Title of Paper: “Reflections in Diana’s Mirror: Sir James Frazer’s ‘Survivals’ and the Literary Construction of Nemi.”
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Abstract:

Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* proved an extremely influential work from the publication of its first two-volume edition (1890) to the twelve-volume third edition (1911) and beyond. It was highly influential on late-Victorian writers such as Thomas Hardy as well as Modernists such as T.S. Eliot and D.H. Lawrence. While Frazer’s influences on literary figures is often remarked upon, less examined is the literary nature of Frazer’s own endeavor. This paper seeks to demonstrate that *The Golden Bough* is explicitly and imaginatively crafted to address the controversies of its time, supporting the point of view of cultural and scientific progress, and as such it is important to read his work as a mingling of the anthropological and the imaginative. At *The Golden Bough*‘s heart is Frazer's contention that societies follow a Darwinian pattern of evolution and that religion is a step in this direction. His methodology is shaped and crafted both to develop this hypothesis but also to respond to its ideological opponents. In order to do so Frazer employs literary techniques and uses rhetoric that he molds in order to present his evidence in ways that best suit his argument's needs. In other words, Frazer imaginatively shapes his subjects in order to fit his ideological assumptions. This paper seeks to demonstrate this by focusing primarily on Frazer’s opening discussions of the Shrine at Nemi, which creates the hermeneutic through which the rest of the text is intended to be viewed.

Keywords: James Frazer; Golden Bough; anthropology; Victorian; religion; survivals; E.B. Tylor; Nemi; hermeneutics; victorian epistemology

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In 1878 Thomas Hardy began the serial publication of his novel *The Return of the Native*. The story opens on Egdon Heath (a fictitious locale in Dorset) on November Fifth, Guy Fawkes Night. The villagers have gathered for their annual bonfire festival:

> It was as if these men and boys had suddenly dived into past ages, and fetched there from an hour and deed which had before been familiar with this spot. The ashes of the original British pyre which blazed from that summit lay fresh and undisturbed in the barrow beneath their tread. The flames from funeral piles long ago kindled there had shone down upon the lowlands as these were shining now. Festival fires to Thor and Woden had followed on the same ground and duly had their day. Indeed, it is pretty well known that such blazes as this the heathmen were now enjoying are rather the lineal descendants from jumbled Druidical rites and Saxon ceremonies than the invention of popular feeling about Gunpowder Plot. (20)

Hardy’s location of a pagan survival in the yearly festivities surrounding Bonfire Night is typical of Victorian interests in folklore and history, dating back to the antiquarian craze of the previous century. It should come as no surprise that twelve years after *The Return of the Native*, we find Hardy singing the praises of his friend the mythographer Edward Clodd on the subject of survivals: "Mr. E. Clodd this morning gives an excellently neat answer to my question why the superstitions of a remote Asiatic and a Dorset labourer are the same" (*Life* 230). Hardy, as Andrew D. Radford has sought to show, was deeply involved in the burgeoning anthropological sciences, and it should not surprise us that we find in Hardy’s work both echoes of recent scholarship in the subject as well as precursors of scholarship yet to come. Hardy finds a compatriot in Sir James Frazer, whose famous volume *The Golden Bough* would profoundly influence both the literary and anthropological world. And just as Hardy’s novels are influenced by the growing interest in the social and material cultures of the past, *The Golden Bough* is clearly a product of both Frazer’s tireless (and perhaps obsessive) efforts and the cultural milieu within which he worked. *The Golden Bough*’s methodology is informed and shaped by Frazer’s epistemological commitments, prompted by the clashes that new philosophical and scientific perspectives offer. But there is another similarity between Hardy and Frazer, and that lies in the literary nature of their endeavors. While Frazer is clearly not writing as a novelist, his argument is partly made through his thorough mastery of evocative prose, prose that often obscures certain facts working against his theoretical interests. As I will seek to demonstrate, *The Golden Bough* is explicitly crafted to address the controversies of its time, supporting the point of view of cultural and scientific progress, and as such it is important to read his work as a mingling of the anthropological and the imaginative. At *The Golden Bough*’s heart
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is Frazer's contention that societies follow a Darwinian pattern of evolution and that religion is a step in this direction. His methodology is shaped and crafted both to develop this hypothesis but also to respond to its ideological opponents. In order to do so Frazer employs literary techniques and uses rhetoric that he molds in order to present his evidence in ways that best suit his argument's needs. In other words, Frazer imaginatively shapes his subjects in order to fit his ideological assumptions. I will seek to demonstrate this by focusing primarily on Frazer's opening discussions of the Shrine at Nemi, which creates the hermeneutic through which the rest of the text is intended to be viewed.

Frazer's expansive project, beginning with the two-volume 1890 edition, would eventually cascade into twelve volumes and various appendices. However the seed of his methodology is apparent in that very first volume and it is only expanded in the myriad of additions, corrections, and redactions which follow. Any examination of Frazer's methodology and its relationship to the culture that influenced it must begin with the 1890 edition, where we first find its central images.

The Golden Bough finds its origin and its most famous image in a religious practice that took place at Nemi in Aricia, Italy. At Nemi along the banks of a lake was a shrine dedicated to Diana:

In this sacred grove there grew a certain tree round which at any time of the day and probably far into the night a strange figure might be seen to prowl. In his hand he carried a drawn sword, and he kept peering warily about him as if every instant he expected to be set upon by an enemy. He was a priest and a murderer; and the man for whom he looked was sooner or later to murder him and hold the priesthood in his stead. Such was the rule of the sanctuary. A candidate for the priesthood could only succeed to office by slaying the priest, and having slain him he held office till he was himself slain by a stronger or a craftier. (Frazer 1890, 2)

This shrine, excavated in 1885, was a widely published discovery. But it is what Frazer came across while editing an edition of the second century travel writer Pausanias that seems to be the true impetus for his study. Pausanias writes that Hippolytus, done to death by the curses of Theseus, was raised from the dead by Aesculapius; and that being come to life again, he refused to forgive his father, and disregarding his entreaties went away to Aricia in Italy. There he reigned, and there he consecrated to Artemis a precinct, where down to my time the priesthood of the goddess is the prize of victory in a single combat. The competition is not open to free men, but only to slaves who have run away from their masters. (112-113)

This story is one of a number of foundation myths that explain the origin of the ritual figure that Frazer refers to as the "King of the Wood." There are numerous other references to the practice but, it is Pausanias's statement that this occurred "down to my time," that is down to the second century of the Common Era, which seems to give Frazer pause. He writes "This strange rule has no parallel in
classical antiquity, and cannot be explained from it. To find an explanation we must go farther afield. No one will probably deny that such a custom savours of a barbarous age and, surviving into imperial times, stands out in striking isolation from the polished Italian society of the day, like a primeval rock rising from a smooth-shave lawn" (1890, 2-3). *The Golden Bough* begins in this manner, as a study and an examination of a ritual that has outlasted the society around it. The "barbarous" custom is not itself surprising, but rather its continued existence in an Italy that has moved beyond. In an era of Imperial state religion, with the dominance of Christianity not far away on the horizon, Frazer finds it curious that this gruesome practice is maintained.

This interest in the "survival" of the ancient practice provides us with two telling points about Frazer’s methodology. First, it points to his interest in the "primitive" as evidential fodder for understanding the origins of religion—indeed Frazer will make much use out of the King of the Wood in order to put forth his origin theories. Second, it points to another incredibly important methodological concern, the concept of "survivals" in and of itself. Frazer is particularly interested in the ritual at Nemi because it seems out of character with its time and place. Frazer’s reliance on this concept is, as we shall see, related to his convictions regarding cultural evolution. The term survival and its employment carried ideological baggage in Victorian Britain, baggage that related directly to the various debates surrounding Darwinism and new scientific understandings.

The nineteenth century saw the profound impact of new sciences, beginning with geology and culminating in Darwin. Britain, Darwin’s homeland, was steadily impacted by these scientific developments as well as the Higher Criticism being imported from Germany. The Victorian marketplace of ideas became a divisive place, where epistemological models grounded in religious views on the one hand and scientific views on the other strove for dominance. Robert Fraser identifies two key theories of history and culture that are crucial for understanding this cultural milieu as a whole, and Frazer in particular. "The first and older," writes Fraser, "stated that man had started from a state of perfection and had simply run to seed," while the other model focused on a progressive concept of history and culture based upon an evolutionary view (13).

This first perspective was a dominant force in British cultural life leading up to the scientific revolutions of the nineteenth century, due primarily to its relationship to religious orthodoxy. In this paradigm the continual slide of society downwards is the on-going result of the Fall and the loss of Eden. This particular point of view reached its radical culmination in the extreme Millenialists who began to populate Britain during the first half of the nineteenth century. Their views were "catastrophic and pessimistic, seeing both the world and the churches as so lost that only Christ’s Second Coming could redeem them" (Gilley, 107). The broad evangelical revival of the early 1800s gave these positions a voice amongst British dissenting sects, influencing the culture in ways that continued to reverberate throughout the century. Nor were
Millennialists the only ones influenced by this perspective. As Robert Newsome rightly points out, mainstream figures such as Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford held similar beliefs about cultural degeneration (37). In arts and literature this perspective would continue to flourish through the works of the fin de siècle, and eventually become apparent in works of British modernism such as Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.

This viewpoint was being expounded in terms that would directly clash with evolutionary points of view even before such points of view entered mainstream public discourse. In 1855, four years before the publication *Origin of the Species* Richard Whately published *On the Origin of Civilization*, wherein he read the Book of Genesis as a parable about man’s "decline from a state of Stone Age virtue" (Fraser, 13). Evolutionary theory not only denied literal interpretations of the Bible (positions becoming untenable for many religious believers due to the advances in Form Criticism and general Biblical studies) but it also confronted these other relatively more sophisticated theories about historical development.

A number of scholars throughout this period sought to apply Darwinian evolutionary models to contexts beyond biology. Even before Darwin, Herbert Spencer had been paving the way for an intellectual climate focused on development; however, it was Darwin’s work that provided the greater impetus for this intellectual shift. Robert Ackerman characterizes the climate thus:

> The orthodox immediately rose to give battle to what were usually seen, in antinomian fashion, as the forces of confusion and mischief. But the aggressive claims of the scientists and their allies produced a second reaction as well among scholars and thinkers who, although themselves intellectually and emotionally unable to remain Christians, could not or would not accept a universe in which human will and motivation were irrelevant. (36)

E.B. Tylor, for one, began working with rudimentary concepts of cultural evolution even before he read Darwin. He expanded this work arguing for "the existence of an organic law of development and progress operative in the growth of human institutions. This meant that change was gradual and orderly, much the same the world over, and that human institutions, once simple and confused, had become complex and highly coordinated over the passage of time" (Ackerman 78).

In order to respond to attacks on these evolutionary concepts Tylor developed the idea of survivals. He contended that even while society evolves, certain primitive practices are maintained, their original meaning becoming lost. Even advanced civilizations maintain some of these practices until their purposes recede from view as cultures change. Tylor writes "When in the process of time there has come general change in the condition of a people, it is usual notwithstanding, to find that much manifestly had not its origin in the new state of things, but has simply lasted on into it" (71). There are, he argues, numerous examples of these kinds of survivals, and he finds them in our midst, ranging from children’s games to salutations upon sneezing.
Tylor’s concept of survivals both explains these phenomena and affirms the Darwinian theories of cultural evolution at the same time. These phenomena cease to be problems, and become evidence of the earlier stages of cultural development. As Tylor states:

On the strength of these survivals, it becomes possible to declare that the civilization of the people they are observed among must have been derived from an earlier state, in which the proper home and meaning of these things are to be found; and thus collections of such facts are to be worked as mines of historic knowledge. In dealing with such materials, experience of what actually happens is the main guide, and direct history has to teach us, first and foremost, how old habits hold their ground in the midst of a new culture which certainly would never have brought them in, but on the contrary presses hard to thrust them out. (71)

These survivals become the raw materials for the scholar to work from. They provide evidence that culture changes, for there must have been a point in the past when these survivals had meaning. He also affirms the evolutionary character of this cultural change by pointing out that the present cultures seek to “thrust out” such irrelevant superstitions. Often, as he points out in a number of examples, the culture finds new uses for such material, again affirming the evolutionary adaptability of culture. Divination methods become children’s games, and proverbs take on new culturally relevant meanings. Tylor concludes his chapter on survivals by again emphasizing the evolutionary character of cultural change:

As the social development of the world goes on, the weightiest thoughts and actions may dwindle to mere survival. Original meaning dies out gradually, each generation leaves fewer and fewer to bear it in mind, till it falls out of popular memory, and in after-days ethnography has to attempt, more or less successfully, to restore it by piecing together lines of isolated or forgotten facts. (110-11)

According to Ackerman survivals become the necessary evidence to trace the evolution of a cultural or religious institution: "To be persuasive, any developmental argument based on artifacts and behavioral observations must demonstrate that in fact each of its elements grew out of the preceding one--that the series was indeed evolutionary ...This device of survivals made it possible, Tylor and other evolutionists thought, to fill in the cultural blanks and reconstruct the life of bygone eras" (78-9).

The concept of the survival opens up for examination the early stages of development that many scholars theorized existed. When understood in this fashion these phenomena could be studied as part of the early originary moments of culture. At the same time the concept functions as a bulwark against claims of cultural degeneration. It explains why "primitive" behaviors occur in advanced societies: they are, for Tylor and others, evidence of the history of development, not symptoms of degeneration.
Frazer follows Tylor in proposing a paradigm for cultural development that follows an evolutionary model. In the preface to the second edition of *The Golden Bough* Frazer says that part of his main purpose is "to follow the long march, the slow toilsome ascent, of humanity from savagery to civilisation [sic]" (Preface to second edition xxv). Indeed Frazer argues throughout the *Golden Bough*, that the stages of cultural development proceed from views of magic, to religions, and ultimately to science (and beyond). Frazer writes: "But if in the most backward state of human society we find now known to us we find magic thus conspicuously present and religion conspicuously absent, may we not reasonably conjecture that the civilized races of the world have also at some period of their history passed through a similar intellectual phase" (1911, Vol. 1, 86). For Frazer these are evolutionary stages of development, and he finds his evidence for them in not only indigenous societies, but also more importantly in survivals.

Thus when Frazer takes the survival of the ritual at Nemi as his starting point, he is staking an ideological claim on the side of the Darwinians. The importance of Nemi is demonstrated by the fact that Frazer structures his work throughout its stages of development around the ritual. Even if we take seriously Frazer's claim in later editions of the work that the King of the Wood serves as only a "puppet" or a "pretext" through which to explore other questions, the work still finds its organizational structure based around the Priest at Nemi. However, the importance of this as a survival is not just evident through its centrality to Frazer's corpus, but also because of the way that Frazer selectively represents the ritual. As we shall see Frazer's literary construction of the events at Nemi is primarily designed to highlight the ritual as a survival: he explicitly refers to it as such, but he also uses more subtle rhetorical strategies to suggest this, as well as to preemptively silence objections.

Robert Fraser has traced the myriad of archaeological theories surrounding the site at Nemi and its relationship to the ritual and other religious practices. The site's incongruity (as far as classical accounts maintain) extends not only to the time-period in which the deadly contests continued, but also in relationship with the other ritual associations of the site. As Fraser writes "a spa settlement dedicated to the gentle arts of healing seems to consort ill with a deadly hand-to-hand combat between a man defending his life and limb and a fugitive from justice staking everything on the outcome" (10).

One of the ways in which archaeologists studying the site attempted to explain this incongruity, was through alternative placements of the shrine. The 1817 discovery of a small temple dedicated to Diana some distance from the lake furnished a relatively persuasive solution to the problem. The incongruity of armed combat and physical rehabilitation is reduced by the lack of proximity. This also follows partially from Strabo's account of the shrine and its environs, though Strabo did argue that the shrine fronted the lake. Lord John Savile accounted for this by theorizing that water was siphoned off from the lake to the shrine.
Frazer, however, does not mention these possibilities, as Robert Fraser points out:

Frazer not merely rejects this possibility, but overlooks it entirely—less, one suspects, because of its intrinsic improbability than because of its inconsistency with his own line of argument. Frazer needed the shrine to be where tradition had placed it if his theories were to hold. If Nibby’s theory was correct, then any incongruity in the ambiance of the shrine was explained away. Frazer needed the shrine to be as incongruous as possible. It was incongruity in which he was interested. (Fraser 11)

Frazer does not employ or mention these possibilities because he does not have to. They are not part of the literary construction he is producing. And it is important to point out that in Frazer’s vision of Nemi and the Priest-King so much hinges upon a literary construction the author develops to suit his theories’ needs.

Gillian Beer has examined the literary quality of a number of nineteenth century anthropological texts, pointing out that the so-called “arm chair school” of anthropologists were forced by their cultural constraints to rely on the testimony of others, but also their own imaginative faculties. These anthropological texts are literary constructions that gain their authority from their ability to convince the reader that they are genuine representations. Beer has likened Frazer to Shakespeare’s Prospero, from The Tempest. This image “provid[es] Frazer with a never-articulated role, as the magician whose methods are reason, and whose goal is to create order out of the unruly elements without denying caprice, chance and accident. Prospero is both dreamer and controller of dreams” (40). Frazer, in seeking to weave connections between disparate cultures and times and present the world as a systematic order, employs the imaginative in order to represent the unseen. The force of his argument comes primarily from the rhetoric he uses so deftly. Through narrative Frazer not only sets the tone of The Golden Bough, but one which elides elements that do not serve his ideological purpose.

Just how much hangs on Frazer’s descriptive rhetoric may be demonstrated by examining criticisms made by Edmund Leach and Jonathan Z. Smith. Leach’s own visit to Nemi in 1985 prompted his reevaluation of Frazer’s treatment of the site. Leach is highly critical of Frazer’s immensely popular abridged edition of 1922, which omits a great deal of the description of Nemi and thus eliminates possible rational motivations for the Priest-King. Leach’s "pilgrimage" to Nemi has revealed a complex much larger and well established than Frazer suggests, particularly in the abridgment. This points to two problems with Frazer’s own account: it suggests that the Priest-King had an economic motivation (thus dismantling Frazer’s original question), and also demonstrates the complex’s establishment as a central part of regional religious culture. While Frazer, according to Leach, characterizes Nemi as "a poverty-stricken survival from 'savagery'“ (3) it is in fact an economically thriving temple complex which
would provide a rational incentive for the fugitive-become-priest to brave the dangers associated with it. Leach goes on to argue:

The behaviors he [Frazer] describes are represented as totally irrational; they are 'survivals' from an age of brutal and childish absurdity. But modern readers who replace the first and one half pages of their abridged edition with the first eight pages of the full scale version will find that the financial benefits of the King of the Woods must have been very substantial. Most of the mystery in Frazer’s story then disappears. (3)

Leach accuses Frazer of not properly representing the economic status and the societal grounding of the temple complex at Nemi. Leach’s experience dramatizes the question of authority posed by Gillian Beer: Frazer's authority, for Leach, derives primarily from the believability of his prose, not his sources, nor his references. It should not surprise us that following his experience at Nemi, Leach became one of Frazer’s most vociferous modern critics.

Criticism of the abridgment is the most obvious instance of these selective omissions regarding Nemi. While Leach may argue that the unabridged third edition remedies this to a point, none of Frazer's editions are able to completely answer the charge of selective description. The descriptions, ranging from the 1890 edition all the way to the third and final complete edition, all obscure elements that might undermine, or at least complicate, Frazer's argument.

Frazer’s earliest description of the grove at Nemi comes from the conflation of Turner’s famous painting of the Golden Bough sequence in the Aeneid and the shrine at Nemi. While from Frazer’s vantage point there is a link between the bough the priest at Nemi must defend and the Golden Bough of Virgil, the conflation of the two is a clear interpretive choice that obscures the very cosmopolitan nature of the complex at Nemi. Frazer writes: “Who does not know Turner’s picture of the Golden Bough? The scene, suffused with the golden glow of imagination in which the divine mind of Turner steeped and transfigured even the fairest natural landscape, is a dream-like vision of the little woodland lake of Nemi, 'Diana’s Mirror,' as it was called” (1890 1). The opening lines here invoking the uncultivated clearly uncivilized world presented in Turner’s painting are beautiful examples of Victorian prose. However, they hide as much as they reveal.

Frazer did not travel to Nemi until 1901; however, he was clearly familiar with the archaeological work that had been done there. His footnotes point to the 1885 excavations, yet one sees no evidence of Saville’s account in the text itself. Rather Frazer focuses on the quiet desertedness of the site:

No one who has seen that calm water, lapped in a green hollow of the Alban hills, can ever forget it. The two characteristic Italian villages which slumber on its banks, and the equally Italian palazzo whose terraced gardens descend steeply to the lake, hardly break the stillness and even the solitariness of the scene. Dian herself might still linger by this lonely shore, still haunt these woodlands wild. (1890, 1)
Here the site is described as isolated, the present quiet conflated with the past. Frazer seeks to examine. And if the reader is tempted to understand this as Nemi’s present state, divorced and distant from its violent pagan past, Frazer closes this first edition by again invoking Nemi and explicitly presenting its current quietude as an ample representation of its past: "If in bidding farewell to Nemi we look around us for the last time, we shall find the lake and its surroundings not much changed from what they were in the days when Diana and Viribus still received the homage of their worshippers in the sacred grove" (1890: 370).

Between the first two-volume edition and the third twelve-volume version Frazer elaborates on just about everything, and Nemi is no different. One would expect that, if nothing else, Frazer’s own trip to Nemi would correct any errors regarding the site’s situation, yet, Frazer adds no corrective. Rather his descriptive additions are more examples of excellent prose which create an atmosphere of desolation:

To gentle and pious pilgrims at the shrine the sight of him [the King of the Wood] might well seem to darken the fair landscape, as when a cloud suddenly blots the sun on a bright day. The dreamy blue of Italian skies, the dappled shade of summer woods, and the sparkle of waves in the sun, can have accorded but ill with that stern and sinister figure. Rather we picture to ourselves the scene as it may have been witnessed by a belated wayfarer on one of those wild autumn nights when the dead leaves are falling thick, and the winds seem to sing the dirge of the dying year. It is a somber picture, set to melancholy music--the background of forest showing black and jagged against a lowering and stormy sky, the sighing of the wind in the branches, the rustle of the withered leaves under foot, the lapping of the cold water on the shore, and in the foreground, pacing to and fro, now in twilight and now in gloom, a dark figure with a glitter of steel at the shoulder whenever the pale moon, riding clear of the cloud-rack, peers down at him through the matted boughs. (1911 vol. 1: 16)

These imaginative additions all suit Frazer’s methodological needs. He has added pilgrims now, yet the shrine is still a quiet place, without much of an indication of significance. These pilgrims emphasize something else as well, their "gentle and pious" demeanor as Frazer imagines them, contrasts with the bloody ritual which keeps the King of the Wood constantly on guard. Again we have Frazer, through imaginative rhetoric with no basis in fact, figuring the ritual as an anomaly, something he can construct as a survival. And yet despite the depiction of the wood as populated by pilgrims, Frazer omits description of the larger economic role the temple clearly plays.

The return to Nemi at the end of the 1890 edition makes clear the vision of the site that Frazer has in mind. Its current state is much as it was in the days when Frazer’s priest stalked the grove, a small minor site. Even the religious dimensions have not exactly changed but been transposed: "The temple of Diana
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Indeed, has disappeared, and the King of the Wood no longer stand sentinel over the Golden Bough. But Nemi’s woods are still green and at evening you may hear the church bells of Albano, and perhaps if the air be still, of Rome itself ringing the Angelus” (370). This image reinforces the view that Nemi was a minor site, the kind of place where one would expect a primitive survival to continue. His emphasis in its proximity to Rome serves to show how close it is to the more cosmopolitan civilization of both ancient and modern Rome. All of this emphasizes the point Frazer strenuously makes, that this is a survival. This rhetoric has another purpose as well, for it links the angelus ringing from Rome to the religiosity of the cult of Diana at Nemi, again expressing Frazer’s primary methodological agenda, to show the primitive roots of religion.

It is telling that Frazer knew his image of the bells ringing was a fiction. He gladly offers an explanation for its continued inclusion, writing in the preface to the second edition “To a passage in my books it has been objected by a distinguished scholar that the church-bells of Rome cannot be heard, even in the stillest weather, on the shores of the Lake of Nemi.” Frazer responds by admitting the mistake and drawing on the literary to support him: “In acknowledging my blunder and leaving it uncorrected, may I plead in extenuation of my obduracy the example of an illustrious writer?” The illustrious writer Frazer invokes is Sir Walter Scott who had a similar instance regarding the audibility of drums in one of his historical novels. Frazer writes he replied in effect that he liked to hear the drums sounding there, and that he would let them sound on so long as his book might last. In the same spirit I make bold to say that by the Lake of Nemi I love to hear, if it be only in imagination, the distant chiming of the bells of Rome, and I would fain believe that their airy music may ring in the ears of my readers after it has ceased to vibrate in my own.

(Preface to the second edition xxvi-xxvii)

Here Frazer acknowledges the literary character of his work, and it cannot be limited simply to the closing which he keeps throughout the editions. Frazer acknowledges that his rhetorical use of the bells is meant to invoke something in the reader, though he is not forthcoming enough to say precisely what.

Jonathan Z. Smith has been highly critical of this tendency in Frazer. Smith points out the ways in which Frazer imaginatively interprets Strabo’s account of the ritual at Nemi:

Three motifs are present in Frazer’s initial description: (1) A runaway slave becomes priest by slaying the previous priest and then remains on guard against being attacked and slain by his successor. (2) The priest guards a tree or circles around it. (3) The priest receives the title of king. The first motif is largely explicit in Strabo’s account. The second and third motifs of tree and king are not even hinted at in Strabo. (214)

Yet Frazer’s prose does not indicate where his source ends and his own speculations begin. The reader must rely on Frazer’s descriptions of the events

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and trust in his authority as interpreter, something which as we have seen is suspect.

This theory of survivals, which Frazer goes to great pains to employ, turns the significance of Nemi towards an evolutionary advantage. Viewing it as a survival, as opposed to a part of the larger culture of Roman religiosity allows Frazer to use it as evidence of an earlier more primitive state, which underlies all religions and societies. This survival provides the linkage (through Frazer's interpretation) of the entirety of The Golden Bough. As Smith has pointed out, the entire structure of The Golden Bough hinges upon Frazer's identification of the Golden Bough of Aeneas with the bough of Nemi, and then identifying it with mistletoe, which then allows Frazer to trace his motifs to the Norse and Balder.

Frazer clearly needs this to be a survival if his project is to go forward. He states this most explicitly in the third edition of the book where he writes of the origin myths surrounding Nemi: "It needs to elaborate demonstration to convince us that the stories told to account for Diana's worship at Nemi are unhistorical." The origin myths for Frazer are of no real interest because they provide a logic (even a mythologized one) for worship at the site while Frazer's methodological needs require that there be little or no logic. He continues "Clearly they belong to that large class of myths which are made up to explain the origin of a religious ritual ... The incongruity of these Nemi myths is indeed transparent" (1911 vol 1: 21).

What the contradictory Nemi myths demonstrate for Frazer is the site's early date: "The true value of such tales is that they ... bear witness indirectly to its venerable age by shewing [sic] that the true origin was lost in the mists of a fabulous antiquity" (1911 vol 1: 22). For Frazer the myths' lack of foundations serve to demonstrate that the ritual at Nemi is a product of a forgotten age. It serves, in fact, to do this even in the face of more historical accounts of the site's founding. In regards to the issue of the sanctuary's antiquity "these Nemi legends are probably more to be trusted than the apparently historical tradition, vouched for by Cato the Elder, that the sacred grove was dedicated to Diana by a certain Egerius Baebius or Laevius of Tusculum a Latin dictator" (1911 vol 1: 22). Frazer finds fault with the "historical account" precisely because of his own position on religious and cultural evolution and his need to present Nemi as incongruous with the broader culture surrounding it:

This tradition speaks for the great age of the sanctuary, since it seems to date its foundation sometime before 495 B.C., the year in which Pometia was sacked by the Romans and disappears from history. But we cannot suppose that so barbarous a rule as that of the Arician priesthood was deliberately instituted by a league of civilized communities, such as the Latin cities undoubtedly were. (1911 vol 1: 22)

Frazer ultimately takes Cato's account as evidence of something, but he has already dismissed for the reader the possibility that the shrine was founded when Cato says it was. Rather he turns Cato's claim into another argument for the older antiquity of the site stating that "Rather we may suppose it [Cato's
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account] refers to some ancient restoration or reconstruction of the sanctuary… At any rate it testifies to a belief that the grove has been from early times a common place of worship for many of the oldest cities of the country, if not the whole Latin confederacy" (1911 vol 1: 23). This passage contains all of the hallmarks of Frazer's interest in Nemi. He argues that the "barbarous" customs that underlie "civilization" cannot be of civilization's own making. While evidence might point to a later date of foundation for the site at Nemi, Frazer’s own ideological point of view will not allow him to see the creation of Arician priesthood and the civility of the Latin league as part of a broader dependent whole.

It is important to remember that Frazer’s fascination with survivals, indeed his willingness to do literary work to maintain them as survivals, is directly related to his theoretical assumptions regarding cultural development. That is this focus on survivals, even to the point of bending pieces to fit, allows him to clearly posit that cultural evolution occurs. He can compare the grandeur of Rome to the "primitive" survival that his own discourse has characterized. Frazer's representation of Nemi is thoroughly embedded in his ideological commitment to cultural evolution. At the heart of Frazer's project is the desire to find survivals of earlier stages of cultural development that underlie complex civilizations. These survivals function as both the raw data to be interpreted in the light of evolutionary development, as well as evidence of an upward progress as opposed to the degeneration posed by the critics of Darwinism. Throughout his masterwork, Frazer imaginatively reads his sources, conveniently describes the sites he treats, and evokes poetic associations within his reader in order to make an argument for the antiquity of his subject matter. His representation of Nemi is a perfect example of this, as it is a representation upon which Frazer's entire work hinges.

This representation is a literary construct that the author shapes in order to make his case. Frazer is a master rhetorician, one skilled enough to bend and craft his narrative into the shape his interpretations call for. Frazer's authority does not come from the copious notes that one finds in his work. As various modern scholars have demonstrated, the sources Frazer works from do not adequately support the conclusions he draws. Rather, Frazer derives his authority from his use of language, and it is his ability to convince the reader of his claims using all of the tools of Victorian prose that has kept The Golden Bough on bookshelves in one form or another for over a century. For Gillian Beer, Frazer is a magician, Prospero using reason and the imagination to construct his tome, while for Jonathan Z. Smith he is a joker who has perpetrated one of the greatest intellectual cons in history. Both of these points of view reveal The Golden Bough as an expertly crafted looking glass that reveals at least one important truth: ultimately Sir James Frazer shaped his account of the ritual at Nemi so that Diana's Mirror reflects, more than anything else, his own face.
Acknowledgments


