Ibsen's Use of Holy Days: An Amalgam of Philosophy, Poetry and Religion

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Abstract The article discovers how Ibsen makes use of mythological elements in ten of his plays, simultaneously relating them to 'holy days' or religious festivities from three different traditions. This includes an interpretation of the significance of Easter in Emperor and Galilean, 1873, then focusing on how other Christian feasts remain in the background of Ibsen's theatre: St John's Day in *Brand*, 1866; Pentecost in *Peer Gynt*, 1867; and Christmas in *A Doll's House*, 1879. This is followed up by showing how two Ibsen plays, *The Wild Duck*, 1884, and *Rosmersholm*, 1886, draw on significant commemorations and ritualistic observances from the Jewish religion. Then it will be traced how three of Ibsen's plays relate to the Eleusinian Mysteries, in antiquity among the best known of all celebrations of the Magna Mater. Written with an interval of almost exactly two years between them, these plays are: *The Lady from the Sea*, 1888, *Hedda Gabler*, 1890, and *The Master Builder*, 1892. Following the discussion of pagan mysteries in Ibsen, the paper refers to the concept of the Day of the Resurrection of the Flesh as a dramaturgic device in *When We Dead Awaken*, 1899. To conclude it is suggested that Neoplatonic philosophy, well-known to Ibsen after his studies of Julian the Apostate, is a constant resource to the amalgam of philosophy, poetry and religion in the Ibsen cycle.

Key words religion; mythology; Neoplatonism; ritual

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When Ibsen's plays are read with religious motifs and ritualistic structures in mind, it can be seen that there are various mythological elements in the action, the dialogue, and the characters of his works. Elsewhere, paying special attention to Ibsen's use of holy days from different religious traditions, I have undertaken such reading in some depth, and this previous research will be briefly summarised here.[1]

While Ibsen was writing his plays in nineteenth-century Western Europe, the religious issue naturally concerned in particular the Christian faith and the institutionalised Churches, Catholic and Protestant alike. Only a year after the first publication of *Peer Gynt*, von Hartmann reaffirmed his argument that "Christianity is no longer a vital factor of our developing civilisation, and has already traversed all its phases" (Hartmann xix). Earlier Hegel had, as Ameriks summarises it, "pictured orthodox Christianity, especially in its medieval form, as the deepest alienation, as an internalising of the master-slave relation within one's mind and throughout one's religious activity". Later, while "Feuerbach and Marx came to bury all religion", as Ameriks

also says, "Kierkegaard aimed to rejuvenate it by calling for a return to Christian orthodoxy" (Ameriks 260).

These thinkers belonged, of course, to the educated, intellectual European elite, and it is impossible to maintain that their thoughts and their theories represent a general tendency of the era. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that the writings of Hegel, Kierkegaard and Marx were widely influential, not only affirmed or disputed by the intelligentsia, but also discussed by ordinary men and women. It is also clear that in the nineteenth-century Western world the Christian faith had been generally weakened by the dominance of scientific materialism and the impact of the theory of evolution in the natural sciences. Svendsen, a Norwegian writer on philosophy and the history of ideas, stated that at the time Ibsen wrote *Emperor and Galilean* the whole intellectual era in Western Europe was coloured by the struggle "concerned with the question of Christianity as the basis of European culture" (Svendsen 84). In that kind of intellectual environment, an atmosphere in which the traditional union of Christianity and humanism is being undermined, Ibsen wrote Emperor and Galilean, a play which the playwright claimed would be his "*hovedværk*", his "magnum opus" (*HU* XVII: 73).[2]

Ibsen's "hovedværk" is set within the period in history when the clash between Mediterranean paganism of antiquity and Christianity was reaching its climax, resulting in the rise of Christianity as a governmental religion in the Roman Empire, followed by the exclusion of Mediterranean pagan worship. Accordingly, the play about Julian the Apostate touches upon the problems which the interrelation of governmental politics and religion raises, but even more it focuses on the significance of religious belief for the individual. That specific concern of Ibsen's, the impact of the communal and collective operation of religion, and the values of religious faith and ethics on the personal level, occurs in his plays from early on. Already in his second play, *The Warrior's Barrow*, Ibsen had examined a discord between religions: the conflict between the Viking ethics of pride, honour and vengeance and the increasing influence of Christianity with the emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation. A corresponding theme recurs in *Lady Inger* where the political effects of the rise of Protestantism are in the background of the action, while in *The Pretenders* the relation of State and Church is central to the story.

It is, however, with his conception of a play about Julian the Apostate in the early 1860s, that a new religious dimension, the concept of a sacred time evoked and celebrated by a religious feast, is developed in Ibsen's dramaturgy. In a draft of *Emperor and Galilean*, the first scene is set at Christmas (*HU* VII: 346), but in the final version the play opens on the night before Easter Sunday. The reason for Ibsen's change from Christmas to Easter in this opening scene seems to be that, as he worked on the play, the idea of resurrection, so irrevocably related to Easter in the Christian religion, became an important element in the play, whereas the idea of the incarnation celebrated at Christmas was of less importance to the playwright's interpretation of Julian's religious dilemma. One of the central conflicts in the play is how Christian belief in the resurrection of the flesh contrasts with the Neoplatonic view of a spiritual resurrection while still living in a physical body; and it can be argued that those dis-

parate ideas are one of the main reasons for the religious crisis Ibsen describes in his protagonist.

It is from his conception about a play on Emperor Julian and onwards that a continuing reference to religious feasts becomes a significant element in Ibsen's playwriting. While "preparing a tragedy, *Julianus Apostata*" (*HU* XVI: 102), Ibsen explained that he was also writing Brand. Interestingly Ibsen sets the final act of the play about Brand, the prophet of human will, on St John's Day, the feast to celebrate the birth of John the Baptist, who prophesised the end of the world. His second dramatic poem, *Peer Gynt* comes to an end on Whitsun Morning, a holy feast representing the end of the waiting and spiritual reunion. The fourth Ibsen play set on a Christian holy day is *A Doll's House*, which takes place at Christmas, the feast of the turning back to light and the emergence of a new era.

A few years after *A Doll's House* Ibsen writes two plays with significant commemorations and ritualistic observances from the Jewish religion. Here we refer to *The Wild Duck* with Hedvig Ekdal as the Paschal victim offered in vain; and *Rosmersholm*, but the Levitical legislation of the Day of Atonement, an annual purification of the whole Hebrew nation, is in the background of Rebekka's confession and her and Rosmer's self-sacrifice in that play. Both these plays not only draw on motifs from Hebrew religion, but are also permeated with mythic and legendary allusions from other mythological traditions and ritualistic practices.

Here it is important to notice that Ibsen's residence in Italy and Germany, as well as a long visit to Egypt, added considerably to his personal experience and knowledge of different mythical and religious traditions. Ibsen shared this interest with scholars and artists of his time. Following the trend of the German Romantic movement, many scholars and poets were interested in ancient Mediterranean religions, and wide-ranging research, archaeological and historical, was undertaken at the various cultic sites. In 1863 – 65 Gerhard published his research on the archaeological remnants at the site of the Great Mysteries of Eleusis, which in antiquity was an annual festive veneration of the Greek fertility goddess, Demeter, and her daughter Persephone, and remarked that the main celebration of Demeter at Eleusis took place in the autumn month of Boedromion.[3] Ibsen refers directly to this Hellenistic autumnal feast in *Emperor and Galilean*, and fifteen years later he writes three plays that allude to the Eleusinian tradition and corresponding religious practice. Written with an interval of almost exactly two years between them these plays are: *The Lady from the Sea*, *Hedda Gabler*, and *The Master Builder*. All three are set in late summer or early autumn, that is, close to the classical dates of the enactment of the Great Mysteries at Eleusis. In the case of *The Master Builder* the playwright seems to set the enigmatic ending of the play precisely on the eve of the most secret mysteries enacted in the Eleusinian Telesterion.

Ibsen's last play, *When We Dead Awaken: A Dramatic Epilogue*, has as its central metaphor a Hebrew-Christian conception of a time yet to come, that is, the Day of the Resurrection of the Flesh. The powerful image of the Last Day is thus of major importance when the play is discussed, but Ibsen's *Epilogue* draws also significantly on alchemical and Gnostic visions, and an analysis of these elements is therefore of

importance when interpreting that play.

Mapped out in this way, it can be seen that Ibsen's application of religious holy days as a dramaturgic device starts with Christian feasts followed by a reflection on Judaic rituals. It is thus as if Ibsen, after having explored the significance of the Christian feasts, undertook archaeological research in order to find what lies beyond Christianity, namely the religion of the Jews, which is here discovered as an underlying element in *The Wild Duck* and *Rosmersholm*. Because of the interrelation of Christianity and Judaism, sharing the same patriarchal God, there are, of course, Hebrew details discernible in the plays, which precede *The Wild Duck* and *Rosmersholm*. In the same way elements from the celebration of the mystery of the Great Mother are observable in some of the plays from *Emperor and Galilean* onwards. This category occurs already in *A Doll's House*, but in that play *Nora Helmer* imitates patterns of sacred veiling interwoven into the structure of *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. Nevertheless, it is with *The Lady from the Sea*, *Hedda Gabler* and *The Master Builder* that Ibsen makes his most profound examination of the Demetrian motherhood and other Mediterranean mysteries. As a result Ibsen establishes his own syncretism, which fully developed in the apocalyptic vision of *When We Dead Awaken*.

It is probable that Ibsen not only became acquainted with the general terms of Hegel's dialectical philosophy as has often been pointed out, but that he was also aware of his interpretation of mythologies, and in particular the story of the resurrected Egyptian god, Osiris. That deity was, in Hegel's explanation, "perpetually restored, and thus posited as one born a second time, as a representation—he is not something natural but something set apart from the natural and the sensible. Thereby he is defined and posited as belonging not to the natural as such but to the realm of representing, the soil of the spiritual, which endures beyond the finite" (Hegel 626). To Hegel, the death of Osiris is thus only dying as observed by the senses, and not death as spiritually conceived; in the spiritual sense Osiris is eternally restored and returned to himself. As noted above, the idea of resurrection, which in Christianity is signified by Easter, is important in *Emperor and Galilean*. The play depicts a dilemma that arises because of the irreconcilable contrasts between the pagan idea of spiritual resurrection Hegel had explained in his interpretation of the Osiris myth, and the theological idea demonstrated with the Christian creed of the resurrection of the flesh. Ibsen neither solved nor abandoned that problem with *Emperor and Galilean*. On the contrary, after the play about Julian, allusions to myths of eternal cycles of death and rebirth, and the manifestation of these cycles in the act of sacrifice, abound in his plays.

Since Hubert and Mauss, who determined "the unity of the sacrificial system" by identifying within "the theme of sacrifice" three major elements, "the entry, the victim, and the exit"[4], and van Gennep who, in *The Rites of Passage*[5], followed in their footsteps, anthropologists and historians of religion have written extensively on ritual. Their scholarly conclusion as regards the main structure of rituals is amazingly uniform; in the apparent complexity of religious enactment, the basic pattern of initiation rites includes, almost without exception, the three phases Hubert and Mauss analysed. As Turner, an expert on ritualistic performances, explains: "Such rites char-

acteristically begin with ritual metaphors of killing or death marking the separation of the subject from the ordinary secular relationships." Turner then describes the final phase of the initiation, which concludes the rite "with a symbolic rebirth or reincorporation into society". In between these two phases there is a stage of what Turner calls *margin or limen*, a phase which usually comprises, as he further explains "a sacred condition protected against secularity by taboos and in turn prevented by them from disrupting secular order, since liminality is a movement between fixed points and is essentially ambiguous, unsettled, and unsettling" (Turner 273 – 74). Ibsen's characters often find themselves within an "unsettled, and unsettling" condition, similar to what Turner called liminality. This is, of course, not unexpected; what is new here is the discovery that by setting his works within the sacred time of religious rituals, Ibsen adds to his theatre a festive dimension, which demands special attention and partly explains the intriguing universality of his texts.

The anthropological research summarised above was, for obvious reasons, not accessible to Ibsen. However, that does not mean that Hubert and Mauss's legacy, and van Gennep's innovations in the field, are not valid for the purpose of the present inquiry. Neither Hubert and Mauss, nor van Gennep and his successors, were studying phenomena that were post-Ibsen. Instead these scholars were gathering information about human behaviour which, because ritual "occurs even in animals", as Burkert says, might be older than mankind (Burkert, "Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual" 57). The Bible, a key book with which to understand ritualistic practice among the Semites, and in which the principal narratives follow ritualistic patterns, was a major object of investigation for Hubert and Mauss. The same book was an endless source for Ibsen. In one of the earliest biographical studies of the playwright, Gran remarked that already in his childhood Ibsen could sit for hours with his textbook in Christian religion and look up the passages referred to in the Bible: "here he had an extreme need to understand the depths" (Gran 9). The pattern of the ritualistic tripartite process was, of course, within reach for Ibsen in various other sources. As Burkert has explained: "there is an initiation structure in the plot of most ancient romances, but the same is true of many common Greek myths, as it is of fairy tales" (Burkurt, "Ancient Mystery Cults" 66 – 67). Of all this collective cultural inheritance Ibsen had an abundant knowledge, and he continually turned to these sources in order to establish a syncretic background to his plays.

The enactment of ritual is intended to provide an awareness of the temporal that is different from everyday comprehension of sequential, linear time. With an extensive insight into ritualistic practice and a wide knowledge of the history of religions, Eliade made a clear-cut conclusion: "Every ritual has a divine model" (*The Myth of the Eternal Return* 21). Every imitation of the divine model of ritual indicates, as Eliade has also argued, that the religious act is aimed at a meta-empirical reality ("Methodologische Anmerkungen zur Forschung der Symbolen den Religionen" 119). Within the meta-empirical reality, established with the ritualistic enactment, the worshippers are brought back to the primordial time when the act imitated was initially performed. The regeneration of time in ritual is, according to Eliade, especially important in the enactment of 'the End-of-the-World-myths', because, as he adds:

"even in eschatologies, the essential thing is not the fact of the End, but the certainty of a new beginning" (*Myth and Reality* 75 – 76). A collective enactment of a traditional religious ritual thus aims at a perpetual regeneration of the initial time in which the primordial act of the divinity, the hero, or the legendary ancestor, took place.

The theory is, as we have seen, that the religious rite enacted on holy days connects humans with the divine, and while it does so the performance of the rite becomes a physical manifestation of the idea of that which is eternal. A sacred ritual is thus not only an act, which aims at transcending human solitude, but also an act that portrays the wish to go beyond the finitude of human existence. This wish and the complications it involves are at the root of *Emperor and Galilean*, and the theme of the temporal as opposed to the eternal, of life as opposed to death, seems ever to have haunted Ibsen's mind after his composition of that play. From then onwards, the idea of an eternal return to primordial time in ritualistic performances recurs throughout his work, maybe never more evident than it is in the title he gave his last play, *When We Dead Awaken*. While working for the eternal as opposed to the temporal, Ibsen applied the concept of holy feasts in his dramaturgy, and did so because the sense of the eternal is already embedded within the concept of sacred time, immediately incorporated in any religious ritual. Ibsen continuously proclaimed that the elevation of the human spirit was an evolutionary necessity, and he understood this quest as the supreme objective of human life. In order to encourage this process particular circumstances are needed: the time, space, and action preset in religious feasts; and Ibsen makes effective use of these qualities in his theatre. By designing the ritualistic notion of primordial times into some of his plays, Ibsen created a dimension in their action, time and place, which goes beyond their apparently realistic approach.

Ibsen critics have commonly referred to truth and freedom as key concepts in his "realistic" thinking, but the third important key concept deeply rooted in many of the plays he wrote, that of the *ånd*, by tradition translated into English with the word "spirit", is missing in conventional discussion of the "reality" of Ibsen's theatre. When Ibsen describes the human condition, he connects the term "spirit" immediately to truth and freedom (Ólafsson 23, 128 – 29).

The concept of the "spirit" is classically related to religious thought and mystical practice through which it has entered poetry since the early ages. In H. G. Wood's thorough documentation of this custom in Christianity, he concludes that the poetical expression for the eternal human search for spiritual fulfilment was in all ages to describe the "ultimate happiness under the symbol of feast" (Wood 210). Ibsen's use of religious feasts and holy days, here discussed, follows this apparently ancient tradition, but the playwright develops the trend by giving it a secular and naturalistic guise, and thus emphasises its concurrent significance.

Ibsen could not have read the Bible with interest without coming across the term "spirit", which in the Christian scheme was established by St Paul. The influence of the Bible on Ibsen includes, the Pauline understanding of "spirit", or *pneuma*, as St Paul chose to name that human faculty. Nonetheless, Ibsen's identification of himself with the neopagan Emperor Julian (HU XVII: 61; HU XVIII: 73) might at first sight complicate the question of how to interpret his continuous application of the

word, with which the Neoplatonic term *nous* is usually translated. This is so because the usage of *nous* in Neoplatonic discourse is not an exact equivalent of the Pauline *pneuma*, and the problem of distinguishing between the two has been multiplied by the confusion caused by the tradition to translate both terms into English, and Norwegian, with the same word. The Neoplatonic *nous*, which Beierwaltes equates with the German *Geist*, suggesting that it could be called "intelligibility" in English (Beierwaltes 299), has instead sometimes been translated, "by the Christian term *Spirit*" (Bevan 197). *Nous* in Neoplatonic usage is a faculty with which humans can deliberately approach the indefinite divinity by philosophical contemplation and, sometimes, mystical practice, whereas the Christian *pneuma* is not a faculty over which the human mind has similar provision. In the Christian doctrine the communion of the devotee with the divine demands at all times the devotee's absolute reception of and submission to the definite Christian God. But even if it seems evident from Paul's Epistles that he does not equate *pneuma* with *nous*, the parallels between Pauline thought and that of the Neoplatonists are more important here than their diversities. According to Beierwaltes, there are two concepts in Neoplatonic discourse that refer to the inner life of man; one is *nous* while the other is called *psyche* (Beierwaltes 299). It is in this division that we find the important analogy between Christian thought and Neoplatonism, because, as Bevan argues: "St Paul and Plotinus alike made a distinction between something called *psyche* and the higher part of the Soul" (Bevan 198).

It is evident that Ibsen thought of the human soul as consisting in a similar dichotomy. We can see this in a public speech he gave in Christiania shortly after the publication of *Emperor and Galilean*, when he said that any man or woman who sincerely looked at their personal inner life could not avoid viewing "the dregs and the sediments" of their own being. In the same speech he further claimed that when he had worked on those shadowy particles of the human being in his plays, the effect had been like taking a cleansing bath. On the same occasion Ibsen had earlier explained his attempt to write about the opposite component of the human soul, that which is "superior to the everyday ego". Then the dramatist added: "I have written about it in order to manifest it before and within myself" (*HU* XV: 394). The impact Neoplatonic philosophy apparently had upon Ibsen via his studies of the Apostate, is discernible in these quotations, and so too is his apparently extensive reading of St Paul. That which, in Ibsen's formulation, is superior to the everyday ego seems to indicate the higher part of the soul, a faculty that corresponds to what is called nous in Plotinus's philosophy, and that which is termed pneuma by St Paul, but the difference between the two seems to depend on philosophical and theological nuances rather than a different model of human faculties.

Ibsen criticism has to a great extent concentrated on "the dregs and the sediments" of the human soul referred to by the playwright. I have chosen to focus on the other part of the soul, that which is superior to the everyday ego, and examine how the playwright applies religious imagery to visualise this human faculty in his theatre. In Grotowski's opinion, "a secular consciousness in place of the religious one", seems "to be a psycho-social necessity for society", and for this reason he argued for the inevitability of a ritualistic theatre and the "holy" actor, however emphasising

that "one must not take the word 'holy' in the religious sense" (Grotowski 42, 49). Almost one hundred years before him, Ibsen, sharing Grotowski's concern about the decline of religion and its effects on individuals and society, as well as the theatre, established his own syncretic approach to the subject matter on which he dwelt in his plays; and he did so to emphasise the importance of religious awareness in an apparently spiritless world.

When Ibsen died, his wife said "that he was a deeply religious human being" (Hage 43), and shortly after the death of the playwright, Fibiger argued that 'the religious problem was so deeply rooted in Ibsen's soul from his childhood until his old age, that he was never free from it; on the contrary it became more and more dominating in the course of his life and thereby also in his poetics" (Fibiger 22). Following in the footsteps of Goethe who, as Jamme claimed, "all his life attempted to express his religious affinity in the images of Greek mythology" (Jamme 95), Ibsen expressed the strain of reconciling the everyday human ego with the superior one; and he did this by melding in his poetry metaphors derived from Neoplatonic philosophy, along with Gnostic and alchemical models and images from various religious traditions. It may well be true to some extent, as Esslin maintained, that "Ibsen's first and most obvious impact was social and political" (Esslin 71), but his aim was not solely to show life as it appears in its outward features and thereby to encourage social change. In Ibsen there is, as Ewbank has rightly observed, "an otherness which we suppress or 'naturalise', at the risk of losing his uniqueness" (Ewbank 31). At the end of his lifelong work Ibsen had created a series of plays in which his 'otherness' is manifested in many ways, including the thematising of religious festivals here discussed.

It is within festive time celebrated on sacred days that the ritualistic aspect of religion is made visible in performance. At the same time the reflecting human mind is invited to interpret and integrate the meaning of the feast. This was the practice and philosophy of pagan Mediterranean cults, but the authoritarian Christian Church was through the ages unwilling to allow such personal interpretation. For the Church the obedience of devotees to its authority had, when Ibsen wrote his plays, long become more important than the practice of spiritual devotion as means of self-development. Since the days of Constantine I, and especially after the defeat of the ideals Emperor Julian represented, the Church had operated as a political power, depriving the Christian faith of much of its potential spiritual qualities.

It is well known that Ibsen attacked both political bodies, the Church and the State. It is not as widely recognised that he did so out of his profound longing to assist humanity in its urgent spiritual need. In *Emperor and Galilean*, Julian, referring respectively to Christian faith and Greek philosophy, claims that the new truth is no longer true and the old beauty is no longer beautiful (*HU* VII: 81). It is reasonable to conclude that the playwright shared his character's sentiments, for Ibsen clearly meant that the truth of the Christian religion as preached by the Church was no longer valid, and he felt that the Church imprisoned the human spirit rather than liberated it. It is also evident that Ibsen, especially in his later years, grieved for the beauty of the philosophy of German idealism that was fading away before an increasingly nihilistic worldview. Ibsen's hope against hope at this crossroad was in a new spiritual cate-

gory which he saw as evolving out of an admixture of religion, philosophy and poetry, three modes of expression developed to define and to demonstrate human thoughts and feelings.

In its essence, a traditional sacred ritual can be defined as an artistic form of expression including the imagination of poetry, the reflection of philosophy, and the spiritual devotion of religion. Therefore it is, I think, important to acknowledge that by accommodating so many of his works to the notion of sacred feasts from various religious traditions, thereby engendering the plays with pagan philosophical ideas and classical mythological elements along with crucial Judaeo-Christian images, Ibsen attempted to manifest the idea of the amalgam of philosophy, poetry and religion in his theatre.

Until now the presence of religious feasts in Ibsen's plays has not been given its due, especially not in the theatre. As Bentley has argued, performances of Ibsen suffer much from: "the pretence of putting Ibsen on firm naturalistic ground" (Bentley104). Half a century has passed since Bentley's comment; nevertheless, the situation has not greatly changed where Ibsen productions are concerned. Critics and audiences, even theatre artists, pursue the naturalistic approach, often of course decorated with symbolic images, but Ibsenite theatre is invites to something more insightful. The next step may be to approach the staging of an Ibsen play "as though [we] were at some ancient religious ceremony", as Gordon Craig noted of his 1906 *Rosmersholm* production with Isadora Duncan and Eleonora Duse (Bablet 88).

【Notes】

1. See Trausti Ólafsson, "Ibsen's Theatre of Ritualistic Visions: An Interdisciplinary Study of Ten Plays," *Stage and Screen Studies*12(2008).
2. All the quotations of Ibsen's works are taken from *Hundreårsutgave: Henrik Ibsen, Samlede verker*, 21 vols, ed. Francis Bull, et al. (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1928 – 57). The sources are indicated with the abbreviated *HU* followed by the Roman numeral of the volume referred to: VII, XV, XVI, XVII and XVIII.
3. See Eduard Gerhard, *Über den Bilderkreis von Eleusis* (Berlin: Die Köningliche Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1863 – 1865)256.
4. See Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*, trans. W. D. Halls (London: Cohen & West, 1964)19 – 49.
5. The work was originally published in 1911.

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