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Résumé de l'article

In 1781, British Envoy Sir William Hamilton wrote to Joseph Banks of an astonishing discovery in rural Abruzzo. The inhabitants of Isernia offered wax phalluses as votives to Catholic shrines during the annual Fête of St. Cosmo and Damiano. The waxen vows were evidence that the cult of Priapus persisted in the modern world, and their appearance produced *thauma* or wonder in antiquarian circles. Moving from Hamilton's letter to Richard Payne Knight's *A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus* (1786), this essay draws from recent scholarship on the phenomenology of *thauma* to recast this well-known episode of the *ex-voti* as an eighteenth-century attempt to reconcile archaic Greek and modern modes of perception. Using archaic texts to ascribe new meaning to phallic emblems, Knight created an interpretative framework through which moderns might draw closer to the ancient world.

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"Our Modern Priapus": *Thauma* and the Isernian Simulacra

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In 1781, British Envoy Sir William Hamilton wrote to the President of the Royal Society, Sir Joseph Banks: "I have actually discover[e]d the Cult of Priapus in its full vigour, as in the days of the Greeks & Romans, at *Isernia* in *Abruzzo*."[1] Anticipating the astonishment of his colleagues, Hamilton claimed that the phallic offerings, moulded in wax and collected in remote Italian communities, were evidence that pagan rituals persisted in the modern world. His letter described the ritual practice of presenting wax models of male genitalia to Catholic shrines at an annual fair in Isernia—"one of the most ancient cities of the Kingdom of Naples."[2] Hamilton suggested that the votives were a devotion still paid to Priapus and a "conformity in modern and ancient superstition."[3] These objects, poised between past and present, produced a sense of *thauma*, or wonder, in eighteenth-century circles, recalling both ancient and Christian theologies. Although the ecclesiastical powers suppressed the festival before Hamilton could attend (as

1. Letter from William Hamilton, dated 17 July 1781 in Naples, to Joseph Banks, in London; British Library, Add. Ms. 34048, ff. 12–14. Quoted in Giancarlo Carabelli, *In the Image of Priapus* (London: Duckworth, 1996), 2.
2. Richard Payne Knight, *An Account of the Remains of the Worship of Priapus, lately existing at Isernia, in the Kingdom of Naples: in two letters; One from Sir William Hamilton, K.B. His Majesty's Minister at the Court of Naples, to Sir Joseph Banks, Bart. President of the Royal Society; And the other from a Person residing at Isernia: to which is added*, A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus, *and its Connexion with the mystic Theology of the Ancients* (London: Printed by T. Spilsbury, 1786), 8.
3. Knight, *A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus* (in the edition cited in footnote 2 above), 5.

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a result of his inquiries and the completion of a new road which increased traffic to the region), the collector managed to acquire a handful of the "Priapi," which he deposited in the British Museum in 1784. Knowledge of the ritual was made available to an even wider audience in 1786 when Hamilton's letter was published alongside the learned disquisition of fellow Dilettante and distinguished connoisseur, Richard Payne Knight. This collaborative volume was entitled *A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*, and the phalli were engraved for the frontispiece (Figure 1). Set within a classical niche, a space often reserved for cult statues, the artful arrangement of the votives suggested their sacred qualities and affirmed their status as crucial evidence in support of the central thesis.

Hamilton's "curious discovery" allowed Knight to develop a philosophical framework for interpreting phallacism. Focusing on Knight's infamous interpretation of these artifacts, I explore how recent scholarship on the phenomenology of *thauma* might allow us to apprehend this well-known episode of the *ex-voti* in new terms. Richard Neer, for example, has argued that the historical development of the classical style in ancient art was not one of progress toward naturalism, but of efforts to produce a *thauma idesthai* [wonder to behold for itself and oneself].[4] Comparing Neer's discussion of the language used in archaic texts to describe wonders (*thaumata*) with Knight's essay on ancient theology, I reveal how these remnants from the past were understood in the Age of Reason. Using archaic sources to ascribe new meaning to phallic emblems, Knight created an interpretative structure through which moderns might draw closer to the ancient world. I begin with a discussion of Hamilton and his method before turning to the concept of *thauma*, wherein I draw from Neer to illuminate parallels between subject-object relations in archaic Greece and the arguments outlined in the *Discourse*. I then situate the text within antiquarian culture to suggest that its approach reflects a broader turn in Enlightenment thinking. If the improbable endurance of phallic emblems in a Catholic context called into question the cultural distance between ancients and moderns, it likewise offered proof that the generative principle

4. See Richard Neer, *The Emergence of the Classical Style in Greek Sculpture* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), and Raymond Adolph Prier, *Thauma Idesthai: The Phenomenology of Sight and Appearance in Archaic Greek* (Tallahassee: The Florida State University Press, 1989).

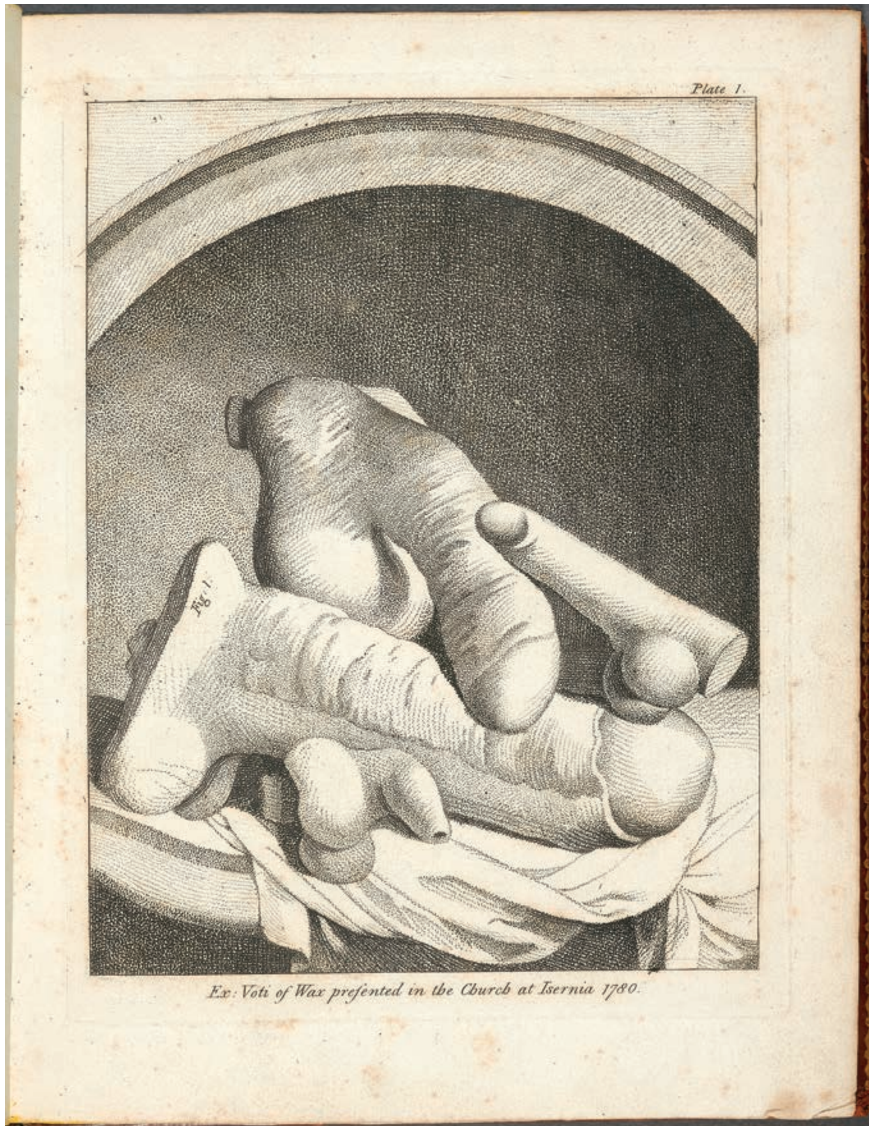

Figure 1. Plate I (frontispiece), "Ex: Voti of Wax presented in the Church at Isernia 1780," from Richard Payne Knight, *An Account of the Remains of the Worship of Priapus* (London: Printed by T. Spilsbury, 1786); The Huntington Library, San Marino, California, RB 400897.

embodied in the phallus had been corrupted through a modern, Christian regime.

Hamilton assured Banks that the festival in Isernia was "the annual fete of St Cosmo's great Toe, (for so the *Phallus* is here called, tho' it is precisely the same *thing*)."[5] He described the "many worshippers selling male members made of wax in different forms, and in all sizes up to a palm's length."[6] According to the firsthand account of the road engineer from whom Hamilton had learned of the festival, sterile women living in the village and surrounding area offered the male organs of generation as *ex-voti* at the shrines of Saint Cosmas and Saint Damian in exchange for a cure. During the ceremonies, women placed their offerings within the vestibule, voicing their hopes with statements such as "Blessed St. Cosmo, let it be like this."[7] Hamilton's letter revels in impious details, blending Bacchic humour with sincere antiquarian interest. These were the exact qualities that defined his correspondence with the Society of Dilettanti, a social club for gentlemen, which united an appreciation for ancient art with drinking and libertine humour. The group "set out," as one scholar has put it, "to combine the antic and the antiquarian in eclectic, innovative, and versatile ways."[8]

Being both a renowned collector in Britain and also a diplomat living abroad, Hamilton occupied a unique position in the Society. He commenced his residence as British Envoy to the Court of King Ferdinand IV in 1764, having arrived in Naples at a decisive moment. Bourbon cultural reforms saw the expansion of digging at Pompeii and Herculaneum, revealing a vision of the ancient world so vivid that it nurtured Hamilton's enthusiasm for drawing parallels between past and contemporaneous cultures.[9] According to Giancarlo Carabelli,

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5. Letter from William Hamilton, dated 17 July 1781 in Naples, to Joseph Banks, London, quoted in footnote 1 above.

6. Ibid., 13.

7. Knight, *A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*, 10.

8. Bruce Redford, *Dilettanti: The Antic and the Antique in Eighteenth-Century England* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2008), 3. Studies on the Society of Dilettanti include Jason M. Kelly, *The Society of Dilettanti: Archeology and Identity in the British Enlightenment* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2010).

9. Alain Schnapp, "Antiquarian Studies in Naples at the End of the Eighteenth Century: From Comparative Archeology to Comparative Religion," in *Naples in the Eighteenth Century: The Birth and Death of a Nation State*, ed. Girolamo Imbruglia

“[i]n the second half of the eighteenth century Naples was an ideal location for comparative antiquarian studies, for there, perhaps more than anywhere else in Europe, the old and the new could be observed at the same time.”[10] Hamilton’s commitment to a comparative approach can be discerned in his letter to Banks, since he requested that the votive offerings be “placed near the ancient ones in the British Museum.”[11] In positioning these modern votives beside their ancient counterparts, Hamilton wished to assert their paradoxical and enigmatic status: the Isernian simulacra were pagan *and* Catholic relics, ancient *and* modern.[12]

The reception of the *ex-voti* could be contextualized in relation to recent accounts of wonder in the Age of Enlightenment. Scholars have called the period between 1768 and 1831 an age of wonder, during which scientific passion and new technologies transformed both methods of knowledge production and perceptions of the world.[13] If intellectuals at this moment resisted wonder as an experience of admiration in the face of the unexpected or the unknown, this reaction was nonetheless understood as an impetus that could ignite curiosity and provoke further solemn investigation.[14] In the period following the emergence of Francis Bacon’s new natural philosophy, wonder itself could be redirected toward productive ends to allow all that was “new, rare, and unusual” to be explained using science.[15] Hamilton’s avid interest in volcanoes and his enthusiasm for novel discoveries of all

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(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 155. See also Brian Fothergill, *Sir William Hamilton: Envoy Extraordinary* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 39. For an account of Hamilton’s Neapolitan career see Kim Sloan, “‘Observations on the Kingdom of Naples’: William Hamilton’s Diplomatic Career,” in *Vases and Volcanoes: Sir William Hamilton and his Collection*, ed. Ian Jenkins and Kim Sloan (London: British Museum Press, 1996), 24–39.

10. Carabelli, *In the Image of Priapus*, 10.

11. Letter from William Hamilton, dated 17 July 1781 in Naples, to Joseph Banks, London, quoted in footnote 1 above.

12. The phrase “Isernian simulacra” is borrowed from Carabelli, *In the Image of Priapus*, 3.

13. See Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2008). See also Barbara Maria Stafford and Frances Terpak, *Devices of Wonder: From the World in a Box to Images on a Screen* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2001).

14. Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150–1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 328.

15. Francis Bacon quoted in ibid, 219.

kinds position him as a figure through which this enlightened experience of wonder grounded in scientific reasoning might be discussed.[16] Certainly, the Isernian simulacra functioned as empirical evidence for emerging theories on cultural difference. Moreover, Hamilton's approach no longer resembled that of a seventeenth-century antiquarian; as one scholar has pointed out, his enthusiasm "arose from a desire to understand the man behind the object."[17] In fact, Hamilton, like other members of the Society of Dilettanti, deliberated over his antiquities with philosophical zeal. This intellectual drive occasioned innovative research methods such as the observation of local custom in regions considered "islands of backwardness" during the eighteenth century.[18] Thus, Hamilton's efforts speak to the imaginative and powerful branch of science that grew out of Enlightenment rationalism.

In this article, I seek nonetheless to introduce a different meaning of wonder that will shed light on the significance of these objects for Hamilton and his circle. When reconsidered within the intellectual milieu of Dilettanti scholarship, compelled as it was to investigate ancient art and its ekphrastic tradition, it becomes clear that the wax models served as a conduit for exploring an archaic worldview. I suggest that Knight's adjoining discourse on ancient phallacism was intended, like Hamilton's letter, to offer a clever and ironic, but nonetheless erudite, investigation into the archaic cosmologies of the ancients. Knight argued that the phallus and the religion it represented derived from the "original principles in the human mind,"[19] a thesis built on the theoretical foundations of the Baron d'Hancarville's *Recherches sur l'origine, l'esprit et les progrès des arts de la Grèce* (1785), which traced the dissemination of primitive phallic cults across the ancient world and into modern religion.[20] Hamilton was also well acquainted

16. Noam Andrews, "Volcanic Rhythms: Sir William Hamilton's Love Affair with Vesuvius," *AA Files* 60 (2010): 9–15.

17. Schnapp, "Antiquarian Studies in Naples at the End of the Eighteenth Century: From Comparative Archeology to Comparative Religion," 154.

18. This metaphor is borrowed from Carabelli's *In the Image of Priapus*, 9. He describes Enlightenment theories of progress postulating that "islands of the past" could persist alongside the new. Schnapp, "Antiquarian Studies in Naples at the End of the Eighteenth Century: From Comparative Archeology to Comparative Religion," 155.

19. Knight, *A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*, 25.

20. Baron d'Hancarville, *Recherches sur l'origine, l'esprit et les progrès des arts de la Grèce* (London: B. Appleyard, 1785).

with Pierre François Hugues, the alleged Baron d'Hancarville, whom he hired to design the first illustrated catalogue of his vase collection, *Antiquités étrusques, grecques, et romaines, tirées du cabinet de M. Hamilton* [*Collection of Etruscan, Greek, and Roman Antiquities from the Cabinet of the Hon*ble. *W*m. *Hamilton*] (1766–1776).[21] It is important to note that d'Hancarville also had connections to German Hellenist Johann Joachim Winckelmann, as this link demonstrates the extent to which ideas moved across Europe through antiquarian networks.

In fact, Knight borrowed ideas from the Baron d'Hancarville and Winckelmann to argue that the Isernian simulacra served as authoritative evidence that material culture could reveal the covert cosmologies of the ancients. Contextualizing phallic objects within a broader cultural framework that included a profound engagement with ancient Greek language and literature, this new protracted approach could penetrate the secret spaces of the ancient world and explain the occult meanings of erotic forms. Indeed, Knight's commitment to original sources resonates with a broader Enlightenment ambition to better understand the ancients—one expressed in works like Edward Gibbon's *An Essay on the Study of Literature*, first published in London in 1761. Gibbon lamented that moderns born under another sky and in another age could not hope to appreciate ancient art or literature without "[a]n acquaintance with antiquity… [and] a certain turn of mind, which is generally the result of it; a sentiment not only making things known, but familiarizing them to our ideas, and inducing us to regard them with the eyes of the ancients."[22] The *Discourse* certainly follows this

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21. Haskell notes that d'Hancarville was born Pierre François Hugues, the son of a bankrupt cloth merchant. His title, the Baron d'Hancarville, was apparently self-styled and one of many false names that he used during his lifetime. See Francis Haskell, "The Baron d'Hancarville: An Adventurer and Art Historian in Eighteenth-Century Europe," in *Oxford, China and Italy: Writings in Honour of Sir Harold Acton on his Eightieth Birthday*, ed. Edward Chaney and Neil Ritchie (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 177–91. Recent studies on Hamilton's vase collecting include Thora Brylowe, "Two Kinds of Collections: Sir William Hamilton's Vases, Real and Represented," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 32, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 23–56, and Emmanouil Kalkanis, "The Visual Dissemination of Sir William Hamilton's Vases and their Reception by Early 19th-Century Scholarship (c. 1800s–1820s)," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 75, no. 4 (2012): 487–514.

22. Edward Gibbon, *An Essay on the Study of Literature* (London: T. Becket and P.A. De Hondt, 1764), 25–26. In 1761, a French edition was published in London also by the same publishers. For a broader discussion regarding the formative role of the classical education on neoclassicism in Britain, see Viccy Coltman, *Fabricating*

logic.[23] In his emphasis on original Greek texts, Knight advertized his erudition as a means through which one might access secret truths—that is, adopt "the eyes of the ancients."

Knight identified a disjuncture between the primitive (and therefore natural urge of the ancients) and the hollow "persistence" of pagan ritual under Catholicism, but if ancient rites were philosophical, he needed a theoretical framework to support his findings. Despite their Roman provenance, Knight situated the Isernian simulacra and other phallic objects recovered from Pompeii and Herculaneum into an archaic Greek religious context as opposed to a Roman one.[24] Comparing ancient sources and modern social realities, Knight confirmed that the offerings presented at the vestibule in Isernia derived their meaning from an archaic form of perception. He identified a specific archaic ethos that proceeded from wonder and linked eroticism, sculpture, and the divine. According to Knight's conclusions, the Isernian simulacra functioned as miniature cult statues *à la grecque*.

Richard Neer and Raymond A. Prier have characterized *thauma* as an aesthetic response to archaic Greek art that can help us to understand Knight's interest in the relationship between text, image, and

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the Antique: Neoclassicism in Britain, 1760–1800 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

23. Redford likewise argues that Knight adapts a "Gibbonian manner" of writing to attack Christianity with "a tone of unruffled superiority." See Redford, *Dilettanti*, 123.

24. Although Hamilton declared a certain ambivalence in his infamous claim that he had discovered the Cult of Priapus in its full vigour, which I quoted at the beginning of this article, he later cultivated an appreciation for the difference between these two cultures. This is evident in the preface to his *Collection of Engravings from Ancient Vases*, where he wrote unequivocally of "Earthen Vases of beautifull [*sic*] forms, with Elegant figures, either drawn or painted on them, of the sort that have been usually called Etruscan Vases, although there now seems to be little doubt of such monuments of antiquity being truly Grecian." See Sir William Hamilton, *Collection of Engravings from Ancient Vases mostly of Greek Workmanship discovered in sepulchres in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies but Chiefly in the neighbourhood of Naples during the course of the years MDCCLXXXIX and MDCCLXXXX now in the Possession of Sir W^{m}. Hamilton, his Britannic Majesty's Envoy Extra^{y}. and Plenipotentiary at the court of Naples with Remarks on each Vase by the Collector*, vol. 1 (Naples: W. Tischbein, 1791), prefatory letter, para. 1. It is in this intellectual climate that we must apprehend the *Discourse*. Knight's emphasis on the first principles of ancient religion reveals a desire to locate the *origin* of Priapic worship as well as to understand the meanings ascribed to phallic objects in their purest form. It is for this reason that Knight traces modern phallic rituals to archaic Greek antecedents, not to Roman ones.

theology.[25] Both Neer and Prier highlight the importance of wrought objects bathed in light, swift in motion, and "other" in origin within archaic and early classical Greek art and literature.[26] In his recent engagement with the concept of *thauma idesthai* (an appellation that designates *a wonder to see for oneself and itself*), Prier relates that his interest in the "phenomenology of sight and light" derives from a "pragmatic recognition of *language*."[27] He reconsiders archaic Greek from Homer's epoch to explore the varied meanings of the words *phainesthai* [to appear for oneself and another] and *dokein* [to seem]. Prier maintains that: "The base of any investigation into the archaic Greek worldview must be [Greek] language and its text."[28] He outlines a connection between language and worldview that allows us to apprehend differently the elaborate argumentation that Knight weaves through his cavalier *Discourse*. Prier calls our attention to an aesthetic regime based in language that Knight confronts indirectly in his appraisal of phallic emblems.

Knight was well positioned to make connections between material culture, religion, and language. Despite having no formal education, he asserted his status as an independent scholar, and as Nicholas Penny has noted, "was always looking for reflections of Homer in Greek sculpture."[29] He pursued his interest in the Greek language throughout the 1780s and published *An Analytical Essay on the Greek Alphabet* in 1791. This interest in linguistics emerges and is manifested throughout the *Discourse*. In his comparison of Greek and Phoenician culture he notes that "the genius of a language goes a great way towards forming the character of the people who use it. Poverty of expression will produce poverty of conception."[30] The limitations inherent in the

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25. Neer, *The Emergence of the Classical Style in Greek Sculpture*, 57–69; Prier, *Thauma Idesthai*, 91–117.

26. Neer, *The Emergence of the Classical Style in Greek Sculpture*, 57–69.

27. Prier, *Thauma Idesthai*, xxxi.

28. Ibid.

29. Nicholas Penny, "Richard Payne Knight: A Brief Life," in *The Arrogant Connoisseur: Richard Payne Knight, 1751–1824: Essays on Richard Payne Knight Together with a Catalogue of Works Exhibited at the Whitworth Art Gallery, 1982*, ed. Michael Clarke and Nicholas Penny (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982), 10.

30. Knight, *A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*, 157. For a broader discussion of Knight's writing on Homer and the Greek language, see Penny, "Richard Payne Knight: A Brief Life," 8–10.

Phoenician language, he explains, prevented Phoenician artists from rivalling their Greek counterparts who were "animated by the spirit of their ancient poets."[31] Cultures with superior language, he maintained, had a greater potential to develop their visual arts. Knight links language to artistic progress and argues that it corresponds to worldview.

Knight likewise mobilizes his authoritative understanding of ancient Greek to make artistic attributions, using the appearance of letters as evidence for his claims and pointing to the errors of less learned antiquarians who relied instead on Roman texts, and in the process misinterpreted the iconographies of ancient coins and medals. He writes:

> The case is, that Antiquarians have been continually led into error, by seeking for explanations of the devices on the Greek medals in the wild and capricious stories of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, instead of examining the first principles of ancient religion contained in the Orphic Fragments, the writings of Plutarch, Macrobius, and Apuleius, and the Choral Odes of the Greek Tragedies.[32]

While citing the Orphic litanies, Knight explains the relationship between theological concepts and artistic choices. Ritual objects took the form of a phallus because it represented a fundamental principle of the archaic Greek faith and was thereafter passed down to Roman and Catholic traditions, losing subtle aspects of its meaning as it moved from one culture to the next. Knight explains: "It has often happened, that avarice and superstition have continued these symbolical representations for ages after their original meaning has been lost and forgotten."[33] Knight cautions his fellow antiquarians to avoid translations and Roman accounts, arguing that original texts alone contain authentic information. Indeed, if one consults the ancients directly, the apparent unbridled eroticism in archaic images can be rationalized. Drawing from the Baron d'Hancarville's writings, Knight concludes the following: "instead of representing them [the fauns and satyrs] in the act of gratifying any disorderly appetites, the artists meant to show their modesty in not indulging their concupiscence, but in doing their duty in the way best adapted to answer the ends proposed

31. Knight, *A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*, 157.
32. Ibid., 79.
33. Ibid., 24.

by the Creator."[34] If his selective audience of "a few real dilettanti" could perceive the visual cues embedded in phallic objects, then the cosmological framework that informed their manufacture would unfold.[35] The questions that Hamilton, Knight, and their circle would pose concerning the material culture of the ancients were thus not derived from an objective interest in antiquities, but an enlightened eagerness to appreciate ancient art through an archaic Greek world-view, embracing the relationship between the formal, the erotic, and the ideological.

Knight identifies a nexus of spiritual ideas that archaic beholders would associate with the phallus. His interest in the liaison between object and beholder might be explored further using an interpretative model borrowed from Neer, who draws from archaic and classical texts to establish a new conceptual framework for understanding archaic art. Neer institutes a connection between the experience of wonder and beholding images in archaic Greece that allows us to apprehend the *Discourse* anew. Wonder, Neer argues, is "a basic and hugely neglected element of Greek thinking about depiction," but one crucial to understanding its operative modes.[36] He maintains that wonder was the characteristic reaction to well-crafted images in archaic and early classical literature, and he cites a Greek myth of deception to explain how *thauma* functions as a fundamental component.[37] The Titaness of motherhood, Rhea, cheats her husband Kronos into swallowing not one of his children but a stone, disguised as the swaddled infant Zeus. The cannibalistic ritual intended to prevent filial succession is thwarted in an imitative act. The stone, disguised and unworked, nonetheless becomes the archetypal work of sculpture in Greek epic.[38] Neer explains that it functions as a double, "standing in place of the absent Zeus."[39] After assuming his father's rule, Zeus places the stone at Parnassus to serve as a sign (*sēma*) and a wonder (*thauma*) to mortal

34. Ibid., 77.

35. In a letter dated 18 June 1785, Knight wrote to Joseph Banks: "I meant my discourse only for the Society and a few real dilettanti." Quoted by Peter Funnel in "The Symbolical Language of Antiquity," published in *The Arrogant Connoisseur*, cited above, 58.

36. Neer, *The Emergence of the Classical Style in Greek Sculpture*, 57.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.

men. The substitute becomes a *thauma*, a handicraft that represents the god even in its nondescript state. Neer argues that crafted things in Greek epic can be wonderous for several reasons, but the stone functions as a *thauma* because it exhibits twofoldness and even duplicity for its association with the divine or that which is incomprehensible to men.

Knight follows a similar logic in his description of the phallus as a characteristic or iconic attribute of the divine. He writes that the "first-begotten Love" of Hesiod and Orpheus was described "[i]n the ancient theology of Greece … [as] the lucid or splendid (Φάνης), because he first appeared in splendour; of a double nature, (διφυης), as possessing the general power of creation and generation, both active and passive, both male and female."[40] Knight argues that the phallus, in the remotest antiquity, functioned as a double since it signified the twofold nature of the god Priapus *and* acted as his substitute. Although he does not use the word wonder to describe the phallus, Knight does indicate its status as a sign. He extends this argument to the Christian cross, which he suggests became a substitute for the divine emblem. "The Male Organs of Generation," he remarks, "are sometimes found represented by signs of the same sort, which might properly be called the symbols of symbols."[41] The coincidence is as remarkable as it is rational; Christians adopted a familiar shape to facilitate conversion among the faithful. It is just one occasion where an emblem assumes new shades of meaning as it transgresses both cultural and temporal boundaries.

If the phallus functions as a sign, it indicates a theological idea that remains concealed. Knight perceptively observes that phallic forms were "only intelligible to the initiated" and argues that moderns must resist anachronisms since the "emblematical works of the ancient artists" can only be appreciated if one considers "manners and customs as relative to the natural causes which produced them, rather than to the artificial opinions and prejudices of any particular age or country."[42] Knight reiterates that moderns need to adopt an archaic perspective to recognize the hidden meaning of ancient religious forms and

40. Knight, *A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*, 29.
41. Ibid., 48.
42. Ibid., 27, 25, 27–28.

ceremonials which might appear to be absurd on the surface, but are in fact wise and merit further contemplation. This mode of looking resonates with the concept of *thaumazein*, which has been described as "a mode of perception that involves recognition of the hidden, invisible, and the divine, dimension of appearances."[43] Knight impresses upon his reader the importance of this recognition for archaic and modern beholders. Drawing on this model, the ceremonial rite in Abruzzo is "a very natural symbol of a very natural and philosophical system of religion, if considered according to its original use and intention."[44] As emblems, the Isernian simulacra are modelled after archaic Greek precedents and perception of their affective power requires a specific historical lens.

Knight considers how the concept of twofoldness, integral to Greek religion, was expressed in both text and image. He identifies three sets of oppositions (active/passive, male/female, creation/destruction), which in his view are the dual characteristics of an ancient god, called the universal Bacchus, the Apollo Dydymæus, or the *double Apollo*. His dualism, explains Knight, was first negotiated through emblems and later figural representations, as art progressed from the primitive to the sophisticated:

> In the symbolical images, the double nature is frequently expressed by some androgynous insect, such as the Snail, which is endowed with the organs of both sexes, and can copulate reciprocally with either: but when the refinement of art adopted the Human Form, it was represented by mixing the characters of the male and female bodies in every part, preserving still the distinctive organs of the male. Hence Euripides calls Bacchus θηλυμορφος, and the Chorus of Bacchanals in the same Tragedy address him by masculine and feminine epithets.[45]

Knight argues that this dual gendering can be discerned on medals of Antigonus, king of Asia, who is depicted as the Apollo Didymæus (Figure 2 and 3). The figure on the small coin (Figure 16 on Plate IX) is sitting on the prow of a ship. The text records that the presence of

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43. Vered Lev Kenaan, "*Thauma Idesthai*: The Mythical Origins of Philosophical Wonder," in *Philosophy's Moods: The Affective Grounds of Thinking*, ed. Hagi Kenaan and Ilit Ferber (London: Springer, 2011), 20. Kenaan draws from Hannah Arendt's discussion of *thaumazein* in *The Life of the Mind* (1977).

44. Knight, *A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*, 24.

45. Ibid., 74.

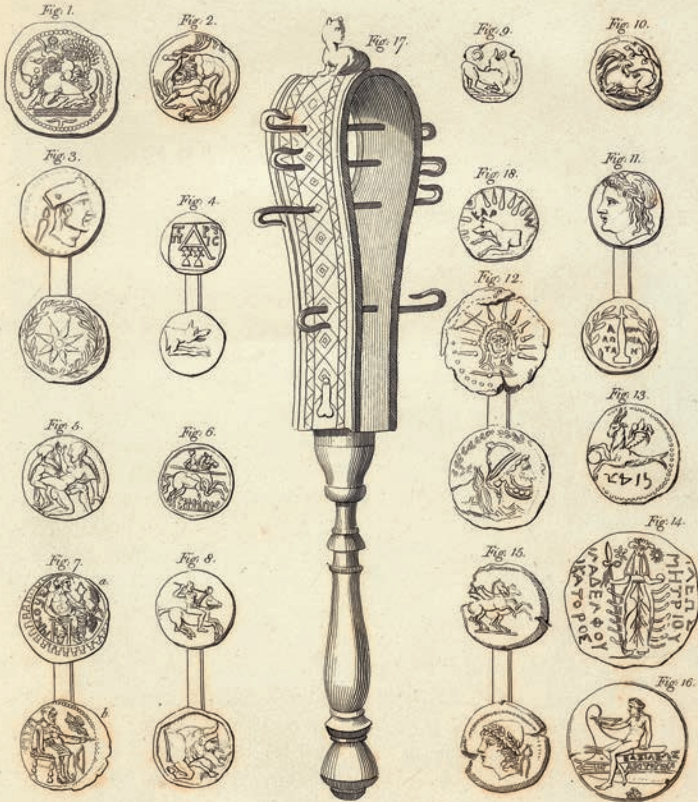


Figure 2. Plate IX, from Richard Payne Knight, *An Account of the Remains of the Worship of Priapus* (London: Printed by T. Spilsbury, 1786); The Huntington Library, San Marino, California, RB 400897.

a bow indicates that he is Apollo, not Bacchus, and that his feminine features are evidence that the artist was attempting to depict his divine dualism. His artificial ringlets of hair drape over his shoulders "like that of a woman," and his delicate countenance and feminine elegance are the figural expressions of a "union of the creative and destructive powers of both sexes in one body."[46] Knight's interest in "formal doubleness" resonates with Neer's description of *thauma idesthai*, produced through the negotiation of opposing elements or "likeness-in-difference."[47] According to Knight, as the emblematic language of archaic Greece transitioned into figural art, artists found creative solutions for depicting divine dualism. The stone at Parnassus, which first functioned as an icon, like the phallic offerings found in Isernia, was reimagined as a figure through this process of refinement.

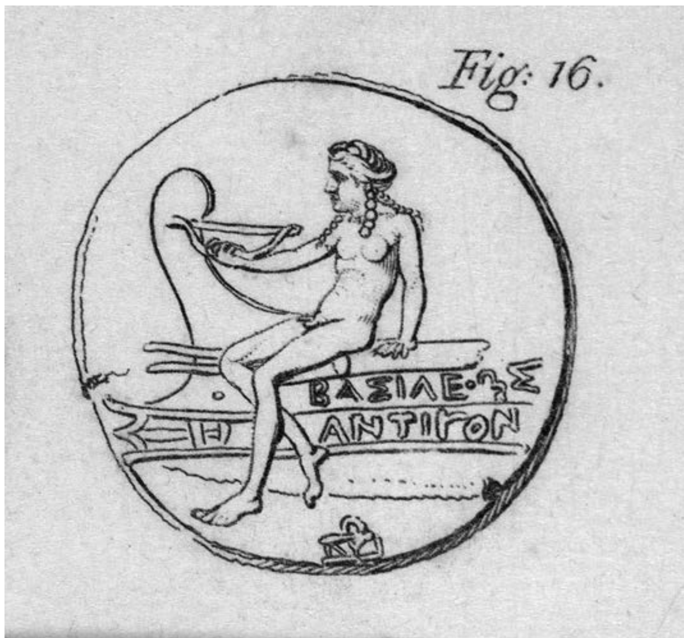


Figure 3. Detail of Plate IX (Figure 16), from Richard Payne Knight, *An Account of the Remains of the Worship of Priapus* (London: Printed by T. Spilsbury, 1786); The Huntington Library, San Marino, California, RB 400897.

46. Ibid., 141, 142.
47. Neer, *The Emergence of the Classical Style in Greek Sculpture*, 97, 59.

Moreover, the feeling of wonder that was indivisible from beholding cult statues or describing divine objects in archaic Greece was an experience made possible through vision. Prier notes that *thaumazein* was a semiotic network exclusive to archaic modes of representation and ekphrasis, and he introduces various formulaic expressions for wonder in Greek epic associated with sight, and in numerous variants, divine light. Neer likewise calls his readers' attention to these wondrous qualities. He quotes the following passage from a Homeric hymn wherein Apollo leaps onto a ship in the shape of a dolphin. In response to this amazing sight, the sailors decide to return to shore to "comprehend the great wonder."[48] The men wished to see for themselves if the monster would remain on the vessel or return to the sea. Apollo appears in flashes of fire, "like a star" whose brightness reaches the heavens. When he enters and exits his shrine, he springs forth, "swift as thought" and "bearing the form of a man."[49] Divine episodes evoke *thauma* through their explicit appeal to radiance, swiftness, and radical alterity. Neer argues that when Apollo reappears in the standard form of a cult statue, the qualities of wonder become manifest in visual representation. Although the Isernian simulacra are perhaps underwhelming when compared to archaic and early classical freestanding sculpture, both Knight and Hamilton considered them to be valuable cultural artifacts associated with an archaic visual tradition.

Indeed, Knight identifies the same abstract qualities in devotional images of Priapus that Neer and Prier assign to archaic wonders. The organ of generation, Knight tells us, "is perfectly consistent with the general practice of the Greek artists, who… uniformly represented the attributes of the Deity by the corresponding properties observed in the objects of sight."[50] Knight observes that "[w]ings are figuratively attributed to him as being the emblems of swiftness and incubation," and Priapus "is said to pervade the world with the motion of his wings, bringing pure light; and thence to be called the splendid, the ruling

48. Quoted in ibid., 61. Neer modifies H. G. Evelyn-White's translation of Homer's *Hymn to Apollo* (415–417). See Hugh G. Evelyn-White, *Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns and Homerica* (London: William Heinemann, 1914), 355.

49. Quoted in Neer, *The Emergence of the Classical Style in Greek Sculpture*, 62. Neer modifies H. G. Evelyn-White's translation of Homer's *Hymn to Apollo* (440–450). Evelyn-White, *Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns and Homerica*, 357.

50. Knight, *A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*, 27.

Priapus, and self-illumined."[51] That Knight understood the importance of light as a divine attribute in the ancient world is also confirmed in his description of a bronze sculpture from the Vatican collection (Figure 4). Knight makes the following informative statement:

> the celebrated bronze in the Vatican has the male organs of generation placed upon the head of a Cock, the emblem of the Sun, supported by the neck and shoulders of a Man. In this composition they represented the generative powers of the Ερως, the Osiris, Mithras, or Bacchus, whose center is the sun, incarnate with man. By the inscription on the pedestal, the attribute, thus personified, is styled *The Saviour of the World*…; a title always venerable, under whatever image it be represented.[52]

Despite the mischievous tone in which Knight describes the object, disguising his facetiousness with solemn erudition, he highlights an association between the phallus and divine light consistent with recent accounts of archaic wonders.

In *Specimens of Antient Sculpture, Aegyptian, Etruscan, Greek, and Roman* (1809), Knight would expand on the importance of light, motion, and alterity in archaic art and literature. He argued that Homer expanded and elevated the minds of his contemporaries, forming their taste with a "transcendent genius."[53] Knight bathes the celebrated poet in an affective light of his own making: "the effulgence of his [Homer's] mind still bursts upon us like the rays of the sun, which traverse the immensity of space with undiminished brightness, and diffuse life and motion through the universe."[54] In describing the Greek poet and the characteristic attributes of Greek deities using archaic metaphors grounded in the affective experience of wonder, Knight crafts an aesthetic framework for appreciating, in philosophical terms, even the crude wax models that Hamilton collected in Abruzzo.

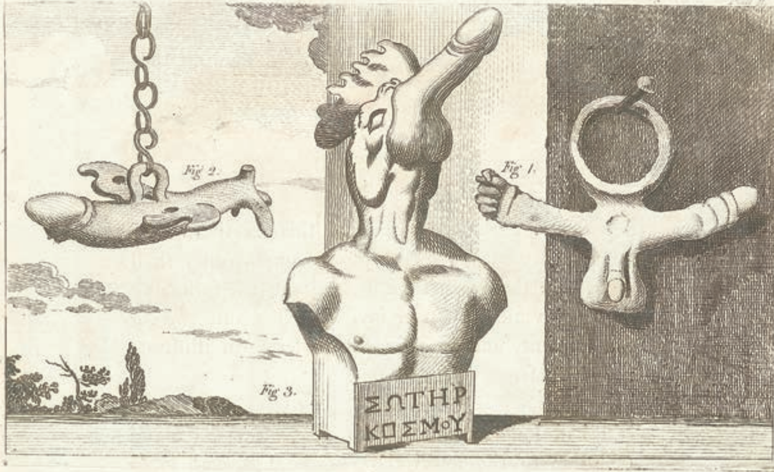
Returning to the frontispiece engraving for a moment, I would like to suggest a visual correspondence between the *Discourse*, the Isernian simulacra, and *thauma*. If to wonder, in archaic and classical

51. Ibid., 34, 33.

52. Ibid., 54.

53. Richard Payne Knight, *Specimens of Antient Sculpture, Aegyptian, Etruscan, Greek, and Roman: Selected from Different Collections in Great Britain by the Society of Dilettanti*, vol. I (London: Printed by T. Bensley, 1809), xii.

54. Ibid., xiii.



A

LETTER

FROM

SIR *WILLIAM HAMILTON*, &c.

Naples, Dec. 30, 1781.

SIR,

HAVING laſt year made a curious diſcovery, that in a Province of this Kingdom, and not fifty miles from its Capital, a ſort of

A 2 devo-

Figure 4. Plate II, from Richard Payne Knight, *An Account of the Remains of the Worship of Priapus* (London: Printed by T. Spilsbury, 1786); The Huntington Library, San Marino, California, RB 400897.

Greece, is to "be poised between two possible reactions," before a cult image, as Neer relates,[55] might we reconsider the formal qualities of the frontispiece using the same theoretical framework? That is, we can see the concept of twofoldness visualized in the four phalli, themselves presented in two states, two possible reactions—erect and flaccid, large and small. Indeed, Whitney Davis has argued that although neither Hamilton nor Knight comment on the relationship between the phalli in the engraving, we can nonetheless distinguish an intention behind this double pairing.[56] The phalli illustrate dualism, the attribute of Priapus, because they share his peculiar ability to exist in two states. Moreover, the sculptural qualities of the *ex-voti* are accentuated through their attractive triangular composition and placement within a classical niche—a space reserved for freestanding statuary. Three phalli have protruding wax stubs located on their bases, disclosing their manufacturing process. Cast from molten wax poured into moulds, the votives are not unlike bronze sculptures. By creating these visual links, the engraver elevates these modest objects to the status of art.[57] However, the engraver must also have been cognizant of the ironic potential of these associations. If the *Discourse* was intended to operate on several registers, to function as a highbrow engagement with ancient religious art but also to offer a form of burlesque, we should consider the cheekiness of the image.

Indeed, we might turn to the corruption of the term *thauma* itself, which lost its phenomenological associations in the period after Aristotle.[58] In the satire *Eikones*, for example, Lucian relates that his main character is "struck stiff with *thauma* and almost became a stone instead of a human," upon beholding a woman of statuesque beauty.[59] As Neer trenchantly observes, Lucian reduces *thauma* from a divine experience with an image to a simple erection.[60] The frontispiece

55. Neer, *The Emergence of the Classical Style in Greek Sculpture*, 68.

56. Whitney Davis, "Wax Tokens of Libido: William Hamilton, Richard Payne Knight, and the Phalli of Isernia," in *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure*, ed. Roberta Panzanelli (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2008), 111.

57. According to Redford, James Newton (1748–1804) was the principal engraver. See Redford, *Dilettanti*, 115.

58. Neer, *The Emergence of the Classical Style in Greek Sculpture*, 68.

59. Quoted in ibid., 68.

60. Ibid.

speaks to the dual nature of the phallus, capable of expanding and shrinking, hardening and softening, but it also underlines its status as a divine signifier which, if taken at its face value, is reducible to a crude, if not vulgar, wax object.

The final parallel between Greek epic and the *Discourse* that I would like to consider draws from the description of Alcestis in Euripides's tragic drama. The protagonist Admetos vows to replace his dead wife with a statue before she is rescued from Hades and returned to life. Admetos marvels at her sudden reappearance, but notices that she "remains in a strangely twofold state, between life and death."[61] Neer argues that after her miraculous return as a mute presence, Alcestis is like a moving statue, "somewhere between … animate and inanimate; … [an] uncanny combination of the phantasmatic and the real."[62] She becomes a sight-wonder. That effigies might come to life was a highly relevant matter for those who visited Hamilton in his Neapolitan residence and witnessed his mistress Emma Hart performing her famous *Attitudes*. Emma would pose as different ancient personae in quick succession, transforming from a bacchante into Niobe, or recreating scenes from ancient vases and frescoes believed to depict secret religious rites.[63] Using shawls, Emma concealed or showcased her movements to produce different theatrical effects. Sometimes she would cast aside her fabric props in a manner that resembled the unveiling of a statue, a calculated gesture that was not lost on her audience.[64] The Comtesse de Boigne, for example, described Emma's appearance as "a statue of most admirable design" while other observers recounted that she "created a living gallery of statues and paintings," at once fluid, graceful, sublime, and heroic.[65] That viewers likened Emma to an ancient marble statue is significant.[66]

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61. Ibid., 61.

62. Ibid.

63. Stafford and Terpak, *Devices of Wonder*, 53.

64. Ersy Contogouris, "Emma's *Attitudes*: Movements and Surprising Transformations," *Emma Hamilton and Late Eighteenth-Century European Art: Agency, Performance, and Representation* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 66–98.

65. Éléonore-Adèle d'Osmond, Comtesse de Boigne, *Memoirs of the Comtesse de Boigne (1781–1814)*, 3 vols., ed. M. Charles Nicoullaud (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1907–1908), 1.100. The second account was recorded by the Conte della Torre di Rezzonico in 1789 (see Entry 160 in *Vases and Volcanoes*, cited above, 260).

66. In a letter to her brother, Lady Palmerston referred to Emma as "so magnificent a marble." See Henry Temple Palmerston, *Portrait of a Golden Age: Intimate*

Marble was the material of choice for important artworks in archaic Greece because it reflected light, and radiance induced *thauma*.[67] The enlivening effect of light on marble was also celebrated in the late eighteenth century. Roman museums, for example, offered torchlit tours of their collections because the flickering light created the illusion of movement and animated the sculptures.[68] Ersy Contogouris has argued that the torchlit setting in which the *Attitudes* were performed was intended to remind viewers of these nocturnal museum experiences and enhance Emma's statuesque qualities.[69] Thus, the effect of light on marble, real or imagined, enabled a transformation: Emma became living stone and shining marble came to life.

I argue that Hamilton, Knight, and other members in their circle equated Emma and the Isernian simulacra with wonders in an archaic sense. Suspended between past and present, flesh and stone, the captivating presence of Emma and the simulacra resulted from their dual status. Whether observing Emma bathed in torchlight, or beholding the Isernian simulacra in the British Museum, viewers imagined themselves witness to a vision of the ancient world. It was such encounters with objects from the past that provoked antiquarians to reflect on the enigmatic nature of temporal boundaries. The Baron d'Hancarville expressed his thoughts on the matter in the following poignant remark: "[I]t is through the secret influence that they exert on the spirit that the centuries touch and draw close to each other despite the intervals of time which separate them."[70] Substitutes like Emma or the *ex-voti* appeared to collapse such boundaries and they transformed a select

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Papers of the Second Viscount Palmerston Courtier under George III, ed. Brian Connell (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), 276. Quoted in Contogouris, "Emma's *Attitudes*: Movements and Surprising Transformations," 68–69.

67. Neer argues that the radiance of marble, which reflects light because of its crystalline structure, made it the ideal medium for prestigious architectural and sculptural projects in archaic and early classical Greece. Neer, *The Emergence of the Classical Style in Greek Sculpture*, 73–74.

68. Contogouris, "Emma's *Attitudes*: Movements and Surprising Transformations," 69. See also Claudia Mattos, "The Torchlight Visit: Guiding the Eye through Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century Antique Sculpture Galleries," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 49/50 (Spring–Autumn 2006): 139–40.

69. Contogouris, "Emma's *Attitudes*: Movements and Surprising Transformations," 69.

70. Quoted in Haskell, "The Baron d'Hancarville: An Adventurer and Art Historian in Eighteenth-Century Europe," 185.

and erudite audience into ancient Greek viewers who could appreciate these objects of sight as real and unreal.

Therefore, the recent manufacture of the Isernian simulacra and their ancient lineage positioned them as *thaumata* in competing temporal registers. These facsimiles could be sight-wonders contextualised within an archaic discourse or sight-wonders for moderns since their dual status seemed to suggest that the past was alive in the present. With his letter to Banks, Hamilton launched an investigation into archaic modes of perception that would reveal the true meaning of the phallus in ancient religion, while Knight elevated copies of copies to the status of cult statues, fabricating a theoretical framework for apprehending them using the Orphic litanies and other archaic texts.[71]

In addition to revealing the origins of phallacism, Knight had a second motive for the project: to expose how the natural worship of creative power had been corrupted through the mechanics of Christianity. Hamilton registered the significance of the *ex-voti* when he declared them "fresh proof of the similitude of the Popish and Pagan Religion," but Knight's argument was even more controversial.[72] He maintained that ancient pagan and modern Christian ritual had "the same meaning, and only … differ[ed] in the modes of conveying it."[73] Although the text was denounced when it fell into the hands of critics like Thomas J. Mathias in the 1790s, its satiric, learned, and anticlerical qualities were directed at a specific group of men, members of the Society of Dilettanti and those who were "likely to do honor to the

71. It should be noted that there is a discord between Knight's interest in archaic phallus-emblems and his negative appraisal of the Elgin marbles. How do we make sense of the fact that Knight seems to have been so profoundly mistaken when confronted with nothing less than the Parthenon marbles? Indeed, Knight hesitated in praising them, and in fact argued that the sculptures were made during the reign of the Roman emperor Hadrian. If Knight was a connoisseur of ancient art, he nonetheless argued that the most celebrated Greek sculptures to reach Britain were of Roman manufacture. This controversial appraisal reminds us that questions concerning cultural origin and imitation were highly political. Although his exact motivations for dismissing the marbles remain unclear, what is important is the language that Knight used to scorn them. The Elgin marbles, like the Isernian simulacra, were copies that had been stripped of their original meaning and grandeur. For an account of the polemic, see Frank J. Messman, "Richard Payne Knight and the Elgin Marbles Controversy," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 13, no. 1 (1973): 69–75.

72. Knight, *A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*, 4.

73. Ibid., 23.

Priapeic system."[74] Disclosing the *ex-voti* in the intellectual atmosphere of the 1780s, the authors of the *Discourse* wondered if something of the spirit of *erōs* might be revived in their own time.

Hamilton and Knight transformed passive antiquarianism into an intellectual pursuit that relied on comparison and scientific reasoning. Their collaborative text argued that ancient phallic worship was not a sign of unrestrained eroticism but an affirmation of "a lucid cultural logic."[75] Knight relied on his understanding of ancient Greek language, literature, and material culture to assign new meaning to phallic objects from archaic Greece, ancient Rome, and modern Abruzzo. Although critics would claim that their scholarship was inane, Hamilton and Knight attempted to prove that the cultural difference dividing ancients and moderns was a matter of perception. Rethinking Dilettanti scholarship through contemporary accounts of classicism that reflect a privileging of wonder allows us to cultivate a deeper understanding of the subtle but complex arguments put forward in the *Discourse*. I have argued that this collaborative volume, often overlooked as a serious Enlightenment text, was indebted to classical learning, scientific method, and the evolving parameters of antiquarian scholarship in the late eighteenth century.

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74. From the Society of Dilettanti Minutes, dated 5 June 1791. Quoted in Redford, *Dilettanti*, 115.

75. Neer, *The Emergence of the Classical Style in Greek Sculpture*, 69.