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# **The Lady Who Served the Mystery Potion: The Eleusinian Sacrament Personified**

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## **The Dwarfish Grotesquerie**

In the etiological myth for the mixed drink of the *kykeon* that was thereafter drunk by the initiates for the Mystery celebrated annually for two millennia at the sanctuary of the ‘Two Deities’ (*tó theó*) at the village of ancient Eleusis about eleven miles west of Athens, the Lady who first served the potion did something obscene that made the goddess Demeter laugh (Homeric *Hymns*, 2.203). She had been grieving for the separation from her daughter Persephone, who had been abducted by the lord of the netherworld Hades, while she was gathering magical plants with a group of maidens attending her. The Two Deities were these two, the mother and the daughter, Demeter and Persephone, but since the role of one would devolve into that of the other, they were referred to as the Holy Duo. The jest that made Demeter laugh was an obscenity, but a sacred one, which was the clue to the meaning of the initiation and an essential element in the indoctrination of the new inductees into the secret of the religious Mystery.

The Lady who served the potion was herself the personification of the obscenity, a dwarfish grotesquerie who went by the name of Iambe, named for the ‘iambic’ rhythm of scurrilous verse and dancing. The name was also a calque upon the whole series of names punning upon the *ia/o-* root that designated the homonymous word in Greek (*iós*) for the ‘arrow’ and the ‘drug’ or entheogen that anointed it with its ‘toxicity,’ so named for the poisoned ‘bow’ or (*tóxon*). Shamans in Classical antiquity commonly traveled in the spirit upon the vehicle of the arrow with its toxicity. The verbal root occurs in the word for the ‘druggist’ doctor as *iatrós*, and in the numerous mythical figures associated with entheogenic empowerment: like Ion of Athens, the eponymous ancestor of the Ionian tribal group of Greek peoples, conceived from a magical crocus plucked in a cave beneath the city’s Acropolis; and Iamos of Olympia, the etiological founder of its hereditary brotherhood of divinatory shamans; and the cow maiden Io, who was constantly in estrus from the bite of the cow-fly (*Tabanus bovinus*); and the flower maiden Iole (‘Violet’), who was deflowered by Heracles; and Iason (Jason), who was named for his anointment with a special toxin of Prometheus; and even Iacchos, who was Bacchos (the chthonic Bacchus, Dionysus) personified as the joyous shout who led the procession of Eleusinian initiates.

## **Death and the Maiden**

The abduction of Persephone by Hades is a frequent mythical motif of shamanic rapture accessed in rituals of herbalism, probably referring to the sexual fantasies of females involved in the gathering of psychoactive plants. In the case of Persephone’s experience, it was occasioned by the plucking of the *nárkissos* (Homeric *Hymns*, 2.8) (*Pancratium maritimum* or the ‘sea-daffodil’), depicted in pre-Classical Minoan frescoes, and specifically as a rite of visionary herbalism on a golden ring from Cretan Isopata. The flower’s name belongs to the pre-Greek language, but it was assimilated into Greek as the verbal root for ‘narcosis’ and ‘narcotic.’ Since the essence of the Mystery initiation at the Eleusinian sanctuary was something seen, a vision of ‘the holy,’ although the hall of initiation was in no way suitable for a theatrical performance, we should expect that the *kykeon* served by Iambe was psychoactive. Thus her name belongs to the series of punning personifications upon the motif of the toxic arrow.

## **Dirty Dancing**

Numerous figurines of Iambe survive that depict the nature of her obscenity. She may clutch the lyre that would provide the musical accompaniment for her unseemly song and dance. Most characteristic of her obscenity is that her face is displaced to her belly, sometimes with a topknot of hair above, and with the legs joined and the vulva located just above at the bottom of her belly face. The exposed vulva is essential to her identity to the extent that she might even be considered merely an anthropomorphism of the sexual organ, much as its male complement in the phallus and its anthropomorphism as brotherhoods of dwarfish ithyphallic grotesqueries, such as figured in the Mystery initiation of the 'Great Gods' on the island of Samothrace and at the *Kabeirion* west of the Greek city of Thebes. These ithyphallic grotesqueries also had dwarfish sisters. Thus Iambe may also be depicted as she spreads her legs, riding upon a pig. The 'piglet' was slang for the *pudendum muliebre* (vulva), probably determined by the response of the *Suidae* (species of mammals that includes the pigs, hogs, boars, etc.) to the human pheromone. Thus in Aristophanes' *Acharnians* (425 BCE), an impoverished farmer is left with nothing to bring to market except his daughters in a sack disguised as 'piglets' for sale. Prostitutes could be termed 'pig merchants,' and the pig obscenity is well documented in the metaphors of Attic comic stagecraft. The boar was its obvious human mate.

Iambe's name is generally interchangeable with Baubo, who was the anthropomorphism of the *baubón* or dildo more commonly called *ólisthos* or 'slipper,' and she therefore could be seen as a symbol for both the male and the female. For this reason, Iambe's legs are also sometimes joined so that the figurine can present a more credible likeness of a penis, with the topknot as the split meatus emerging from the foreskin, rather than the fanciful chevelure of the female's pubic hair. Even thus, however, her basic identity is the vulva, since the *baubó* designated the 'belly.'

Ancient phallic effigies survive with the penis shaft ornamented with a depiction of the vulva, reminiscent of the penile subincision rites of puberty as practiced by diverse peoples around the world, implanting the image of the vulva upon the male organ. The obscene jest that cheered Demeter's grief was that Iambe offered the goddess a view through the spread labia of the vulva into her belly-womb, displaying that she was pregnant with a male child (*Orphic Hymns*, frag. 52). This was the son whose birth was announced at the culmination of the Mystery initiation, that 'Brimo had given birth to Brimos,' a son named after the mother. The Mystery goddess had multiple analogous names, and so did her son. Ultimately the goddess was a version of the threefold Hecate, who merged all aspects of the female reunited to access her terrible power. The dwarfish Iambe-Baubo is a version of the worldwide figure of the squatting goddess caught at the moment of parturition. Examples occur from regions as diverse as the Aztecs of the New World and the sixth-millennia BCE birthing goddesses of Anatolian Çatal Hüyük.

## **The Almond Gateway**

The view through the gateway of the spread vulva is the figure familiar in Celtic lore of the Sheila-na-gig, an old woman, with withered breasts and spindly ribcage pulling open the labia. She was expropriated into Christianity as symbolic of the entrance into sacred space, often ancient pagan sculptures incorporated into church architecture as ornaments above the gateways. The almond-shape of the spread vulva is thus termed the *mandorla* and it is common in Christian art as signifying mystical vision, surrounding depictions of the Christ, the Virgin, or other views into the celestial realm. In the initiation hall at the sanctuary of Eleusis, this vulva gate was represented architecturally by the doorway on the ancient antique shrine enclosed within the cavernous hall, surrounded by the stepped perimeter that accommodated the several hundreds of inductees. It was here, beside the doorway, that the hierophant proclaimed the child's birth as the culmination of the Mystery experience.

What perhaps cheered Demeter's grief was apparently the negation of the sexual polarity that the episode of her daughter's abduction represented: the male abductor and the abducted bride have transitioned into the maleness of the female. Such merging of dichotomous antitheses is the essential experience of mystical vision. The primordial goddess was a sexual totality, producing the world as the solitary agent from the gapping cosmic vulva called Chaos, the 'gapping aperture or mouth' (Hesiod, *Theogony*, 124 *et seq.*). She continued this manner of parthenogenesis until she externalized maleness as her procreative co-partner in the form of Ouranos, the 'heavens.' Neolithic figurines portray her maternal female body with an elongated neck, sometimes quite explicitly with the head unmistakably in the likeness of the glans penis. She evolved into the Cycladic figure of the bearded Aphrodite, eventually becoming the deified Hermaphrodite of the Classical period, sometimes depicted raising her garments like Iambe to display her female's male genitals. The head of the bearded Gorgon Medusa, whose pig-tusked mouth Freud recognized as a 'displaced dentate vagina' extending its clitoris as a lolling penile tongue, perpetuates this motif, evolving into its pacified transmutation as the cross-dressing virginal goddess Athena.

### **The Necromancy of Socrates**

Iambe-Baubo in the ancient folkloric tradition was an *Englottogástor*, a 'Tongue-in-Belly.' The 'Tongue-in-Bellies' are one in a group of dwarfish grotesqueries, more explicitly fungal anthropomorphisms belonging to the tribe of 'Shade-feet' or *Skiápodes*. These are creatures with only a single broad foot, for which reason they were also called Monopods. They jump vigorously about on their sturdy leg, and then when they tire, they fall upon their backs and rest in the shade of their wide foot like a parasol.

Aristophanes parodied Socrates in the *Birds* comedy (414 BCE) as performing a rite of necromancy in the cemetery of the *Kerameĩkos* just outside the western gate of the city of Athens, summoning the 'Tongue-in-Bellies' as an act of profanation of the Mysteries of Eleusis. In fact, the cemetery was located at the beginning of the Sacred Road that the initiates would follow through the Holy Swamp on route to Eleusis for the Mystery. The Swamp appears again in the *Frogs* comedy (405 BCE), where Aristophanes staged the deity Dionysus meeting a chorus of initiates as they crossed the Swamp.

In this Swamp was also the very ancient Temple of Dionysus, that was opened just once a year for the Lesser Mystery, a secret ritual that commemorated the abduction of Persephone. The building was known as the 'bull-stall' (*boukólion*). Here the 'queen' or *Basilinna*, was prepared by a group of elder women for her sexual engagement with the god Dionysus. She was said to sleep with him. She was the wife of the hereditary 'king archon,' who perpetuated into the democratic government the former role of nobility in control of religious matters. The secret encounter was a shamanic rite of sexual rapture accessed, as indicated by the Temple's designation as a bull-stall, by an appropriate psychoactive agent, the zoomorphic plant that materialized as bellowing or mooing bovines. This was a mushroom. There is no name for the mushroom in English, only metaphors. This is characteristic of things too sacred to name. Mushroom is one of those metaphors, assimilated as early as the Elizabethan era from the French *mousseron*, itself derived from Late Latin *mussare*, to 'moo/bellow,' from Greek *muká-esthai*, to 'bellow.' Mushroom is onomatopoeic for this bellowing sound which as early as the Classical period of Greece mushrooms emitted as they sprouted from the ground.

### **Fungal Anthropomorphisms**

In later tradition, these 'Shade-feet' and their like were perpetuated in medieval lore and are depicted in sacred Christian architecture, but their fungal anthropomorphism is well known, as indicated by C.S. Lewis's *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (1952), a series of narratives for

children titled *The Chronicles of Narnia*. The jumping imitates the sudden bursting of the mushrooms from the ground, and the parasol is a metaphor for the mushroom traceable back to Sanskrit and the Vedic Soma sacrament. Siberian tribesmen intoxicated by the mushroom mimic the mushroom bursting from the ground by thrusting their head through restraining membranes. The shaman becomes consubstantial with the entheogen.

In Lucian's fantastical *True History* (second century CE), we find another mushroom anthropomorphism as the *Caulomycetes* ('Cover-mushrooms'), a tribe of mushroom warriors who wield the fungal cap above their heads as shields. They are obviously quite small if the cap is big enough to provide their cover. These warriors recall the berserkers, and more particularly the 'haoma wolves,' an elite band of Persian Achaemenid warriors, obviously involved in ritual lycanthropy, like the wolf cults of the ancient Spartans. The Persian Zoroastrian version of Soma was the Avestan *haoma*, known to the Greeks as [h]ómomi, the moly (*mólu*) of Homeric tradition, and associated with wolves and foxes since canines are fond of the intoxication it affords. The berserker tradition was widespread throughout ancient Europe and is documented in the time of the second-century CE Roman Emperor Trajan as involving mushrooms in his encounter with the Dacians of Thrace, who were named as the 'wolf-people.' The particular species of mushroom is probably the *Amanita muscaria* since it best fits a panoply of metaphoric attributes and it is the only mushroom noted for the enhanced physical stamina that it accesses.

### **Food of the Thunderbird**

The parody of Socrates' necromancy was immediately preceded in the comedy by the entrance of the Titan Prometheus with his phallus, the obligatory appendage of his costuming, swaddled in drapery until its unfurling as a parasol. Prometheus, the creator of man, stole celestial fire from the gods, as another enactment of herbalist plant gathering, and Aristophanes reveals him as a 'Shade-foot' as he hides from the gods above in the shade of his parasol. For the theft of fire, Prometheus was chained to a mountain, where daily an eagle feasted upon his liver. The liver functions as the filter of the body's toxins, affording it the highest concentration of any poisons ingested. It was thought that the liver was a microcosmic model of the cosmos, making it thereby the seat of divination. From the divine fluid that dripped from the Titan's gnawed liver sprang a magical plant that grew with a double stem (Apollodorus Rhodius, *Argonautica*, 3.856). No plant sprouts from the ground with a 'twin' stem except the Amanitas since its stipe ('stem or trunk') thrusts both up and down as the mushroom fruits, producing the characteristic shape of a dumbbell. The Amanitas are commonly called raven's bread for the fondness of the birds for its intoxication, but other birds respond in a similar fashion. It is also eagle's fare, as documented in the folklore of the New World and the tales of the thunderbird.

Another of the creatures summoned in Socrates' necromancy are the *sycophants*, the ones who tattled on the people who had been just recently prosecuted for performing the Mystery ceremony in their private homes with guests at their symposia or drinking parties, apparently profaning the sacred potion by abusing it as a recreational drug. Among those accused was Alcibiades, the notorious disciple of Socrates. The *sycophant* is literally the person who 'exposes the fig.' It is a term of reproach for a despicable type of people who turn state's evidence for the prosecution. The fig, however, is an obscene gesture with the hand, the thumb protruding between the clenched forefinger and middle finger, imitating the penis/clitoris lurking between the labia of the vulva. The fig is both womblike, with its profusion of seeds enmeshed in its rosy menstrual flux, and also masculine, resembling the scrotum of the testes beneath its neck like the penis. The fig revealer or sycophant is a flasher exposing the genitals, the revelation of Iambe-Baubo that made Demeter laugh.

The Gorgon Medusa, whose head the hero Perseus harvested with a pruning hook and hid in the

apple-picker's sack called the *kibisis* is the most explicit anthropomorphism of this same fungal sacrament, so depicted in a fourth-century BCE *amphora* surviving from a tomb in Southern Italy, and documented as a variant local account recorded by the second-century CE antiquarian and traveler Pausanias. Significantly, the sound she emitted was a mooing. From the blood that dripped into the sea from her severed neck sprouted coral (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 4.735-762), which is spongy until immersed in water, providing another metaphor for the mushroom as the sponge (Greek *spóngos*, Latin *fungus*), descriptive of its avid absorption of the rainfall as it fruits.

### **Persephone's Abduction and the Bacchanalia**

The *Tongue-in-Belly's* child that the withered old servant revealed as she served the Mystery potion was essential to the meaning of what the initiates experienced. Demeter had first been offered a drink of red wine. This she had refused. The abductor Hades was interchangeable with the chthonic persona of Dionysus, as was enacted in the sexual encounter of the *Basilinna* in the Temple in Swamp. The rituals of Dionysus mediated his dual botanical manifestations as the wild mushroom and as its cultivated version as the fungal yeasts that grow the wine upon the juice of the harvested fruit of the tended grapevine. The bacchant revel celebrated the former and was a version of the same motif as Persephone's abduction. The emblem of the bacchants was the thyrsus, the symbolic container for the gathered wild plants, prototypic of which was the mushroom. In common culinary nomenclature, the stipe of the mushroom was termed its thyrsus. But instead of the offered drink of wine, Demeter had prescribed the mixed *kykeon* of the Mystery initiation. It was intended as the antithesis to the wild plants of the episode of the abduction, and it symbolized the dry equivalent to the liquid of the wine and the transition from the rape of the maiden to her elevation as married queen of her husband. The botanical equivalent of the cultivated vineyard was the plow-land planted with its crop of grain, particularly the barley, *Hordeum vulgare*. The Mystery drink was kernels of barley and the mint fleabane in an aqueous medium. It was not a beer or any alcoholic product since grain will not ferment unless its kernels are mashed to convert its starch to sugars upon which the yeasts might grow.

### **Triptolemos**

The child emerging from the *Tongue-in-Belly's* spread vulva had various names since they are all merely epithets for the same entity. Ultimately, as the one to whom Demeter taught the art of the cultivated field of grain, he was named Triptolemos. His true parenthood was part of the restricted knowledge, since the traveler Pausanias, as always interested in local versions of the mythical tradition, states that he had intended to discuss this matter of the parents of Triptolemos, but the goddess in a dream had warned him to avoid the topic. His name suggests the 'triple warrior' (*tri-ptólemos*) an honorific and heroic title. The trinity is essential to his identity, but he is actually named for the symbolic 'three furrows' (*trípolos*) that were cut at the primordial plowing, and repeated annually as commemoration at each subsequent year's inaugural plowing at a special plot designated by an altar dedicated for him. If Pausanias had been allowed to pursue the subject, he would probably have disclosed that Triptolemos was the son of the reunited female trinity, representing the goddess as maiden, mother, and postmenopausal crone. Hence the boney skeletal ribcage of the Sheila-na-gig. In Greek, the reunited three phases of the goddess were personified as Hekate (Hecate), a postmenopausal crone, patroness of wet nurses and of herbal witchcraft, but depicted as three maidens back-to-back, wielding implements of the Mystery. The intrusion of the phallic plowshare into the vulva plowed as furrows into the primordial uncultivated Earth required restitution by the compensatory offering of the plowman as sacrificial victim. In ritual enactments, the offering of a pig was substituted for the plowman.

### **Eubouleus, the Covenant Personified**

Thus another name for this figure was Eubouleus, the so-called swineherd who witnessed the abduction and lost his pigs down the same chasm that gaped for the maiden's descent. He was cited as the etiology for the offering of pigs at the Thesmophoria festival, where women, extinguishing the fires of the hearth and deserting their husbands, bivouacked in the open for several days, conversing upon sexual obscenities with prostitutes. Pigs were thrown into a chasm at the base of the Acropolis and then retrieved as rotten, putrefying remains and spread upon the plowman's altar as symbolic of their conversion into the source of agrarian fertility. After this, they returned to their husbands and the relighted hearth of their homes with rekindled and intensified sexuality, after abstinence, titillated by the obscene discourse. This Eubouleus was named as the personification of the 'Grand Design,' the good conspiracy between Zeus, his brother Hades, and Gaia or Earth announced as the trick or ploy of the *nárkissos* that precipitated the episode of the abduction.

### **Demophoön, the Public Victim**

Another name for this figure was Demophoön, the 'human victim offered by the populace.' In the narrative, he is the child whose mortality Demeter had tried to burn away in the hearth fires each night, while she nursed him, not with the milk from her breast, but the breath of inspiration. She was caught in the act by the Queen at Eleusis and her daughters and forced to interrupt the procedure which would have made him immortal, whereupon she renounced the effort, tossing him down on the hearth and proclaiming that now all he might expect in the future was a heroic death.

### **Brimos, the Mystery Child**

Ultimately, as the child whose birth was announced at the culmination of the initiation, he was named Brimos, the matrilineal son of his mother Brimo, the 'terrible queen,' who was this same dread trinity of female personae represented by Hekate.

Before Demeter's reconciliation, symbolized by her teaching the Mystery and the art of agriculture, the mother had refused to lose her daughter to the netherworld, striving for the same immortality and spiritual purity that she had attempted with Demophoön. She thus allowed nothing to grow, but sat like a plague of sterility upon the land, until her fellow Olympians agreed to reverse the abduction, upon the one proviso, that Persephone take no food in the netherworld. As the maiden left Hades, however, she was tricked into taking a few seeds of pomegranate into her body, thereby irreparably sullyng her celestial nature with matter, and conceiving the Mystery child, whose dual potential, combining spiritual essence in corporeal entrapment or incarnation, set the pattern for human existence.

### **Fleabane**

As wife and mother of Hades' child, Persephone became only a frequent visitor of her mother on Olympus, analogous to the seed entrusted into the ground in order to sprout as the resurrection. Demeter becomes the mother-in-law of Hades and the grandmother of his child. The two plants of the mixture in the *kykeon* represent the wild abduction and the transition to cultivation. The fleabane (*Mentha pulegium*) was personified as the maiden Minthe who was the concubine of Hades, analogous to the role of Persephone in the episode of the abduction, unsanctioned by matrimony. Fleabane is an insecticide, like the 'fly-bane' *Amanita muscaria*, named *tue-mouche* in French. The psychoactive agent in the *kykeon* mediates between fleabane and the barley. It is derived from ergot, and represents the most primitive of the grasses from which barley was hybridized, spelt (Einkorn wheat *Triticum monococcum*). It produced originally only one or two red kernels resembling the grains of barley infested with ergot (*Claviceps purpurea*). Ergot mycelium fruits as a mushroom and is similarly linked with lycanthropy in folkloric traditions.

The ergot, associated dandelion weed and primitive grasses, mediates between the fungus of the abductor and the cultivated crop. Leavened bread, moreover, is analogous to the fermented wine. It is a product of the same controlled yeasty growth that heaves up the rising dough into a spongy fungal mass that was seen as the microcosmic version of the heavens, so named as what was heaved up to the cosmos.

It was this ergot potion that was profaned in the recreational abuse of the Mystery initiation, something superior to the normally available intoxicants. The psychoactive agent is LSA (lysergic acid amide), a natural version of LSD, and the same entheogen known as *ololiuqui*, extracted from morning glory seeds in Mayan shamanism. The extraction process produces an oscillating stasis of ergine and its mirror isoergine achieved by hydrolysis of the ergotamine toxin in an alkaline aqueous medium obtained by the addition of bone ash, in commemoration of the inaugural plowman offered as victim.

In the enactment of the Mystery initiation, the initiates journeyed in the spirit upon the vehicle of the *kykeon* to visit Persephone and Hades via the Cave of the Ploutonion in the sanctuary at the critical moment that she was about to give birth, and they resurfaced in the hall of initiation through the vulva-door of the central shrine building, simultaneously reborn along with the Mystery child. Fleabane was an abortifacient. In contrast, ergot was employed in the pharmacopeia of midwifery to control postpartum bleeding. In the netherworld, the initiates had been welcomed as visiting guests of the infernal couple, and thereby they were all now on both parts forever obligated by the sacred relationship of reciprocal hospitality. The netherworld would visit their houses offering prosperity and fecundity, and when they died, they would travel to a realm with which they had already established a debt of hospitable accord.

### **The Meaning of the Mystery**

Plato explicitly described that what was experienced in the Mystery initiation was a face to face encounter with deity (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250e *et seq.*). As a Neoplatonist, the Christian Paul described his own mystical rapture in exactly the same terms (Paul, *I Corinthians*, 13.12; *2 Corinthians*, 12.2-5). As enacted in all the scenarios for such Mysteries, the initiate experienced a symbolic death as a preparation for enhanced living. At Eleusis, the initiate, in the words of Cicero, 'learned the beginnings of life and gained the power not only to live happily, but to die with better hope' (Cicero, *Laws*, 2.14.36). The entire evolution of civilized modes of culture and the analogous hybridizing of primitive toxic plants into the foodstuffs upon which life depends became a personal experience in the vast expanse of limitless time. Life henceforth was lived with confidence in its antecedents and its cosmic projection.

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