

## CHAPTER TWO

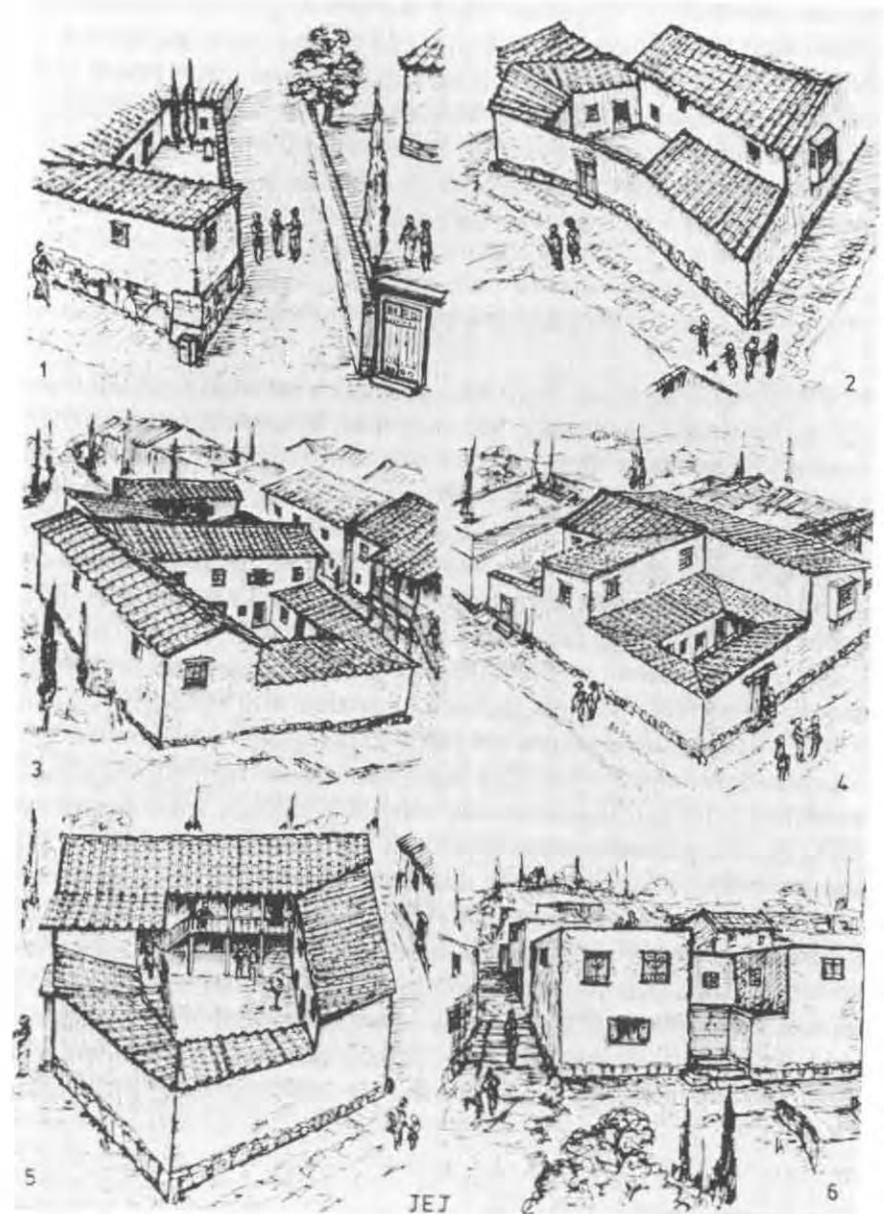


# The Cloak of Darkness

## *The Protections of Ritual in Athens*

The Parthenon is a hymn to a female deity, a woman reigning over the city. Yet Perikles drew his Funeral Oration to an end by declaring, "Perhaps I should say a word or two on the duties of women to those among you who are now widowed. I can say all I have to say in a short word of advice." The advice was to be silent. He declared that "... the greatest glory of a woman is to be least talked about by men, whether they are praising you or criticizing you."<sup>1</sup> In returning to the city, women should again return to the shadows. No more were slaves and resident foreigners entitled to speak in the city, since they too were all cold bodies.

Although Perikles addressed the Funeral Oration to the living, he—like other Greeks—imagined he was also overheard by the ghosts of the dead. The dead had lost all body heat, yet their shades haunted the living, remaining powerful forces of good or bad fortune. Cold was allied to darkness, the underworld the home of the



Athenian houses, late fifth and fourth centuries B.C.

shades. Yet lack of heat and light were not hopeless conditions. Those who were cursed with living cold bodies made something of their condition by practicing certain rituals, rituals which threw over themselves a cloak of darkness. These ancient rituals show an enduring aspect of our civilization: the refusal of the oppressed to suffer passively, as though pain were an unalterable fact of nature. That refusal to suffer had, however, its own limits.

## 1. THE POWERS OF COLD BODIES

In the Funeral Oration, Perikles spoke in a curiously offhand way about the rituals of the city. He said that "When our work is over, we are in a position to enjoy all kinds of recreation for our spirits. There are various kinds of contests and sacrifices regularly throughout the year."<sup>2</sup> As a modern historian has remarked, this is "a very pragmatic view of community religion"; his fellow Athenians would have taken the calendar of festivals to be the very core of their civic lives rather than "relaxation from business."<sup>3</sup>

Ritual may seem a static force, preserving memory through repeating gestures and words time after time. In the ancient world rituals instead modulated as old forms came to serve new needs. Rituals which honored women's place in an earlier agricultural society modulated in time so that bodily stigma was lifted from women in the city. The shift from agrarian myth into urban ritual did not violate memories of the past, nor did women use ritual to rebel against men. Though the greatest of all rituals in Athens, the *Panathenaia*, mixed men and women together, rituals which women observed alone revealed this power of modulating the past into the present more sharply. One of these, the *Thesmophoria*, aimed to dignify the cold female body; another, the *Adonia*, restored to women those powers of speech and desire Perikles denied them in the Funeral Oration.

### *The Thesmophoria*

The Thesmophoria began as a fertility rite. It dated back to pre-Homeric times, a ritual women conducted in the late autumn when seed was to be sown. Demeter, goddess of the earth, presided as divine patron. The festival's story came from Demeter's burial and mourning for her dead daughter, Persephone; the name came from

its main action, that of laying things in the earth (*thesmoi* in Greek means "laying down" in the broad sense of laying down the law). Women prepared for the Thesmophoria with a ritual act making use of pigs—treated in Greek mythology as animals of sacred value. At the end of each spring, they took slaughtered pigs down into pits, or *megara*, dug into the ground; here the dead animals were left to putrefy. This spring festival in honor of Demeter (the *Scirophoria*) served directly as a symbol of fertilizing the earth. Demeter's sanctuary at Eleusis lay outside Athens. The Thesmophoria conducted in Athens in the fall transformed this simple act of fertilizing the earth into an urban experience.

On the first of the three days of the Thesmophoria, women went into the pits containing the moist remains of the pigs, and mixed grain seed into the carcasses. This day was a matter of "going" (*kathodos*) and "rising up" (*anodos*), for the women rose from the cave to enter into special huts where they sat and slept on the ground. On the second day, the women fasted, to commemorate Persephone's death; they mourned by swearing and cursing. On the third day, they retrieved the grain-rich piglets, and this stinking mush was sown into the earth later as a kind of sacred compost.<sup>4</sup>

The Thesmophoria seemed to represent directly the story of Demeter as the Perikleans knew it, a story of death and rebirth, of the goddess who gives up her own daughter to the soil, a surrender paralleled by the slaughter and burial of the piglets. Yet the ritual as practiced in Athens altered the original, agricultural myth. Instead of opposing fertility and sterility, the Thesmophoria invoked sexual abstinence as opposed to fertility. For three days before the Thesmophoria the women did not sleep with their husbands, as well as being sexually abstinent during the festival. The ritual thus changed from the mourning of a daughter whose dead body nourishes the earth to a drama organized around the theme of self-control.

In a haunting passage, the classicist Jean-Pierre Vernant has evoked the ritual as practiced in Athens:

The time of sowing marks the beginning of the period that is propitious for marriage; married women, mothers of families, celebrating as citizens accompanied by their legitimate daughters an official ceremony in which they are, for the time being, separated from their husbands; silence, fasting and sexual abstinence; they take up an immobile position, crouching down on the ground; they climb down into underground *megara* to collect talismans of fertility to be mixed in with seeds; a slightly nauseous smell prevails, and instead of aromatic plants

there are clumps of willow branches, the willow being a plant with anti-aphrodisiac qualities.<sup>5</sup>

The smell of the desire-deadening willow was important during the rite, as was the foul odor and the darkness of the huts in which the women crouched on the ground. Their bodies became still and cold, almost lifeless. In this chilled, passive condition the ritual began to transform them: they became dignified bodies enacting the story of Demeter's mourning.

While the Demeter myth related women to the earth, the Thesmophoria in Athens linked women to one another. This new bond appeared in the formal organization of the Thesmophoria; the officers of the ritual were chosen by the women themselves. "Men were involved only to the extent," Sarah Pomeroy writes, "that, if they were wealthy, they were compelled to bear the expense of the festival as a liturgy or tax in behalf of their wives."<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the women celebrated the rite, Vernant says, "as citizens," though they withdrew from the world of men to do so. Only at the end of the third day did they return to the husbands who awaited them outside, emerging from the huts with their birth-burden of dead flesh and grain. The cloak of darkness in the earth, the cold of the pits, the closeness to death, transformed the status of their bodies. The women made a journey during the Thesmophoria through darkness, emerging into the light, their dignity affirmed.

To be sure, the metamorphosis from country to city left its mark on many other rituals as well, since the calendar of urban festivals was originally tied to rural life, to the cycle of the seasons, and to farming. But the transformation of the Demeter myth into urban ritual had a special meaning for women because of the specific place it occurred in Athens. Fragmentary evidence suggests that, when first practiced, the laying down of the piglets occurred in natural caves. The urban archeologist Homer Thompson has identified where this Neolithic rite was reconstructed in the city. The pits were dug out and the huts built on the Pnyx hill, behind the seats where the men sat in the Ekklesia. Through ritual, the women had thus established a civic space for themselves in Athens near the space of power occupied by men.

The technical name for the changes that occurred in the Thesmophoria is "metonymy," a Greek word for one of the tools of rhetoric. A metonymy substitutes one word for another; sailors can be called sharks or seagulls, depending on the effect a speaker or writer seeks.

Each of these substitutions makes an explanation: by calling a sailor a shark, we immediately explain the viciousness of his actions; by calling him a seagull, we explain his prowess to rise, like a gull, above the turmoil of the sea.<sup>7</sup> Metonymy does something like throw a cloak over original meanings, by transforming the original through association. Of all the weapons in the poet's arsenal, metonymy most varies language, transmuting the meaning of a word further and further from its origins.

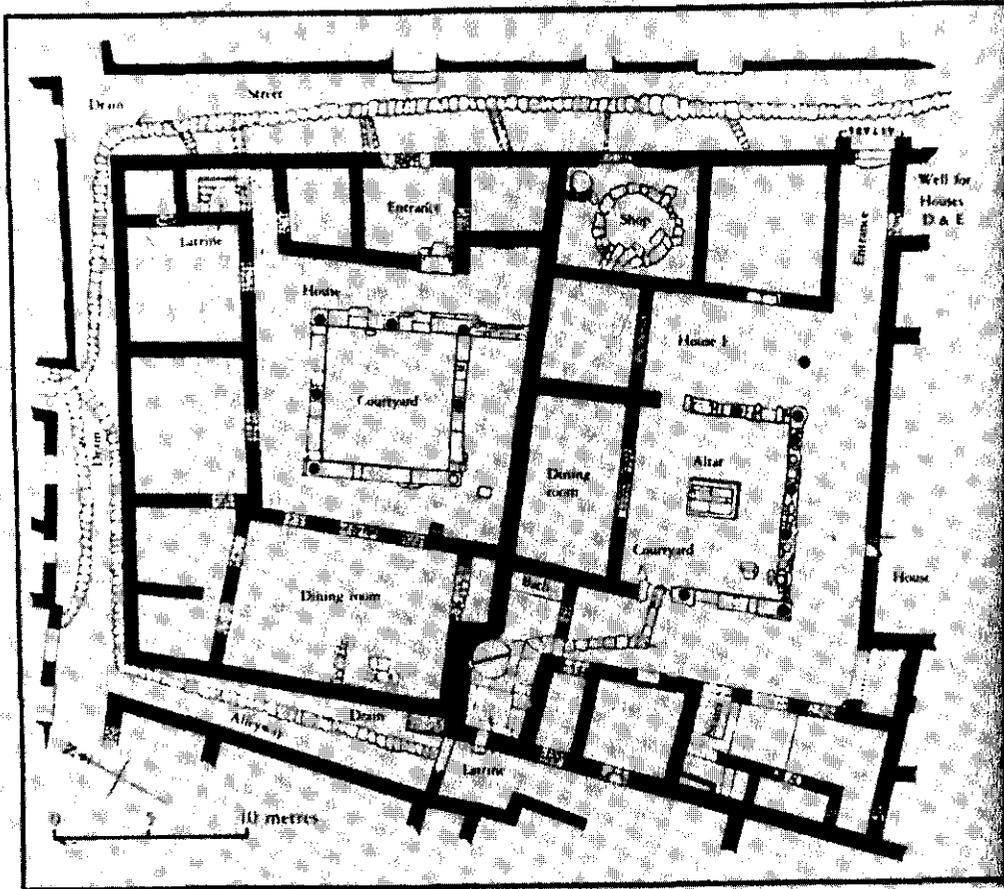
During the course of the three days of the Thesmophoria, the women—smelling pig stench and willow, crouching in the ground—experienced ritual transformation thanks to the powers of metonymy. "Cold" and "passive" came to mean, by the second day, self-discipline and fortitude, rather than weakness and inferiority as they did outside. These changes culminated on the third day when the women emerged. They had not become like men. The light shone on cloaked bodies transformed in a ritual—mysterious and unknowable by men—which had somehow dignified these bodies.

Ritual metonymies, unlike a poet's phrases, make use of space to effect such changes. These spaces alter the condition of the bodies which step within ritual's magic circle. Such an alteration occurred in the Thesmophoria, the ritual pit, cold and dark, giving the cold bodies whom Perikles counseled to live unnoticed a new civic value. The shape of the huts concentrated the fumes of the willow, which aided women in this transformation by deadening their desires. The location of the huts in urban space emphasized the nearness of this dignifying site to the place where men ruled as citizens.

### *The Adonia*

The Adonia festivals were agricultural rites tied to death. Their urban transformations occurred in domestic space. Greek women were confined to houses because of their supposed physiological defects. The Greek historian Herodotus contrasted the reasonableness of his civilization in doing so to the strangeness of the Egyptians, observing that "in their manners and customs the Egyptians seem to have reversed the ordinary practices of mankind. For instance, women go to market and engage in trade, while men stay home and do the weaving."<sup>8</sup> In Xenophon's *Oikonomikos*, a husband enjoins his wife, "your business will be to stay indoors."<sup>9</sup>

The ancient Greek house had high walls and few windows; when money permitted, its rooms were oriented around an inner court-



Athenian house plans, from Delos, fifth century B.C.

yard. Within the house, something like the *purdah* system of the classic Muslim household prevailed. Married women never appeared in the *andron*, the room in which guests were entertained. At the drinking parties given in the *andron*, only women slaves, prostitutes, or foreigners appeared. Wives and daughters lived in the room or rooms known as the *gunaikeion*; if the household was prosperous enough, these occupied the second story, a further remove from the daily intrusions of the street upon the courtyard.

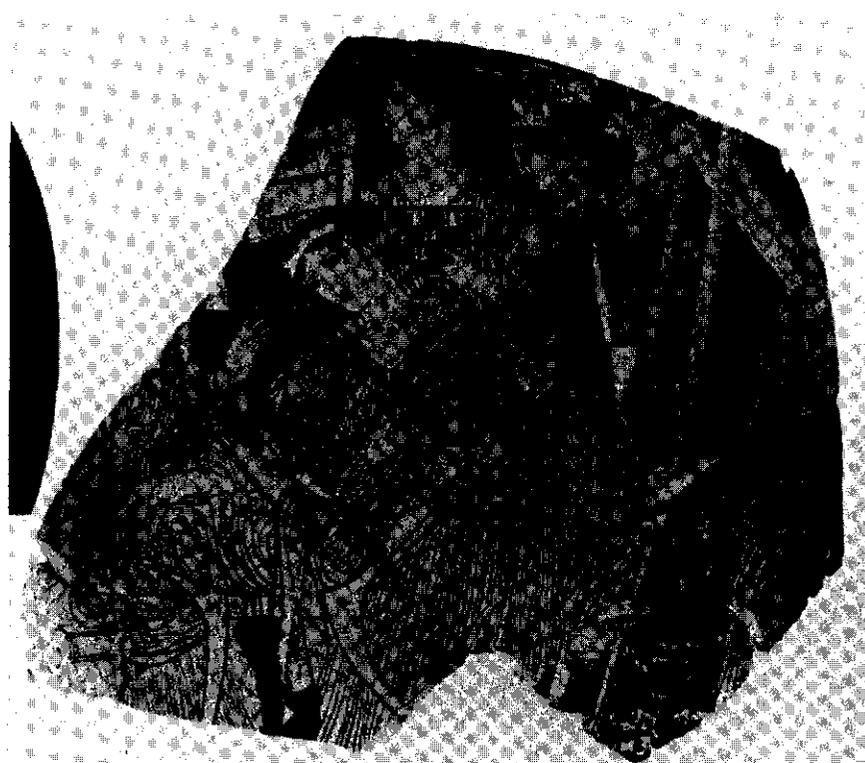
The Adonia differed significantly from male celebrations (the *symposia*) occurring throughout the year beneath the roof in the *andron*. In a moderately prosperous house, this usually square room might have three couches on the side walls and one couch at the end; fourteen diners could recline here, eating and drinking, fondling both male and female prostitutes. The symposium provided an occa-

excite."<sup>10</sup> In the Thesmophoria, an anti-pheromone, the willow smell, pervaded the huts, a smell supposedly deadening desire; the Adonia, on the other hand, made use of aromatic spices which seemed to arouse desire. "The contrast between the Thesmophoria and the Adonia," writes the anthropologist Marcel Detienne, "is like that between Lent and Shrove Tuesday." The Adonia celebrated women's sexual desire; sweetly fragrant, drunken and bawdy, this aromatic festival set free female powers to speak about their desires in an odd and normally unused space of the house, the roof.

The Adonia derived from mythological stories surrounding the god Adonis. He stood at one extreme of the Greek imagination of masculinity; at the other end stood Herakles, the exemplary warrior. Herakles was famous, Homer said in the *Odyssey*, "for his gluttonous gut that never stopped eating and drinking." His sexual hunger equalled his gluttony; in the *Lysistrata*, a horny husband bursts out, "my cock is Herakles invited to dinner." Herakles was reputed to have sired seventy-two sons and one daughter.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, the graceful Adonis was neither gluttonous nor greedy. Unlike Herakles, he died before he could father a child, at the end of his adolescence gored to death by a wild boar. And most unlike Herakles, Adonis gave pleasure to women, rather than sating his lust in their bodies. Adonis was a figure of *hedone*, the Greek word for sensual pleasure, and Aphrodite mourned him as a lover of women.

In the ritual of the Adonia, women in Athens drew on this myth, lamenting the death of a youth who knew how to give women pleasure. A week preceding the festival in his honor every July, women planted seeds of lettuce in little pots on the roofs of their houses; these seeds are quick-germinating, and the women watered and fertilized the pots carefully until young green shoots appeared. At this moment, though, they deprived the plants of water. When the seedlings began to die, it was time for the festival to begin. Now the pots on the rooftops were called "gardens of Adonis," the withered plants mirroring his death.

One might expect the ritual to follow closely the story told by the myth; indeed, the time of year seemed to reinforce the symbolism of the dying garden, July being a month of scorching sun. Yet the women of Athens contrived a ritual that was a funeral in name only. Instead of grieving, they stayed up all night, dancing, drinking, and singing with each other. They threw balls of myrrh and other spices into incense burners (Adonis was the son of Myrrha, the nymph of myrrh) in order to arouse themselves sexually. The festival acquired



Young women mime the mourning of Adonis during the Adonia.

a reputation for lewd joking and illicit sex: one fictional Roman text of several centuries later has a courtesan writing to a friend, "We are going to arrange a banquet to celebrate the [Adonia] at the house of Thessala's lover. . . . Remember to bring a little garden and a statuette with you. And also bring along your Adonis [evidently a dildo] whom you smother with kisses. We will get drunk with all our lovers."<sup>12</sup>

The very plants women had sown in their little "gardens of Adonis" affirmed this sexual celebration. The poet Sappho wrote that Aphrodite had laid Adonis out in a field of lettuce after he was gored; if the image seems odd to us, it made perfect sense to the Greeks, who considered lettuce to be a potent anti-aphrodisiac: "its juice is of use to those who have wet dreams and it distracts a man from the subject of love-making," Dioscorides wrote.<sup>13</sup> Lettuce appeared in ancient literature as a symbol of impotence and more generally of a deadly "lack of vital force."<sup>14</sup> It was thought indeed a

plant that thrived among the shades, and was eaten by dead mothers. During the Adonia, women started to celebrate when lettuce wilted, turned brown, and shrivelled in the pots of parched earth. They began to celebrate, that is, when a plant dies whose juices supposedly dry up living sexual desire.

The Adonia seems a celebration of desires not otherwise fulfilled in women's lives. Sexual deprivation was not due to men's infatuation with those boys destined to become citizens; that would suppose homosexuality on the modern model, as though one kind of erotic desire excludes another. As the jurist Eva Cantarella has remarked, "The real rivals of wives were . . . other 'respectable' women who could induce their husbands to divorce them."<sup>15</sup> The plants and spices of the Adonia helped women confront a more fundamental problem: their desires were inseparable from their submission to the will of men. The aromas of the Adonia attempted to provide a breathing space from that submission.

The Adonia, like the Thesmophoria, transformed an agricultural rite into an urban experience. The ancient myth associated the death of pleasure with the fertility of the earth, as the blood of the dying Adonis spilled out into the soil; this signified that the land draws its nourishment from human suffering. In the urban ritual, the drying of the land and the wilting of its plants brings the sensual body back to life. It was to make an old rite serve this end that women transformed the space of the house.

The Adonia differed significantly from male celebrations (the *symposia*) occurring throughout the year beneath the roof in the andron. In a moderately prosperous house, this usually square room might have three couches on the side walls and one couch at the end; fourteen diners could recline here, eating and drinking, fondling both male and female prostitutes. The symposion provided an occasion for men to let themselves go, engaging in raucous fun "fundamentally opposed to those [decorous conventions] within the polis as a whole."<sup>16</sup> The symposion was, L. E. Rossi has written, "a spectacle unto itself," as the men drank, flirted, talked and boasted, but the spectacle retained one convention of bodily comportment from the outside.<sup>17</sup> Just as at the gymnasium, competition suffused the male bonding of the symposion. Men prepared poems, jokes, and boasts in advance, so that they could show off their skills during the banquet. The balance between competition and camaraderie sometimes tipped out of control and the symposion degenerated into a violent brawl.

Upstairs on the roof, during the Adonia there was equal lewdness, but the women did not compete with each other; there were no prepared jokes. The Adonia also avoided the privacy and exclusiveness which marked the symposion. Women wandered from neighborhood to neighborhood, heard voices calling them above in the dark, ascended the roofs on ladders to meet strangers. In the ancient city, rooftops were usually empty. Moreover, this festival occurred at night in residential districts with no street lighting. The dominant spaces—the agora, gymnasium, Akropolis, and Pnyx—were spaces of daylight exposure. The few candles lit on the rooftops during the Adonia made it difficult to see others sitting nearby, let alone down in the street. It thus threw a cloak of darkness over transformations wrought on the space of the house. Filled with laughter in the dark, the roof became an anonymous, friendly territory.

It was in this space that women, under the cloak of darkness, recovered their powers of speech, spoke their desires. Just as the Thesmophoria transformed images of cold, the Adonia transmuted images of heat; exposure to the heat of the sun became deadly to their lettuce plants, while darkness set the women free.

Up to recent times, scholars thought the Adonia to be a lesbian rite, simply assuming that when women gathered for autonomous pleasure, they must have given each other sexual stimulation. The famous love lyrics Sappho wrote have often been cited in relation to the Adonia:

For when I look at you for a moment, then it is no longer possible for me to speak; my tongue has snapped, at once a subtle fire has stolen beneath my flesh, I see nothing with my eyes, my ears hum, sweat pours from me, a trembling seizes me all over, I am greener than grass, and it seems to me that I am little short of dying.<sup>18</sup>

It now seems a more complicated event: whatever the mixture of sexual preferences, the ritual lacked the moving intensity of Sappho's lyrics, for this was an occasion for temporary pleasure among strangers in the dark, not deep and sustained erotic bonding.

The city did not formally recognize the Adonia; it did not appear on the official calendar as did most other festivals, which were scheduled, supervised, and financed by the city. It was a festival as informal in organization as spontaneous in feeling. And, unsurprisingly, the Adonia made men uncomfortable. Contemporary writers like Aristophanes in the *Lysistrata* derided the sheer noisiness, wailing racket,

and drunkenness of the event, treating with contempt women who had departed from their accustomed silence. But the most consequent charge against the Adonia was made by Plato in the *Phaedrus*. Plato has Socrates say:

Now tell me this. Would a sensible farmer take seed which he valued and wished to produce a crop, and sow it in sober earnest in gardens of Adonis, at midsummer, and take pleasure in seeing it reach its full course in eight days? Isn't this something that he might do in a holiday mood by way of diversion, if he did it at all? But where he is serious he will follow the true principles of agriculture and sow his seed in the soil that suits it, and be well satisfied if what he has sown comes to maturity eight months later.<sup>19</sup>

Plato saw in the Adonia a revelation of the barrenness of momentary pleasure, as opposed to the ancient agricultural story of the nourishing of the earth. Desire, alone, is barren.

Against Plato it could be said that, if the Adonia gave back to women the language of desire, it did so in a particular way. Like the Thesmophoria, this ritual made use of one of the poet's tools in spatial rather than verbal form. The Adonia drew on the powers of metaphor. A metaphor binds separate things together in a single image, as in the expression "the rosy-fingered dawn." In such a metaphor, the meaning of the whole is greater than its parts. Metaphor works differently from metonymy: in a metonymy, one can substitute various words for "sailor"—shark, gull, porpoise, albatross—but once "rosy fingers" and "dawn" are put together, they take on a character which is greater than an analogy of the parts, dawn and fingers. Moreover, strong metaphors resist literalizing. If you say "the rosy-fingered dawn" suggests that barrel-shaped, pink-colored clouds appear in the sky at daybreak, you lose the evocativeness of the image; the poet created an image which dies in explanation.

In the ritual of the Adonia, space made the metaphor work. Normally, fertility and childbearing legitimated women's sexuality. That a person should feel free while on a roof in July at night surrounded by dead plants to speak to strangers about her intimate desires is a bit odd; to combine these unlikely elements together was metaphor's spatial power. A "space of metaphor" refers, in a ritual, to a place in which people can join unlike elements. They do so through how they use their bodies, rather than through explaining themselves. In the Adonia, dancing and drinking take the place of complaint, or of

analysis of the condition of women in Athens. This explains a certain bafflement in Aristophanes' and Plato's comments on the Adonia, their inability to make sense of what was going on; the rooftop rite defies analytic reasoning.

The classicist John Winkler, in a memorable phrase, calls the Adonia the "laughter of the oppressed."<sup>20</sup> But this ritual did not say no to the male yes. It did not prompt women to commandeer the agora, the Pnyx, or other male bastions for a night. The roof was not a launching pad for rebellion. Instead, it was a space in which women momentarily and bodily stepped out of the conditions imposed on them by the dominant order of the city. The Adonia could have easily been suppressed by husbands or the guardians of the polis, yet no civic power sought to prevent women from observing it, and perhaps this also was metaphor's gift in a festival of resistance too odd to invite direct reprisal. If the Thesmophoria legitimated cold bodies within the stones of the city, the Adonia lifted, for a few nights, their weight.

### *Logos and mythos*

These two ancient festivals illustrate a simple social truth: Ritual heals. Ritual is one way the oppressed—men as well as women—can respond to the slights and contempt they otherwise suffer in society, and rituals more generally can make the pains of living and dying bearable. Ritual constitutes the *social* form in which human beings seek to deal with denial as active agents, rather than as passive victims.

Western civilization has had, however, an ambivalent relation to these powers of ritual. Reason and science have seemed to promise victory over human suffering, victory rather than simply ritual's active engagement with it. And reason, of the kind which shaped our culture, has suspected the foundations of ritual, its metonymies and metaphors in space, its bodily practices, which refuse logical justification or explanation.

That ambivalent Western relation of reason and ritual took form in the ancient world. It appeared in the distinction the Greeks drew between *logos* and *mythos*. The historian of religion Walter Burkert has summarized this contrast as follows:

*Mythos* as contrasted with *logos*: *logos* from *legein*, "to put together," is assembling single bits of evidence, of verifiable facts: *logon didonai*, to

render account in front of a critical and suspicious audience; *mythos* is telling a tale while disclaiming responsibility: *ouk emos ho mythos*, this is not my tale, but I have heard it elsewhere.<sup>21</sup>

The language of *logos* connects things. The *logon didonai* sets the stage for a person making connections: there is an audience judging the person arguing, and the audience is suspicious. *Logos* can become impure; as in the debate over the commanders, a speaker may arouse sympathy and identification with his pictures of individual facts, persons, or events. These images flow one after another, the word pictures feel connected, though they could not withstand the scrutiny of pure deductive analysis.

In all forms of *logos*, however, the speaker is identified with his words; they belong to him and he is responsible for them. Greek political thought shaped ideas of democracy around aspects of *logos*. As first asserted by Kleisthenes, freedom of expression and debate makes sense only if people take responsibility for their words, otherwise argument is weightless, words have no importance. The Pnyx made *logos* work spatially in this way; you could see and hear who applauded or jeered a speech, and account how they voted.

In *mythos*, a speaker is not responsible for his or her words. Instead, the language of myth turns on the belief embodied in the Greek remark, "This is not my tale, but I have heard it elsewhere." Most myths, certainly Greek ones, concern the doings of magical beings or the gods, so that it makes good sense to think that the gods shape these stories, not the men and women who recount them to others. Thus the audience hearing someone recount a myth will be free of suspicions it might harbor toward a speaker in the political assembly, a speaker who claims credit for his words. The anthropologist Meyer Fortas once spoke of myth in this way, as a "ratification of the social bond."<sup>22</sup> Or again, Aristotle famously defined the drama as a "willing suspension of disbelief"; myth, from which the early dramas derived, sets the true context for that statement. *Mythos* is about trust in words, in themselves.

The distinction between *logos* and *mythos* teaches a harsh lesson. The words for which people claim responsibility create mutual distrust and suspicions that need to be deflected and manipulated. This harsh truth shed a terrifying light on Kleisthenes' belief that people should be free to speak and responsible for what they say. Democracy deals in the politics of mutual mistrust. The words for which the speakers seem not responsible create a bond of trust; trust is forged

by people only under the sway of myth, under the sway of language external to the speakers themselves, as in the paeans in homage to Demeter spoken in the huts on the Pnyx and to Adonis on the roofs of the Athenian house. The cloak of darkness thrown over both places reinforced the impersonal, trustworthy character of these words, since the individual speaker could not easily be seen—the words came out of the dark. The spaces of rituals created magic zones of mutual affirmation. And all these powers of mythos affected the celebrating body, endowing it with new value. In ritual, words are consummated by bodily gestures: dancing, crouching, or drinking together become signs of mutual trust, deeply bonding acts. Ritual threw a cloak of darkness over the suspicions individuals might have harbored of one another in the ancient city, quite unlike the mixture of admiration and suspicion elicited by naked display.

Athenian culture thus formed parallel contrasts: hot versus clothed bodies; naked men versus clothed women; light, "out-of-door" spaces versus the darkened spaces of the pit and the roof at night; the challenging exposures of the *logos didonai* and the healing cloak of the mythos; the body of power often losing self-control by the very force of its words versus the oppressed bodies united in ritual, even if that bond could not be articulated, justified, or explained.

But Thucydides will not let us celebrate in quite this way, at least about the Athens he knew. Reason has cause to suspect ritual, for ritual contained its own fatal defect in binding people together. Thucydides showed how ritual gave the Athenians no sufficient understanding of *why* they suffered at a moment of great civic disaster; without that understanding, their lives together could unravel.

## 2. THE SUFFERING BODY

Perikles' Funeral Oration ends one scene of Thucydides' *History*; the next recounts a great plague which befell Athens in the winter and spring of 430. Under the impact of the plague, people acted in ways which contradicted the shining confidence expressed in the Funeral Oration: the institutions of democracy broke down, sick bodies unravelled the bonds of ritual in the city, and Perikles himself was destroyed.

The doctors of ancient Athens knew little about how to cope with a massive outbreak of cholera, and Thucydides describes the bodily symptoms of plague with bewildered awe:

Their eyes became red and inflamed; inside their mouths there was bleeding from the throat and tongue, and the breath became unnatural and unpleasant . . . there were attacks of ineffectual retching, producing violent spasms . . . though there were many dead bodies lying about unburied, the birds and animals that eat human flesh either did not come near them or, if they did taste the flesh, died of it afterwards.<sup>23</sup>

The plague struck first and most fatally at the social fabric of the city, by destroying those rituals which paid homage to the sanctity of death. The Greeks started to violate one another's dead: "they would arrive first at a funeral pyre that had been made by others, put their own dead upon it and set it alight; or, finding another pyre burning, they would throw the corpse that they were carrying on top of the other one and go away." Though some people did act honorably, tending the sick and so becoming infected themselves, ". . . the catastrophe was so overwhelming that men, not knowing what would happen next to them, became indifferent to every rule of religion. . . ." <sup>24</sup>

Once ritual had sickened, the plague struck at politics. "No one expected to live long enough to be brought to trial and punished." The Athenians lost their powers of self-discipline and self-governance; instead, faced with plague, they gave themselves over to momentary or forbidden pleasures: "People now began openly to venture on acts of self-indulgence which before then they used to keep dark . . . they resolved to spend their money quickly and to spend it on pleasure . . . the pleasure of the moment."<sup>25</sup> Sickness rendered the hierarchies of politics meaningless, for the plague made no distinctions between citizen and non-citizen, Athenian and slave, men and women. At this moment when the Athenians could no longer control their own lives, their enemies seized the advantage, advancing upon the city through the countryside in the spring of 430 B.C.

Only a few months after he had delivered the Funeral Oration, Perikles' dream of a self-governing city lay in ruins, and he himself was menaced as an architect of that dream. Before the war, Perikles had suggested the Piraeus wall be doubled, so that traffic could pass protected from city to port, and this was done; a space of about 150 yards separated these two parallel walls, and they were thus large enough to contain people from the countryside seeking shelter during time of war. Now, as the Spartans under Archidamus invaded the plains of Attica near Athens in 430, masses from the countryside crowded behind the walls he had created, particularly into the chan-