta ("The Perfumed Panther," in *id.*, *Dionysus Slain*, Baltimore, 1979, p. 20-52).

[81] *Cf.* DETIENNE, "The Violence of Wellborn Ladies," p. 144: "Each matron... is changed into an Amazon, armed in the fortress of the *Thesmophorion*."

[82] For clarity's sake we should note that while the Amazon and the courtesan belong to the realm of Artemis and Aphrodite respectively, we cannot simply identify the two extreme types with their corresponding goddesses. This has been well illustrated for Artemis by J.-P. Vernant, who shows that the goddess does not represent wildness in its pure form but also "sees to it that the boundaries between the wild and the civilized are permeable in some way" ("The Figure and Functions of Artemis in Myth and Cult," in *id.*, *Mortals and Immortals. Collected Essays*, ed. & tr. by F. Zeitlin, Princeton, 1991, p. 198). The world of Artemis is thus "not that of Atalanta. It is not closed in on itself, shut up in its own alterity. It opens out onto adulthood" (*ibid.,* p. 200). This is why both Artemis and Aphrodite have their share in the marriage ritual. Like all divinities, they do not simply embody the Other but also make it possible to establish a contact between this Other and the human world. The ambivalence of Artemis is mirrored in the medical qualities of the *agnus castus* which was (and still is) used not only for suppressing sexual desire but also for promoting menstruation and encouraging conception, i.e. for enabling the female to get over the threshold that Artemis guards so anxiously. For the medical properties of the *agnus castus* and its connection with Artemis *cf.* KING, *Hippocrates' Woman*, p. 86-88.

the power cannot be domesticated, and hence is seen as useless and barren. The world of courtesans is charged with sexual energy, but its outcome is just ephemeral pleasure, producing nothing.[83] Thus we have two *potent but infertile* (because uncultivated) forces on the one hand, and the *potentially fertile but in itself impotent* institution of marriage on the other. Apparently, fertility can only be achieved by reconciling all the parties involved.

How is this done in the ritual? We know too little about the order of ritual actions, but we can take a clue from the Demeter myth standing in the background. In the myth, the Amazonian, antaphrodisiac aspect corresponds to the goddess' anger and refusal to grant fertility. The turning point comes with the appearance of Iambe or Baubo, who represent the opposite, frivolous and obscene type, making an attack on Demeter's gloom. The attack succeeds and results in an outburst of laughter – a creative chaotic force exploding from the cleavage between standard categories. I believe we must construe the festival as proceeding in a similar way. Since Demeter's mourning was imitated on the second day of the Thesmophoria,[84] it is likely that the obscene joking took place on the third day which was meant to stage the resolution of the myth. While all the ritual actions head towards the confirmation of marriage, they do not do so directly but by opposition. Marriage is first contradicted by the refusal to co-operate, but this very refusal is in the next step challenged by its own opposite, the unrestrained exposure of sexuality. In the confrontation, both extremes show each other as ridiculous and untenable. In this way, their boundaries are opened and free energy is released in the outburst of laughter. The extremes having been discredited, all that remains is the middle term:[85] the state of marriage, which presents a moderate mixture of both its opposites, turning *abstinence* into *chastity*, and *licentiousness* into the *pleasures of legitimate intercourse*.[86] Hence it is the ideological concept of marriage that all the energy released by joking is invested in, making it potent and fertile.

The aim of fertility rituals is to summon antistructural power and make it co-operate with human institutions. The power has to be captured in its natural wildness, but at the same time needs to be made compatible with the structures it is meant to invigorate. In other words, it has to undergo a partial transforma-

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[83] The ritual image of this unproductive pleasure are the frivolous gardens of Adonis that the Greeks contrasted with the serious business of agriculture. *Cf.* DETIENNE, *The Gardens of Adonis*, p. 101-107.

[84] *Cf.* Plutarch, *De Iside*, 378d-e.

[85] *Cf.* BURKERT, *Greek Religion*, p. 105 (commenting on ritual *aischrologia* in general): "By plumbing the extremes the just mean is meant to emerge."

[86] *Cf.* the interpretation of Barbara Goff, who sees the festival as an arena where women learn to manage their desire in accordance with the ideology of the *polis*. The Thesmophoria teach the participants to have "a healthy interest and pleasure in sex, which will, however, be suspended in the interests of marital chastity. Whatever pleasure the women are to obtain is on offer only inside marriage" (*Citizen Bacchae*, p. 129).

tion, keeping its original essence but becoming milder and easier to deal with. It needs to be brought to the threshold between Nature and Culture, mediating between both. The Thesmophoria present an ingenious technique of doing this. Their trick is to confront two different antistructural elements in a way that deprives them of their excessiveness and reduces them to a third, ambiguous state. This state is still "natural" and savage, but standing halfway between two extremes, it becomes manageable and can be brought into concord with the moderate structures of human world. The process is brilliantly summarized by Mark Golden:

> The exhumed pigs are neither raw (and so natural) or cooked, transformed by a technique characteristic of human civilization; they are transformed by a natural process.[87] … Kore is neither alive on earth nor dead bellow, but alive among the dead in the underworld; she is neither a maiden nor a full-time wife, but instead lives with her husband for only part of the year. And women are neither virgins nor promiscuously and uncontrollably sexual (dangerous like the pigs who trampled Demeter's grain); they enjoy sex, but only within the bonds of marriage.[88]

It is for this reason, I believe, that the matrons were temporarily reduced to the status of virgins (*nymphai*), as H.S. Versnel has emphasized. In Greek ideology, a *nymphê* is an ambiguous creature. Far from being an innocent girl, she is a maiden "in the prime of womanly maturity just before its marital consummation, that is: 'on the brink'."[89] She is in a state of transition, "standing at the intersection of two categories, the *korê* and the *mêtêr*".[90] She is chaste and not available for consummation, and yet seductive and full of sexuality. It is telling that besides designating the "bride", the word *nymphê* also has the meaning of "clitoris".[91] In other words, the *nymphai* partake of both the extremes involved in the Thesmophoria: that of Artemis and that of Aphrodite. Unlike these divinities and their mythical followers, however, the human *nymphai* are capable of cultivation – indeed, they are defined as a transitional

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[87] It is important that the transformation takes place in two steps: the pigs are first thrown in the Megara to be recovered later. This seems to correspond to the succession of chastity and obscenity in the ritual. When in the Megara, the pigs gradually accumulate creative energy, but have no means of communicating it to our world, being hidden underground. It is only when the Megara are re-opened and the piglets taken out that the communication is re-established. In ritual this accords with the obscene elements which enable the liberating laughter to break through the sombre façade of the females (it is significant that the piglets are carried up together with the phallic cookies which set off the *aischrologia* – *Scholia in Lucianum* 276, 15-17). When lying on the altar at the end of the festival, the putrefied piglets represent a savage power reduced to a state in which it can be approached and utilized.

[88] GOLDEN, "Male Chauvinists and Pigs," p. 7-8.

[89] VERSNEL, *Inconsistencies II*, p. 286.

[90] VERSNEL, *ibid.,* p. 254, paraphrasing M. DETIENNE, "The Myth of Honeyed Orpheus," in R.L. GORDON (ed.), *Myth, Religion and Society*, Cambridge, 1981, p. 102.

[91] For evidence *cf.* J.J. WINKLER, *The Constraints of Desire*, London/New York, 1990, p. 181-182.

category whose wildness sooner or later *must* be domesticated in marriage,[92] a lifelong *nymphê* being a contradiction in terms. In this way, they are perfect representatives of "natural" power mild enough to be culturalized, and it is understandable that the matrons are to be assimilated to them when evoking the elusive power of fertility.

Levels of Meaning

The interpretation just sketched is deliberately simplified and not meant to be definite. Religious symbols are essentially polyvalent and their meaning can never be exhausted. They are highly condensed patterns able to connect various aspects of reality and bring them into structured configurations. In themselves, however, these connections and configurations are meaningless. They only acquire meaning by being related to some particular form of human experience. Since human experience is manifold and its social conditions are shifting continually, the meaning of symbols is fluid and manifold too. Instead of trying to capture this ever changing fullness, my aim has been more modest: to show that the various planes of ritual meaning are interconnected and must be read in terms of one another. If the Greeks understood the Thesmophoria related to fertility, we must take this "native" or "substantive" exegesis seriously, but at the same time must try to find out how it fits in with the functionalist and the cosmological levels of meaning.

To see the relation between these three levels clearly, I suggest that once more we draw inspiration from the anthropologists – this time from Victor Turner and his classic article "Symbols in Ndembu Ritual".[93] When analysing Ndembu rituals, Turner paid great attention to interpretations offered by the Ndembu themselves. The native exegesis constituted the "normative pole" of ritual symbolism, being mostly connected with basic "components of the moral and social orders of Ndembu society".[94] These were always perceived as salutary and cohesive. Yet when the anthropologist observed the ritual actions performed, it became obvious that the native "normative" account was fre-

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[92] For various metaphors used for this process of domestication *cf.* Cl. CALAME, *Choruses of Young Women in Ancient Greece*, new and revised ed., tr. by D. Collins and J. Orion, Lanham, 2001, p. 238-244.

[93] V. TURNER, "Symbols in Ndembu Ritual," in *id.*, *The Forest of Symbols*, Ithaca/London, 1967, p. 19-47.

[94] *Ibid.,* p. 28-29. Turner mostly calls this pole "ideological," only referring to it as "normative" on p. 29. In our context, however, I prefer the word "normative" so as to avoid confusion with the "semantic" level of Versnel's scheme, which is concerned precisely with ideology seen as the way a group of people construe their society in relation to wider cosmological context. For this usage of "ideology" *cf.* GOFF, *Citizen Bacchae*, p. 9, who defines it as "all the social discourses, practices, and institutions that seek to eliminate or disguise" conflicts arising from the distribution of power "by *naturalizing* the unequal distribution" (my italics), i.e. by grounding it cosmologically.

quently contradicted by the way people really behaved with reference to their symbols.

As an example, Turner adduces the girl's puberty ritual *Nkang'a*, with the "milk tree" as its dominant symbol.[95] When explaining its mystical properties, the Ndembu described the tree as standing for human breast milk, thus referring to matriliny, the principle on which the continuity of Ndembu society depends. The milk tree is a symbol of nourishment and motherly protection. It represents the transmission of traditional values: as a child feeds on the milk of its mother, "the tribesman drinks from the breasts of tribal custom".[96] In all these senses the informants stress the harmonizing aspects of the milk tree symbolism. In spite of that, the actual ritual performances Turner observed were far from harmonious and clearly showed that the milk tree is not just a symbol of cohesion but can help to spell out conflicts and antagonisms. It is sometimes seen as the "flag" of Ndembu women, mobilizing them in opposition to men: "the women sing songs taunting the men and for a time will not let men dance in their circle."[97] Another opposition evoked is that between the novice's mother and the other women: even she is "debarred from attending the ring of dancers".[98] And last but not least, the milk tree symbolizes the novice's initiatory suffering and is called her "place of death", expressing "the conflict between the girl and the moral community of adult women she is entering".[99]

To account for the discrepancy between the native, harmonizing account of the actors and the much more conflicting aspects observed by the anthropologist, Turner introduces the concept of symbolic "condensation". Ritual symbols are condensed in that they possess not just the consciously recognized normative pole of meaning but a "sensory pole" as well, which is located at the bodily and physiological level of ritual and which "may be expected to arouse desires and feelings".[100] As Turner noticed, the sensory pole mostly refers not so much to ideal norms as to the tensions inherent in them.[101] It can be seen as a sort of

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[95] The tree (*Diplorrhyncus condylocarpon*) is designated as "milky" due to its "white latex, which exudes in milky beads if the thin bark is scratched" (TURNER, "Symbols in Ndembu Ritual," p. 20).

[96] *Ibid.,* p. 22.

[97] *Ibid.,* p. 23.

[98] *Ibid.,* p. 24.

[99] *Ibid.,* p. 22.

[100] *Ibid.,* p. 28.

[101] *Ibid.,* p. 28-30. This, of course, is not say that there are no more than two levels of meaning in ritual. Both the normative and the sensory level can be multilayered. One should keep in mind that Turner's normative/sensory distinction is just one possible way of dividing ritual meanings, which should be supplemented by other ways, such as the entirely different three-level model offered by Versnel. In actuality all the ritual meanings exist simultaneously, it is just in our explanatory schemes that they are broken up into different types.

necessary "shadow" of the normative level. In Turner's view, no system of ideal norms can ever be free from various inconsistencies. There are always conflicts between norms valid in different situations as well as between collective ideals and individual ambitions. Ritual symbols are remarkable in that by means of their two poles they are able to contain both the ideals and the conflicts arising from them. By embracing all the contradictions of human social life and fusing them with collective norms, they make social life possible.[102] Ultimately, the purpose of ritual is to "utilize the power or energy of mutual hostility in particular relationships" and invest this energy into "symbols of solidarity", endowing them "with warmth and desirability".[103]

Clearly, the distinction between the normative and the sensory pole of meaning corresponds to what we see in the Thesmophoria. The native interpretation stresses the beneficial subject of good harvest and prosperity, constituting the normative pole of the festival's meaning. At the same time, by bracketing native explanations and focusing on the nature of ritual acts involved, we can see that the symbolism helps to articulate tensions inherent in Greek ideology and social structure. Officially, women perform their rites on behalf of the whole community. It is a task entrusted to them by their husbands who have to pay all their expenses. Yet in performing this task they assume a symbolic role which is far from compatible with their standard role in the *polis*. They do things normally inadmissible for a woman: organize in a semi-political way, ward-off males and make obscene jokes. Their putative attacks on male transgressors, circulating in male narratives,[104] are particularly telling, being in strict opposition to the harmonious normative pole of the festival. The situation is closely parallel to the milk tree symbolism which is said to be cohesive by the Ndembu while in fact articulating conflicts at the sensory level. Following Turner, we may suppose that the two levels of the Thesmophoria will be intimately connected, the power evoked by the sensory conflicts being necessary for accomplishing the normative aim.

Turner's scheme helps us understand how the substantive and the functionalist level of our festival can be related. Being associated with conflicts, the sensory pole of symbols arouses strong collective emotions, frequently working with "social excitement and directly physiological stimuli, such as music, singing, dancing, alcohol, incense, and bizarre modes of dress."[105] The same symbols, however, also associate harmonizing ideal norms, and the purpose of ritual work is precisely to enable an exchange between the sensory and the normative pole. "Norms and values, on the one hand, become saturated with

[102] *Ibid.,* p. 30, 44.

[103] V. TURNER, *The Drums of Affliction. A Study of Religious Processes among the Ndembu of Zambia*, Oxford, 1968, p. 268.

[104] *Cf.* Aelianus, fr. 44 (ed. HERCHER); Pausanias, IV, 17, 1.

[105] TURNER, "Symbols in Ndembu Ritual," p. 30.

emotion, while the gross and basic emotions become ennobled through contact with social values."[106] It is not difficult to see how this works in the Thesmophoria. At the normative-substantive pole of meaning, the festival upholds the institutions of agriculture and marriage, supporting the growth of cultivated crops as well as the production of legitimate citizen.[107] At its sensory pole, it explores the ambivalence of female status in Greek society, inciting a number of strong oppositions both between men and women and between various images of the feminine. One can imagine there must have been a lot of excitement about this unusual ritual occasion which enabled women to behave in ways not normally acceptable. Yet, as I have tried to show, the excitement follows strict ritual order. The negative energy of opposition is step by step transformed into the positive force of laughter, reconciling the women with their normative motherly roles and enduing them "with warmth and desirability".[108]

From the functionalist point of view, the purpose of "rituals of rebellion" is to keep society together despite – and with the help of – the conflicts contained in the social structure. From the cosmological perspective, the aim of ritual is similar but more "intellectual": to keep the universe meaningful in spite of the limits and inconsistencies that every ordering of reality is bound to entail. How this is achieved was the subject of some of Turner's later works in which he claimed that the sensory level of ritual has essentially liminal characteristics, suspending or inverting standard ideological relations.[109] Ritual aims at preserving and revitalizing the fundamental categories of society. This aim, however, is not achieved simply by articulating and affirming these categories, but by confronting them with what transcends them, with the dangerous and the antistructural.[110] Such a confrontation is necessary because every system of categories is necessarily limited. No classification of reality is capable of containing all possibilities. There are always everyday situations that are hard to fit in, putting its validity into question and threatening with disorder. Ritual is an institution that makes it possible to face this threat and turn it into positive power. In rituals, normal categories are dissolved in liminal chaos for a moment to be born from it anew, strengthened and regenerated. Ritual recognizes chaos as not only a source of danger but an important wellspring of power too. For

[106] *Ibid.*

[107] The "normativeness" is well expressed in the name of the festival as interpreted by the ancients, who generally derived it from the fact that Demeter is *thesmophoros*, "the bringer of laws" (θεσμοί). See e.g. Diodorus Sic., *Bibl.* V, 5, 2; *Scholia in Lucianum*, 276, 25-27.

[108] TURNER, *The Drums of Affliction*, p. 268.

[109] *Cf.* V. TURNER, *The Ritual Process. Structure and Antistructure*, Chicago, 1969.

[110] *Cf.* V. TURNER, *From Ritual to Theatre. The Human Seriousness of Play*, New York, 1982, p. 79-85.

chaos is not just a negation of order. It is also its foundation. As Mary Douglas famously put it:

> Granted that disorder spoils pattern, it also provides material of pattern. Order implies restriction; from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made and from all possible relations a limited set has been used. So disorder is by implication unlimited, no pattern has been realised in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite. This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognise that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality. It symbolises both danger and power.[111]

Applied to the Thesmophoria, this position suggests that the purpose of the festival is to deal not just with possible social tensions but also with the limits of some of the basic categories of Greek thought.[112] From the cosmological point of view, ritual and religion are ways of confronting any given classificatory system with otherness. In Greek religion, women played a crucial part precisely because they were seen as ideal mediators between the *polis* and the Other.[113] Women were construed as standing on the border between Nature and Culture.[114] They were essentially wild and dangerous, yet their wildness was open to cultivation, and when integrated into the structures of the *polis*, could be transformed into a positive force.

In the Thesmophoria, this transformation can be deduced, among other things, from the different images of female martial activity associated with the festival. I have already mentioned the stories of female attacks on unlawful male intruders. Narratives of this type symbolize the undiluted fierceness of a dangerous power standing outside the world of the *polis*.[115] Aetiologically, they

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[111] DOUGLAS, *Purity and Danger*, p. 117.

[112] The contrast is nicely summarized by ZEITLIN, "Cultic Models of the Female," p. 130-131: "There is a distinction to be made between the effect of ritual on the participants themselves [= the functionalist level] and the effect and motivation of that participation within the society as a whole [= the cosmological level]. Thus from the cognitive-cultural point of view, the study of the female in Greek religion offers a rich source of material for the understanding of the symbolic category of femaleness within the culture – its contradictions, its tensions, its positive and negative poles."

[113] *Cf.* J. REDFIELD, *The Locrian Maidens. Love and Death in Greek Italy*, Princeton, 2003, p. 148-150.

[114] The reason for this was no doubt their ability to give birth to living beings. *Cf.* the classic analysis of Sherry B. ORTNER, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?," *Feminist Studies* 1 (1972), p. 5-31.

[115] According to Barbara Goff, the narratives implicitly recognize "the possibility of women's anger at their subjected lives. ... By inculcating the parameters of proper behavior, ritual provides one of the techniques that will contain female violence, and conversely, the extent of women's anger demonstrates the necessity for the annual repetition of the ritual cycle" (*Citizen Bacchae*, p. 136-137). In my view, this is an unwarranted psychological speculation. We do not know whether Greek women felt angry at their subjection and the fact that the feminists of today would proves nothing for ancient females whose values were constituted differently. Following Max Gluckman (see above, note 30) I would hold that the ritual deals with tensions contained in

correspond to Demeter's anger and refusal to co-operate. At the same time, however, we know of an entirely different type of female power celebrated in the Thesmophoria. It is expressed in the "Chalcidian Pursuit", a secret sacrifice performed in memory of an ancient incident in which women's prayer helped to drive the enemy army away to Chalcis.[116] In this episode, we see the violent force of refusal transformed into positive power exercised on behalf of the city and its institutions.[117] We may surmise that the sacrifice took place on the third day and belonged to the resolution phase of the festival. It pictures women as wielders of power which is mysterious and unaccountable but no less important than the political and military power of men, being in touch with the divine.[118]

No doubt this is why women are important in fertility rituals. The problem of fertility is precisely how to turn the dangerous into the beneficial, how to enable exchange between order and disorder without abolishing the border between the two. Women play a crucial part in this, since in the eyes of the Greeks they are the chief channels through which chaos can break into the *polis*. Their innate wildness and licentiousness might easily get out of hand and corrupt basic social institutions. Yet this same inclination toward disorder makes women extremely important. By having one foot in the *polis* and the other outside it, women are able to mediate between the two realms. The chaos they hide within can be domesticated. Their danger can turn into power.

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the social structure rather than actual psychological states of the participants, i.e. its aim is not to control anger already present within female psyches but to structure female experience in a way which prevents anger from occurring. It is also worth pointing out that the mythical women are not violent against men in general but against unlawful intruders only. Their violence thus marks a negative refusal to mingle with men rather than positive hatred against the male sex.

[116] *Suda*, *s.v.* Χαλκιδικὸν δίωγμα; Hesychius, *s.v.* δίωγμα. Once again, Barbara Goff wants us to see this as an image of female anger (*Citizen Bacchae*, p. 138): "May we not read here the trace of some heavily repressed account of female violence, conveniently deflected from the citizenry to the generic 'enemy'?" To my mind, this goes against the spirit of the story which clearly depicts women as supporting their husbands.

[117] For parallels see GOFF, *ibid.,* p. 193-201.

[118] As Goff rightly remarks (*ibid.,* p. 193), it is "the equivocal position of the female, part and not part of the community, [that] positions her to intervene on that community's behalf." Goff is convinced, however, that the power accorded to women was purely illusory, ritual only offering "experiences of fantasized citizenship, which, in the end, perhaps, occlude and mystify their exclusion from the real thing" (*ibid.,* p. 220). I find this conclusion biased. As Mary Douglas shows in her famous "inventory of powers" (*Purity and Danger*, p. 122), there are two types of power. "There is power in the forms and other power in the inarticulate area, margins, confused lines, and beyond the external boundaries." The first type is external, being associated with statuses and positions in the social structure. The other type is internal and is often seen as supernatural and not entirely controlled. I see no reason why either type should be more important than the other. It is just in our secular society that political power pretends to be "the real thing". In Greece, as in most societies, the power of the Other was taken no less seriously. I am sure that Greek women were intelligent enough to turn this to their advantage even outside the field of ritual in their day-to-day dealings with men.

It is with this implicit recognition at the back of his mind that the Greek farmer saw it as worthwhile to transport the unsavoury remains of piglets to his field. There is no use denying that his behaviour was genuinely magical. It is likely that the fortunate fellow thought of the remains in straightforward "substantive" terms as charged with a supernatural power that was to be conveyed to the soil to make crops grow.[119] Yet, while he hardly consciously attributed any social or ideological meaning to the operation, he would not have been able to see it as meaningful if it did not harmonize with his general cosmological outlook. The fact that the piglets were treated by women in a secret ritual involving inversions of standard categories and temporary return to wildness was enough to convince him that the fertile power must have been drawn from deep and authentic sources indeed.

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[119] In saying this, I do not mean to disparage such magical thinking and see it as a sign of primitiveness. As Ronald Grimes points out (*Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, Lanham, 1982, p. 47), "we have no reason to assume that magic is absent from technological societies, although it is probably adumbrated in them. I suspect magic is minimal in modern agriculture, but modern therapy and modern sexuality are as laden with magical thinking as healing and fertility rites ever were. In addition, advertising is full of it. People deny they believe in magic, but ingest this pill and use that shampoo expecting 'somehow' (the cue for magical transcendence) to become what they desire." Clearly, if we wanted to understand why advertising manages to convince people of the miraculous power of certain brands of perfume or washing powder, we would have to proceed just as we do in the study of Greek rituals, i.e. to read the adverts semiotically, relating the images used to the wider context of our culture and ideology. *Cf.* the classic analyses by Ronald Barthes in his *Mythologies* (Paris, 1957).