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# Forum

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## Virginia Woolf and the Greek Chorus

To the Editor:

I was at first delighted to see the scholarship of Jane Ellen Harrison's *Ancient Art and Ritual* applied in Woolf criticism by Melba Cuddy-Keane ("The Politics of Comic Modes in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*," 105 [1990]: 273–85), and I expected a closely argued presentation. My pleasure faded when I perceived an error so easily discovered that *PMLA* might have caught it before publication.

First, Cuddy-Keane's hypothesis is that the narrative of *Between the Acts* "may be advocating a decentering of authority," that "the narrative may be suggesting that fragmentation permits a new and fluid sense of community." While the observation about the decentering of authority may be valid, arguing from the contradiction fragmentation-community is not. Cuddy-Keane postulates a "distinction between an Ur-art that focused purely on community and a subsequent art that was leader-centered" (274), apparently distinguishing incorrectly between "spring festival" and dithyramb. On the contrary, Harrison clearly asserts that the source of ritual is "a vague excited dance. . . . That dance has, probably almost from the first, a leader; the dancers choose an actual *person*, and he is the root and ground of *personification* . . . ; the leader does not 'embody' a previously conceived idea, rather he begets it" (1913, London: Oxford UP, 1951, 71). This, Harrison says, is "something that is very like rude art." Before this there is "the merely emotional dance from the domain of simple psychological motor discharge" (70). As Woolf's narrator has it, "One [cow] had lost her calf. . . . [S]he lifted her great moon-eyed head and bellowed. . . . From cow after cow came the same yearning bellow. The whole world was filled with dumb yearning" (*Between the Acts*, New York: Harcourt, 1941, 140). Even the herd of cows has a hierarchy. Such a "fluid sense of community" as Cuddy-Keane proposes would be only a little more developed than a primordial soup.

Second, Harrison says, "The rite is performed by a band or chorus, who dance together with a common leader. . . . Emotion is of the whole band; drama—doing—tends to focus on the leader" (72). According to Aristotle's *Poetics* 4.12, Greek tragedy and comedy as well began with the leader (*exarchos*) of the dithyramb (76). The spring festival is the dithyramb; nothing can be more clear than this. The chorus has a leader. There is a more elaborate discussion in Harrison's *Themis*.

The homogeneity of the chorus simply means that its members and their leaders are all birds, all clouds, or all wasps. From this viewpoint, E. M. W. Tillyard's leader-centered group seems quite appropriate. Cuddy-Keane's reference to Roman comedy is irrelevant in the context of Harrison. Roman comedy, quite a different beast, derives from Greek New Comedy; Harrison is discussing Greek drama through consideration of tragedy and Old Comedy. Freud is hardly a qualified critic of Greek drama, his Oedipus complex notwithstanding. A more appropriate source would be Harrison's colleague Francis Cornford and his *Origin of Attic Comedy*.

Third, Cuddy-Keane's search for purely Aristophanic comedy in *Between the Acts* seems invested, finally, in the figure of Reverend Streatfield. His identity as priest is most appropriate to the ritual context of drama, but Cuddy-Keane does not entertain this notion. On the other hand, Albert the idiot is a subtle but more appropriate candidate. "Suppose he suddenly did something dreadful?" (87). He does, of course: "Here the hindquarters of the donkey, represented by Albert the idiot, became active" (171). Whether the inspiration is sexual or scatological, it suggests all of what Cuddy-Keane calls the "exuberance and bawdiness" (280) necessary for Greek Old Comedy and all the subtlety necessary to get past the censors, a perennial problem for Aristophanic comedy.

And, last, the parade of mirrors that Cuddy-Keane views as a "wonderful bit of theatrics" (283) has its locus classicus in *The Golden Ass* of Apuleius, in which, during a procession in honor of "the natural mother of all life," the masquers carry "polished mirrors on their backs, walk[ing] before the Goddess and reflect[ing] all the people coming after" (trans. Jack Lindsay, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1962, 240; emphasis added).

There is ample material in Harrison's theories for application to *Between the Acts* and to Woolf's other works as well, but this attempt to fit the novel to the preconceived notions of whatever analytic approach is currently attractive seems most unfortunate.

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#### Reply:

The targets of Hoff's attack are simply misconstructions of both my argument and Jane Harrison's theory. I do not claim, or even imply, that the primitive spring festival in Greece is different from the dithyramb, and the distinction between a communally expressive

dance and a leader-centered art form is not my own speculation but a reference to Harrison's theory, which I document with a quotation from her text. It is of course Woolf, not Harrison, who I claim incorporates fragmentation in a communal construct (and for Woolf's comments on the baffling, questioning, disconnected beauty of the chorus, see her "On Not Knowing Greek"). And while combining fragmentation and community may be contradictory in a frame of traditional assumptions, Woolf was never one to think uncritically in traditional terms (a complementary parallel can be found in Harrison's claim that "[a] heroic society is almost a contradiction in terms" [*Ancient Art and Ritual*, 1913, Westport: Greenwood, 1969, 162]). Finally, I would have thought that one thing not in dispute is Harrison's general thesis, about which she is so clear: the origins of art lie in collective emotion, in group thinking, and the project of art in her time should be a recovery of art's communal and social function.

I think, however, that there may be some justification for Hoff's confusion, since Harrison conceives of the dithyramb as a form embodying diffused communal participation while, at the same time, she discusses its leaders at some length. But to understand her theory, it is not enough to seize on the word "leader"; we should consider how Harrison interprets the leader in this context.

Harrison's argument, first of all, is that the communal character of the old ritual dance is established before the emergence of the leader. When she states that the "dance has, probably almost from the first, a leader," the word "almost" is a significant qualifier, since her mode of understanding is thoroughly developmental. The group precedes the leader; collective emotion is already felt, already uttered, before the leader emerges as a "practical convenience" to represent that utterance (*Themis*, 1912, Cleveland: World, 1962, 46). Unlike Freud, who posits that the leader provides the group with a sense of identity, Harrison imagines the leader as a product of a group consciousness already in existence. (In *Themis*, she speculates that a pretotemistic stage preceded the totemistic.)

Second, Harrison argues that the leaders of the dithyramb—for whom she uses the term *daimones*, not *exarchos*—differ substantially from their successors, the tragic and Homeric heroes. The *daimones* take the role of "representational puppets, mere functionaries" (*Ancient Art* 166). Conceived in animal or plant form, they represent not human nature but the feeling, not yet formulated as an idea, of oneness and continuousness with a magical power running through all nature. These figures may offer the ground of *later* personification as gods and heroes, but in the ritual dance they are sanc-