

**A STUDY OF PIETY  
IN THE GREEK  
TRAGIC CHORUS**

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A Study of Piety in the Greek Tragic Chorus by Henry Vogel Shelley

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UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

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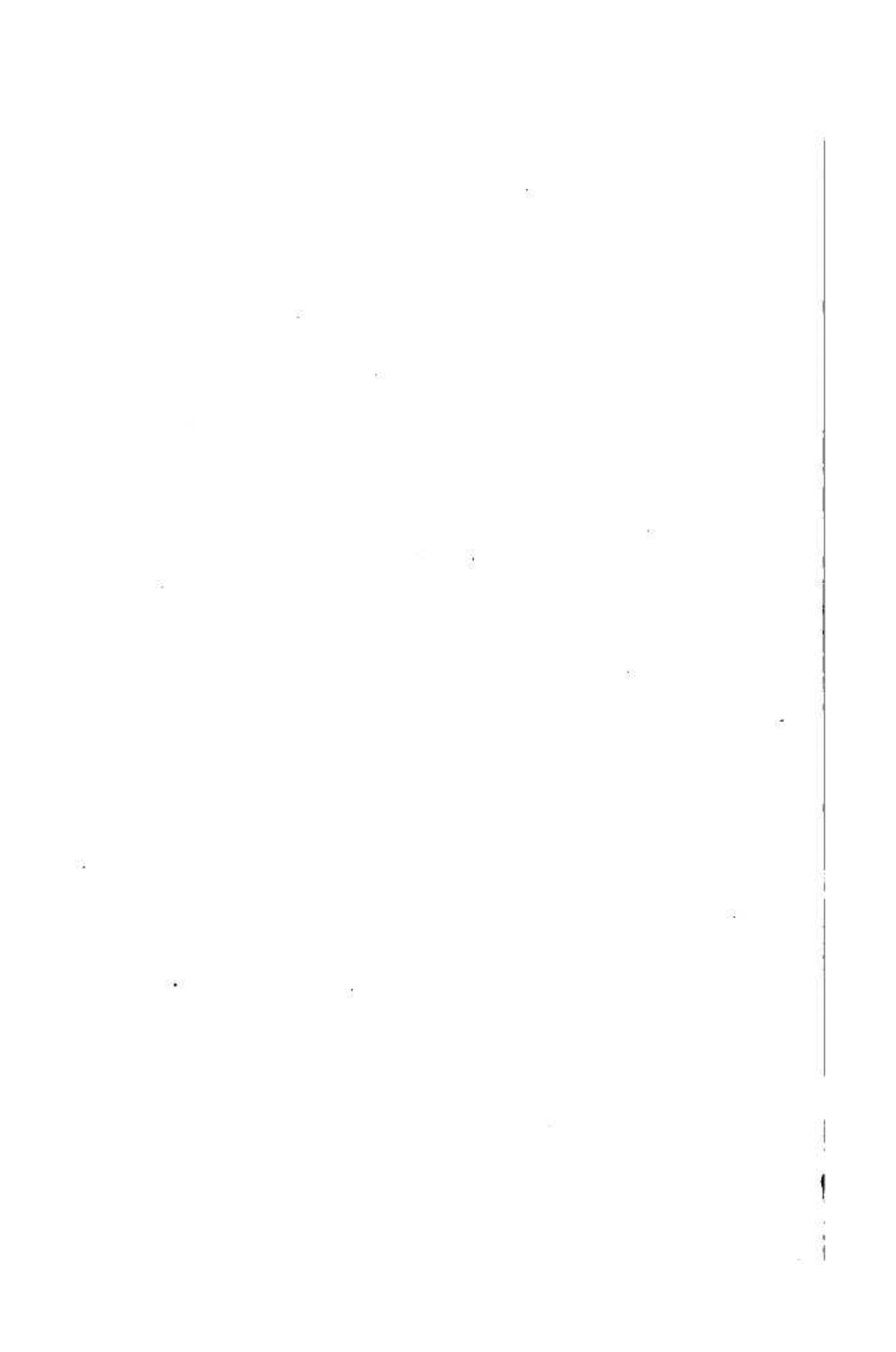
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A THESIS

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PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

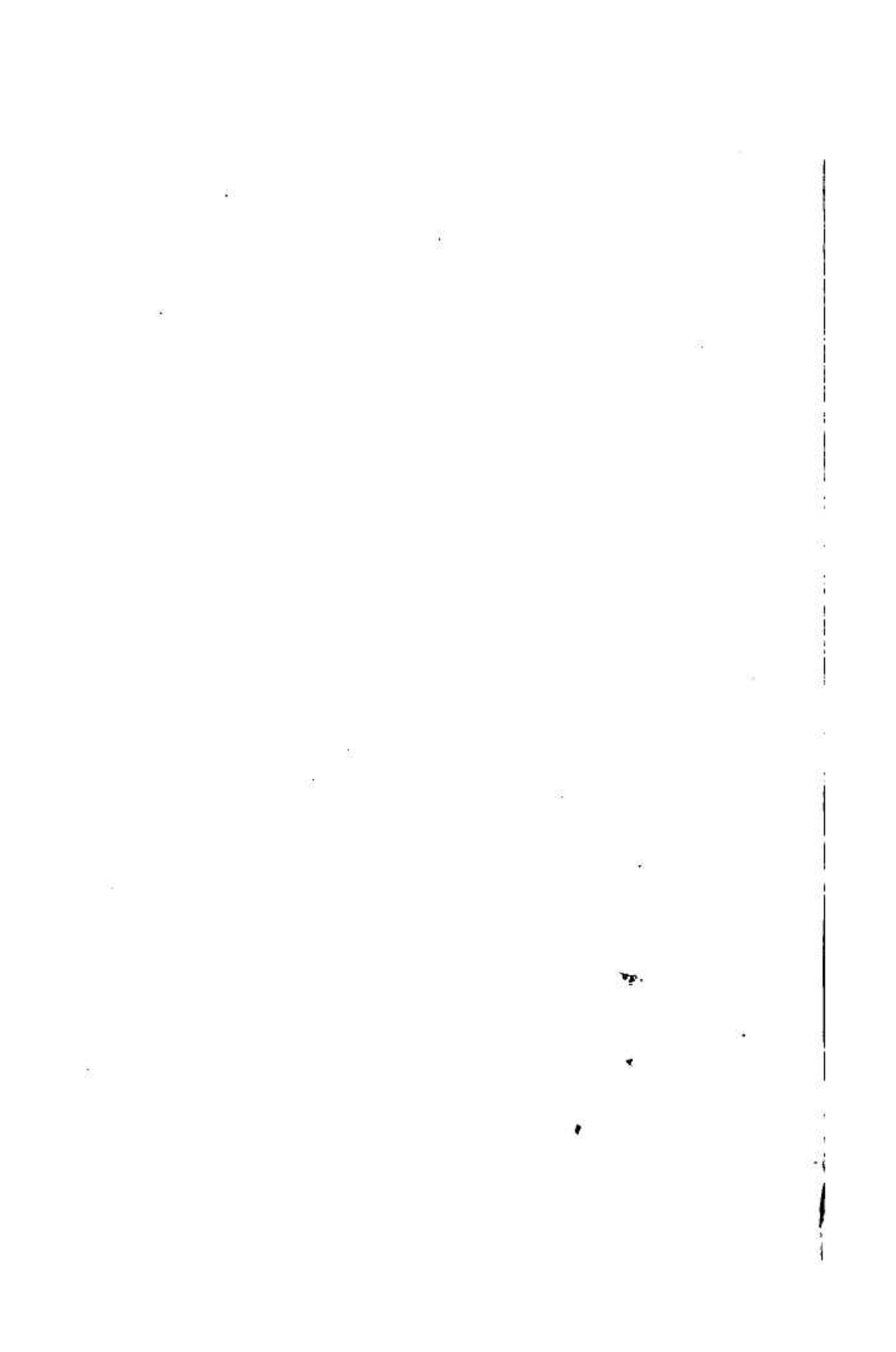
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# A STUDY OF PIETY IN THE GREEK TRAGIC CHORUS

## INTRODUCTION

The religion of the ancient Greeks presents a fascinating study. It constitutes a phase of Greek life, which only in very recent times has received serious consideration, but fortunately at present enough research has been made in the subject to determine at least its general outline. To the modern mind it is a matter of great interest and astonishment to note as two salient and remarkably peculiar characteristics of Greek religion its utter lack of dogma and its marked influence on every aspect of the national life and thought, especially the drama and the four great athletic institutions. But the Greek mind, unlike the modern, drew no line of demarcation between the religious and the secular, for by reason of the ubiquity of the Greek religious influence secularism simply did not exist in Greek life. The idea that comedy had a religious origin seems to us moderns well-nigh preposterous; but we can hardly say the same of tragedy. The very nature of tragedy inevitably reveals the fundamental human need of the consolatory power of religion.<sup>1</sup> The happy, healthy, prosperous man is quite apt to let human nature dominate completely his thoughts and actions; but if stricken with adversity or placed in jeopardy, he turns instinctively to a higher Power for consolation, realizing in this predicament that the help of his fellow-man is utterly futile. It is just this realization of man's complete dependence upon a higher Being, which constitutes the nucleus, the quintessence, the vital meaning of religion.

In Greek tragedy, where the sense of man's misfortune has been portrayed with a profundity of understanding characteristic of no other literature, we shall find abundant evidence of the innate religious spirit in man. Flourishing in the fifth century, that imposing span of time during which the intellect received an impetus for development more powerful than at

<sup>1</sup> The theory of William Ridgeway (*The Origin of Tragedy*, p. 93) that Greek tragedy arose from the worship of the dead seems untenable.

any other period in the history of the world, tragedy thus embodied the religious ideas of the Greeks in a highly advanced stage of evolution. It was truly the Golden Age of Greek history. No greater tragedians than Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides have ever lived, and their extant works remain, therefore, a priceless literary heritage.

#### PERSONNEL OF THE TRAGIC CHORUS

The orthodox system of religion that prevailed throughout Greece during the fifth century was what Gilbert Murray terms Olympianism.<sup>2</sup> Zeus is the supreme god of this anthropomorphic hierarchy, which was introduced into Greek literature by Homer,<sup>3</sup> and which flourished as the state religion till it was apparently superseded, at least among the thinking classes, by the various philosophical schools of later days. Greek tragedy fairly bristles with Olympianism. The actors, to be sure, voice orthodox sentiments for the most part,<sup>4</sup> but it is the chorus καὶ ἐξοχήν that constantly admonishes the spectators to preserve a pious attitude toward the gods. Indeed, the tragic poets seem to have made this a vital function of the chorus. Furthermore, it would hardly be natural to find unorthodox ideas emanating from a company of sage elders, mild maidens or prosaic matrons. For almost all the tragedies possess choruses of some one of these three classes, and in several instances, notably the *Eumenides*, the *Suppliants* and the *Bacchae*, the plays actually derive their titles from the chorus. In all the tragedies of Aeschylus the choruses are composed either of elders or of women. Euripides, too, is remarkably consistent in this matter: in fact, if exception be made of the *Rhesus*,<sup>5</sup> whose chorus is represented by sentinels of the Trojan army, Euripides will be found to be virtually in accord with Aeschylus on this point. In only one play, the *Hippolytus*, does he employ young men as a chorus, and even then he has recourse to

<sup>2</sup> *Four Stages of Greek Religion*, chap. II.

<sup>3</sup> This religion, of course, existed and developed centuries before Homer.

<sup>4</sup> Sometimes (e. g. *Septem* 223, 702; *P. V.* 938) the actors deliver unorthodox utterances.

<sup>5</sup> Professor W. N. Bates (*T. A. P. A.*, vol. xlvii) has, however, clearly shown the *Rhesus* to be genuine.