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**"Red Light District: Reception of the Bacchic Frieze in the Villa of the Mysteries"**

We wish to cast light upon what we excavate from antiquity, after centuries of darkness, to illuminate a lost culture. That is what makes the Villa of the Mysteries so fascinating a counter-case. In plan it looks like any other rich Roman dwelling, open to movement, mind and senses. Yet when excavators found the frescoed red rooms a dream of "unknowing" seized them: they considered them novel and "mysterious," and called our confusions a sort of deliberate ancient plot. "Mysteries" are the various Greek and Roman cults that were organized into groups with scripted rules and roles, sometimes secretive, sometimes no more so than a PTA meeting. Christian image cycles are supposed to spell out a sort of visual book; here seemed to be an ancient picture book of a Dionysiac "liturgy." In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a powerful popular and academic dream pictured an alternative world to the (post) Judeo-Christian one, with a paganism sensuous, hallucinatory, and socially subversive: Nietzsche's Dionysiac abstract historiated, an antique pedigree for the religion of "shock the bourgeois," Roman femmes fatales to obsess male scholars and viewers.

Enter a suspect chapel, or a sort of red-lit 1930's Berlin cabaret for Romans, hunched in the suburbs, behind an oh-so-respectable house facade. In the dark back room, hard to find, whips hiss, foreign music plays, demons gather, women everywhere eye you in calculation, and the embraces begin to the sound of occult chant as drugs start to pass around.

All this is a construct, literally. We made, and maintain, the obscurity of the "Villa dei Misteri" -- the modern shuttering up is an archaeological salesman's idea. The room was remarkable -- but, in fact, as one of the most broadly opened, light-washed, multiply accessible Republican rooms ever found. Surveying villa gardens, and resort-town and farm prospects, it was made to be looked in upon by family and by visitors strolling this villa's terraces, moving between baths and bedrooms and reception rooms. (And, viewed by women as literate as those here!) Let's throw open the doors and windows on the party inside, and use real viewing paths to think about our current fascinations, with how the room's images tease with peeking, inviting and obstructing glances. The eye cycles between domestic and sylvan settings, day and night, lonely shepherds' crags and rich girls' bedrooms, music indeed rings everywhere, gods and satyrs move in our world and we in theirs. It's not a "red-light district" any more; its images had power because they were common throughout the respectable Roman house. But "mystery" remains. And how we think about this Roman place will always be rosily backlit, by our own moral views of societies, which have pleasures, religions, and arts about them both.