CORNFORD, Francis Macdonald (1874-1943)

Francis Macdonald Cornford was a British Classical scholar associated with the Cambridge Ritualists group. Drawing on J. G. Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915), the Ritualists examined ancient Greek literature and culture to reconstruct its origins in ritual. *The Origin of Attic Comedy* (1914), for example, posits that the closing marriage procession in Old Comedy, which he sees as unmotivated by either the plot or the structure of the play preceding it, derives from ancient fertility rites. Similarly, his chapter on the Olympic games in Jane Harrison’s *Themis* (1912) argues that the triumphal procession was, in fact, the “central rite,” with the athletic competition having originally been a “mere preliminary” to it. Cornford’s work also owed a specific debt to Nietzsche, whose distinction in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) between Dionysus, the mystery god, and Apollo, the Olympian deity, was central to the narrative of *From Religion to Philosophy* (1912). In the 1920s, he turned his intellectual attention to Classical philosophy exclusively, and published a number of commentaries on and translations of Platonic dialogues, including a well-known version of the *Republic* (1941). Educated and subsequently appointed to a teaching post at Trinity College, Cornford spent the majority of his adult life, except for the First World War, at Cambridge. Deeply invested in the academic, political, and social life of the university, he also maintained a long-standing connection with the Working Men’s College. Although best known for his scholarly work, Cornford was also a poet and satirist. His *Microcosmographia Academica* (1908) is a touchstone of the university satire genre.

Bibliography: Arlen, Shelley. *The Cambridge Ritualists: An Annotated Bibliography of*

*the Works by and About Jane Ellen Harrison, Gilbert Murray, Francis M. Cornford and Arthur Bernard Cook.* Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1990.

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