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**The meaning of the Thesmophoria**

The Thesmophoria were celebrated in honor of Demeter and Kore in more than thirty cities in the ancient Greek world. Best-known in detail is the Athenian Thesmophoria, which was held in the fall, at the time of the sowing of cereals. Both the date and the ritual itself have supported the assumption that the Thesmophoria concerned the growth of the grain.

Recently N.J. Lowe has argued that the secret rites of the Thesmophoria, as described in a scholion on Aristophanes *Thesmophoriazousae*, do not mean what they have always been taken to mean. (“Thesmophoria and Haloa. Myth, Physics and Mysteries” in the Sacred and the Feminine in Ancient Greece ed Blundell & Williamson (Routledge, 1998) According to Lowe, the scholiast’s aetiological and symbolic explanations of the ritual have been misunderstood by modern commentators who have leapt upon this confused text to show that ancient “... religious ritual originates in...the attempt to compel the productivity of the natural world...”.

That all religious ritual originates in fertility magic is an absurd idea; that much ritual concerns itself precisely with “compelling the productivity of the natural world” seems to be quite obvious. There is plenty of evidence that the ancients, not only the practitioners of ritual but also the learned commentators, thought that ritual action could indeed compel fertility.

An example: The priest of Eleusis was said to shout to the sky, “Rain!” and to the earth, “Conceive!” - both verbs in the imperative. Is one hopelessly naïve for taking the ritual formula at face value? Numerous examples can be cited to show that ritual words and actions in the cult of Demeter and specifically in the Thesmophoria were thought of as compelling fertility.

This scholion is just one example of a learned tradition which used allegory and rationalization to explain away the simple-minded crudity of myths and rituals cherished for their (perceived) antiquity. Philo made Moses into a philosopher and the miracles at the Red Sea into teaching points for his philosophy. Similarly Plato employed myth as a basis for his cosmology, as in the story of Er. Contrariwise, Clement of Alexandria ‘exposed’ the meaning of the Mysteries as nothing more than sex-worship.

Should we search for the ‘meaning’ of ritual in the learned rationalization of priest and philosopher, or in the ‘just-so’ stories told by its performers? Which is more valid? Perhaps we need to remember that myth and ritual are always overdetermined, and look for more than one ‘meaning’ for a ritual. The model of the great and little traditions could be useful here. This model would include the ritual performers’ simpler understanding of the ritual as fertility magic (the little tradition) as well as the intellectualized priestly understanding of the ritual as symbolic or aetiological (the great tradition).