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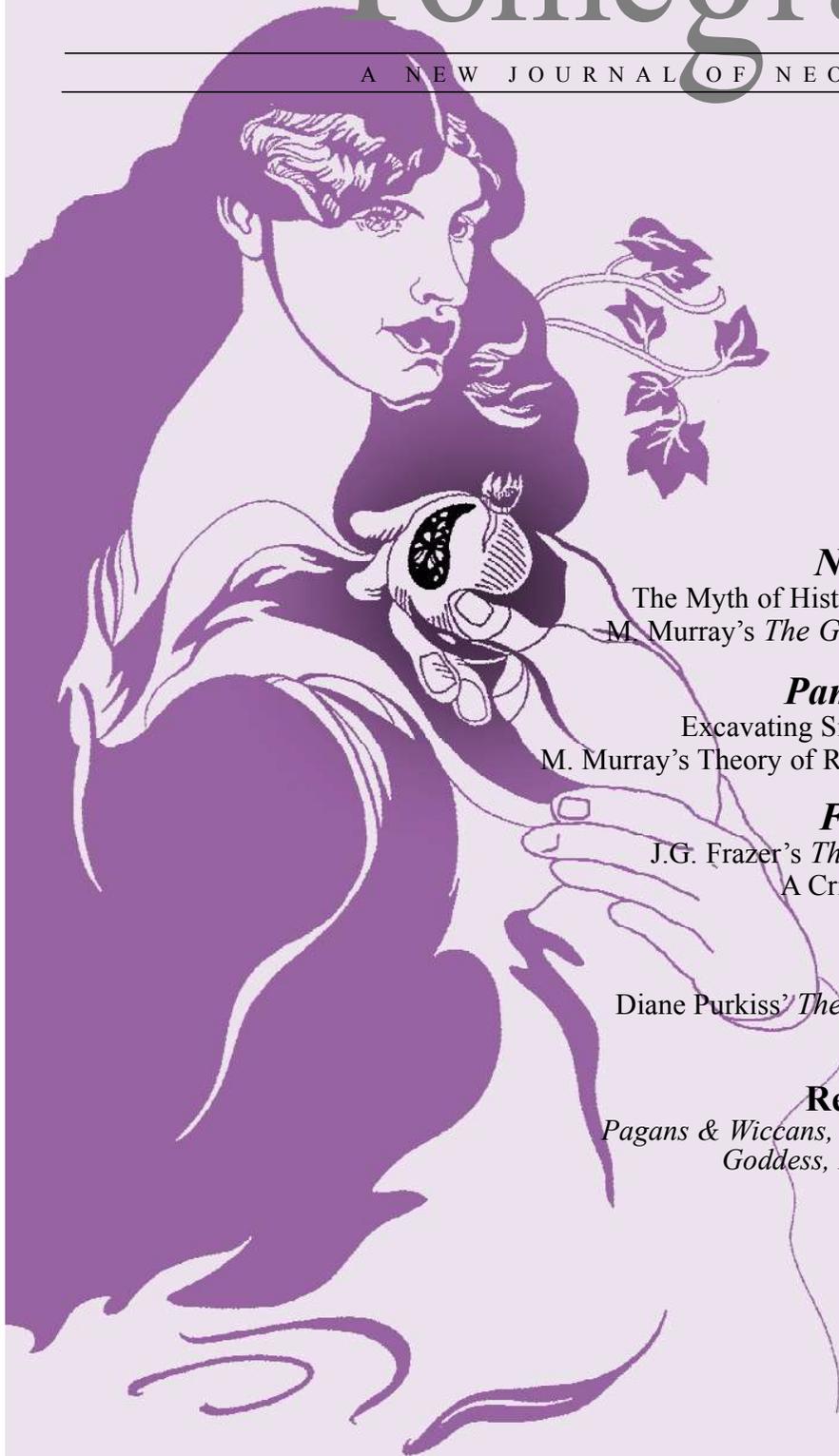
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The Pomegranate

A NEW JOURNAL OF NEOPAGAN THOUGHT



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The Pomegranate

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The Pomegranate is the combined effort of a group of senior Pagans in the United States and Canada. Its purpose is to provide a scholarly venue for the forthright and critical examination of Neopagan beliefs and practices. We intend this Journal to be a forum for the exchange and discussion of the philosophy, ethics, and spiritual potential inherent within the Craft. The consideration of new ideas, as well as the exploration of the roots of our current practices such as classical Paganism, western esoteric traditions and influences from other disciplines, will be included. In the interests of promoting lively discussion, we encourage both our writers and our readers to keep an open mind, and to be ready to explore a wide variety of outlooks.

Notes from the Underground

Since last we spoke, my eager minions have been busy indeed. Among other exciting adventures, two of their number attended the American Academy of Religion's annual meeting in San Francisco, a 3-day extravaganza featuring thousands of Religious Studies scholars of every possible stripe. Our fledgeling magazine was passed around to general approbation, and many subscriptions were bought and paid for on the spot. Even more exciting, several scholars offered articles of their own for publication in *The Pom*, and many others expressed interest in doing so in the not-too-distant future.

As was recently mentioned, we never intended to build our issues around thematic material. But once again, those articles which have crossed our threshold this time around all seem to be concerned with those 19th century 'armchair' anthropologists — James George Frazer and Margaret Alice Murray — whose work proved so inspiring to the early Neopagan pioneers. In fact, we have not one, but two articles about Murray's work to offer our readers in this issue.

If that is not exciting enough, dear readers, we also have, for the first time in this issue, the premier installment of our long-awaited Reader's Forum. It is our fondest hope that *The Pom*'s articles and reviews will continue to generate interest (and even controversy) among our faithful subscribers, and that all of you will do your part and write to us. Remember, a free issue will be sent to every readers whose letters we publish!

So we all hope that you are as excited about this, our third issue, as we are. We also hope that you will continue to subscribe to our magazine, write letters to our eager editorial staff, and (most important of all) submit articles for us to publish.

Persephone (and her minions)

The Myth of Historical Narrative: Margaret Murray's *The God of the Witches*

by Nancy Ramsey

University of California, Santa Barbara

An important area of contention that arises when the scholars of today approach the religions of Witchcraft and Paganism concerns the origins of modern Witchcraft and whether any historical continuity exists between contemporary Pagans and the ancient pagan religions of Europe. One cannot examine this subject without taking into account the work and writings of Margaret Murray. The impact of her work remains extraordinary, serving as inspiration for the works of many other authors. For good or ill, it has greatly influenced scholarly attitudes toward the history of Witchcraft, the ideas held by popular culture about the origins and characteristics of Witchcraft, and the beliefs of contemporary Wiccan and Neopagan populations about their own self-identity and personal historical narrative. Therefore, a closer look at Murray's career and work prove vital to a clear understanding of both the history of Witchcraft and the approach religious studies scholars utilize when delving into this history and the nature of Witchcraft then and now.

Evolution, Pagan 'Survivals,' and the 'Soul' of a Nation

Mircea Eliade stresses that an important factor in the study of religion lies not in the validity of a particular theory but in its reception by academia and popular culture (1976: 3). Margaret Murray's theories and work contain enormous inaccuracies, yet her corpus of literature received wide attention and wielded enormous influence. An exploration into the cultural fashions of the early 1900s can shed a great deal of light on why this took place. Three prevalent ways of conceptualizing religion gave Murray's work the impetus it needed to gain a place in the academic world and popular culture. Her work built upon and took advantage of evolutionary theory applied to religion, the idea of pagan 'survivals,' and the longing for a national mythology.

Most thinkers of her day subscribed to the concept of evolution in culture and religion. The persuasiveness of this evolutionary outlook, which viewed history as progressing and improving according to some sort of divine plan, both predated and coincided with Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, and had a prominent role in the cultural fashion of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The idea that nature marched along the path of evolutionary history mirrored the popular concept of the evolution of culture and religion.

The study of the history of Witchcraft in the early 20th century grew primarily out of anthropological research. Many theories of the history of Witchcraft, including those of Murray, drew heavily on the Enlightenment idea of evolutionary progress popularized in the nineteenth century. The idea of pagan 'survivals,' practices that had originated during an earlier evolutionary period and survived into a later stage of development, meshed easily with the evolutionary perspective of this period. Although many, if not most, scholars of the day fell in with evolutionary ideas and utilized the concept of pagan 'survivals,' perhaps their most prominent advocate was Sir James Frazer. The Frazerian view, that magic, religion, and science belong to an evolutionary sequence, received wide acceptance among scholars of popular religion of the European countryside until the 1960s. When the twelve volume edition of his major work, *The Golden Bough*, was published between 1907 and 1915, it came at a time when chemical fertilizers had just begun providing a seemingly miraculous surplus of food, and the idea of fertility and fertility religions grew as a cultural fashion. It then became the norm to interpret rituals through this light, seeing varied and diverse rituals as all deriving from fertility magic, all serving the same purpose.

Murray found support in her suppositions in the work of Frazer and its immense popularity. She held that these folk practices had always existed alongside and rivaled Catholicism. According to H.R. Trevor-Roper these ideas did not begin with Murray:

It has been argued by some speculative writers that the demonology of the sixteenth century was, in essence, a real religious system, the old pre-Christian religion of rural Europe which the Asiatic religion of Christ had driven underground but never totally destroyed (1970:127).

Murray built on these ideas, maintaining that these beliefs constituted a rival religion, which she refers to as "the Old Religion." She further equated this religion to the ancient fertility cults which Frazer detailed in *The Golden Bough* (Rose 1962: 19). These cults, as Murray painted them, centered around the mythology of a dying and resurrecting god, a god whose birth and death reflect

Public understanding of primitive religions had shifted ... to a more concrete idea of fertility religions specifically concerned with crops, animals, and fecundity. By manipulating data to fit her Frazerian outlook, Murray invented "... a startling new figure, the Witch as a benevolent purveyor of fertility ..."

the seasonal cycle and the cycle of crops (Adler 1986: 47). An important point lies in the fact that, in Murray's mind, this religion did not exist as a reaction to Christianity but predated it and had always existed alongside of it.

Although Murray's thesis was not original, the ideas achieved unprecedented popularity through her writings. In fact, the very theory Murray advanced, namely that Witchcraft was the survival of European pagan religion, appeared among scholars as early as the 1820s but received no serious consideration at that time (Rose 1962: 149). In *Deutsche Mythologie*, published in 1835, Jacob Grimm asserted that scattered relics of a pre-Christian Teutonic religion made up the witch-beliefs of the Middle Ages (Trevor-Roper 1970: 146). The fact that this work failed to influence where Murray's work managed to hold sway for decades underscores the importance and influence of Murray's cultural milieu and what this atmosphere meant to the study of religion.

Murray's assertion that Witches kept alive an ancient fertility religion fit in with assumptions popular in the 1920s. Public understanding of primitive religions had shifted from the a vague view of a generalized animism or sun-worship to a more concrete idea of fertility religions specifically concerned with crops, animals, and fecundity. By manipulating data to fit her devoutly Frazerian outlook, Murray invented "... a startling new figure, the Witch as a benevolent purveyor of fertility ..." (Simpson 1994: 92). This figure appealed to the public imagination and therein lies part of the reason that Murray's work remains in print today. A further benefit as regards timing lay in the release of a one-volume edition of *The Golden Bough* in 1922. Frazer's twelve volume work came out prior to the publication of Murray's *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*; however, his widely-read one-volume edition made Murray's ideas all the more popular and accessible to the general public.

Murray proved by far the most influential proponent of the theory that a secret

survival of pagan practices existed in Europe. Her books represent perhaps the most radical attempt to provide a new explanation of European and American witch-hunts. Her works rest on the assumption that scholars must examine witchcraft beliefs in context with other systems of ideas and that they cannot dismiss these beliefs as sheer nonsense.

Murray played to public opinion in another fashion very indicative of her time. She not only claimed that the 'Old Religion' deserved serious consideration as a religion, she maintained that it had been the true religion of Britain from Neolithic times until the recent past. Further, she asserted that this religion held sway not only in Britain, but in all of western Europe, and influenced everyone from the uneducated peasant to even the highest nobility. The nationalistic nature of this claim fed into popular ideas that a healthy national life remained possible only so long as the traditional cult of national gods, "rooted in the soil of the fatherland," remained strong. (Rose 1962: 200). This viewpoint proved similar to those of German romantics, such as Friedrich Schlegel, Joseph Görres and Friedrich Creuzer, who supported nationalistic ideals with the call for a new mythology uniquely belonging to their own fatherland.

Robert Graves and D.H. Lawrence echo this desire for a return to the old mythologies of Europe. According to this train of thought, the genius of a culture lies in the worship of the first deities it created (Rose 1972: 200-01). Murray's perception of witchcraft as a joyous religion builds on this. In *The God of the Witches* she describes the 'Old Religion':

Throughout all the ceremonies of this early religion there is an air of joyous gaiety and cheerful happiness which even the holy horror of the Christian records cannot completely disguise (Murray 1931: 114).

By writing about the secret society of witches in glowing terms, Murray looks nostalgically upon a non-existent past when Britain truly lived "according to its genius" (Rose 1972: 200-01).

Murray's use of evolutionary theory applied to religion, the idea of pagan 'survivals,' the longing for a national mythology and, above all, the theories of Frazer, allowed her work not only to survive but to influence all later work in the field of the study of witchcraft.

Murray's Place in Her World

Before elucidating the particulars of Murray's work we must first explore her academic background in order to gain insight on the origin and formation of her ideas. Murray enjoyed a good reputation as an Egyptologist at University

College London. During her generation, women seldom received a formal academic training and Murray learned Egyptology not from a university program but from Sir Flinders Petrie, and although Murray's primary training and career lay in the field of Egyptology; folklore and anthropology remained strong secondary interests throughout her life. Murray began studying Witchcraft when the First World War disrupted Egyptian fieldwork. Her status as an Egyptologist and her position as Chair in Social Anthropology in the University of London provided her with credentials lacked by most of her contemporary authors writing on this subject (Rose 1986: 15). In 1929, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* commissioned her to write the encyclopedia's entry on Witchcraft. This section appeared in reprints of the encyclopedia until 1969 and did much to establish Murray's views on the history and origins of Witchcraft and ensure that her ideas became a deeply rooted part of popular culture.

Murray's fascination with Witchcraft led to several publications on the subject, based upon her examination of trial documents from the Inquisition. "Organisations of Witches in Great Britain," appeared in volume 28 of *Folklore* in 1917; *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, published in 1921, remains the centerpiece of her work on the subject; *The God of the Witches* came out in 1934; and finally, *The Divine King in England*, published in 1954, took her theories to their utmost extreme (Simpson 1994: 89). The assertions of her works grew progressively more fantastic; in fact, in her final publication, she claimed that every king of England from the reign of the William the Conqueror through that of James I served in secret as high priests of the Witch cult.

When her published work on the subject of Witchcraft debuted in 1917 scholars in general attacked her findings and her interpretations. Two separate reviews on *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* provide clear examples of the general attitude of academia toward the Murrayite tradition. W.B. Halliday's review of the book appeared in *Folklore* in June 1922. Halliday dismissed Murray's thesis, asserting that she ripped documents from their historical contexts without attempting to master even the rudimentaries of medieval thought and superstition, not to mention the historical antecedents of the late classical ideas that served as the foundation of this worldview. Halliday further complained about Murray's frequent use of irrelevant facts and her tendency to switch from the literal to the interpretive viewpoint when presenting data.

In July 1922, George L. Burr's review of the same book appeared in *The American Historical Review*. An advocate of liberal-rationalist arguments regarding the reality of Witchcraft, Burr remained contemptuous of the

The sheer flood of 'evidence' from such a variety of sources added to her credibility in the eyes of a general audience who were awed by what appeared to be extensive knowledge

contention of both Summer (see below) and Murray that Witchcraft in any way existed as a real phenomenon. Burr points out that those historians who praised the work of Murray knew little of English history and the history of Witchcraft. Burr's primary argument against Murray's theories was that her lack of knowledge about scholarship in the field she presumed to write about negated any serious consideration of her ideas. Burr suggested that her work should not come up for review until she rectified this omission. Burr's one commendation of Murray was that she did not fall prey to the biased partisanship of many earlier historians and the hostility towards Witchcraft which they displayed when interpreting the evidence.

Despite substantive academic criticism by her contemporaries, Margaret Murray's work holds a strong appeal and exhibits a longevity many scholarly works did not enjoy. It remains impossible to delve into the study of Witchcraft's historical origins without running into the Murrayite tradition. *Folklore* published a special edition in her honor in 1961. In this edition, Sona Burstein sheds some light on precisely why her work received such interest in the past and still remains relevant today:

Firmly pushing her way through the mists of emotion and dogma and obscurantism ... she insists that we look with her on real people, villagers who go on foot to a real witch meeting. She will have nothing of mysterious transvections or mystical experiences. Whenever she see her way to a factual explanation ... she puts her considerable persuasive energy into establishing it. I think it may safely be claimed that many a student of folklore, even when in stubborn disagreement with Dr. Murray's major theories, has been consciously or unconsciously influenced by her to keep his feet on the ground in his investigations (Burstein 1961: 521).

This excerpt gives a clue as to the location of Murray's work within the broad spectrum of the study of the history of Witchcraft. Next, this paper presents in greater detail the scope of opinion in the field, where exactly her works stand within it, and precisely what Murray accomplished during her long career.

The assertions of her works grew progressively more fantastic; in fact, in her last publication, The Divine King, she claimed that every king of England from the reign of the William the Conqueror through that of James I served in secret as high priests of the witch cult.

Murray's Place in the Study of Witchcraft

The study of Witchcraft, its practice, its history and its particulars, like the study of other religions, possesses a long and varied history itself as well as a wide range of opinion on exactly how to define the topic of the research. At one extreme stood authors such as Montague Summers, who asserted that Witches existed and really committed the supernatural Satanic acts ascribed to them in medieval literature (Simpson 1994: 90). Summers appeared to delight in the tortures and agonies of the witchcraft trials, and goes so far as to praise *The Malleus Maleficarium*, that unfortunate and misogynistic treatise on how to find, torture and kill witches in your own community, as "among the most important, wisest, and weightiest books of the world" (Summers 1928: viii-ix). In his *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology* he further asserts that, "we know that the Continental stories of witch gatherings are with very few exceptions the chronicle of actual fact" (Summers 1956: vii).

Even though Summers considered Murray his great antagonist, the two authors approached the historical data in a similar fashion, in that they both took confessions at face value. Summers faults Murray for her status as an anthropologist, since anthropology, in excising the supernatural, cannot explain Witchcraft. Summers insists that only "a trained theologian can treat the subject" (Summers 1956: 45). Here lies a major difference between Murray and Summers for, unlike Summers, Murray divorced the element of the supernatural from the data, remaining a firm secularist in her interpretations. This shift appeared to provide a more sound basis for historical study by purporting to dwell solely in the rational realm. Murray's findings were open to scholarly debate rather than presented as support for a faith claim (Simpson 1944: 90).

Her shift in emphasis aligned Murray with a perspective far more common among her contemporaries, such as Jeffrey Russell, who theorized that Witchcraft never existed, except in the imaginations of ecclesiastical authorities, and that the history of Witchcraft is one of repression and inhumanity

perpetrated by the Church and civil authorities in order to secure power and profit. The Church considered the confiscation of the property of the accused one of the most vital functions of the Inquisition, their greatest weapon in fighting heretics. This was a great fuel to the fire of the Inquisition, so much so that Inquisitor Eymeric complained in 1360 that:

In our days there are no more rich heretics; so that princes, not seeing more money in the prospect, will not put themselves to any expense; it is a pity that so salutary an institution such as ours should be so uncertain of its future (Robbins 1981: 271).

Co-operation of the state and the eagerness of the Inquisition in carrying forward its work proved proportionate to the profit available. The power and profit motive remain the key facts for those scholars who view Witchcraft as a dark fantasy dreamed up by greedy authorities. Scholars holding this opinion consider the Inquisition a vicious 'McCarthyian' endeavor, bent on the persecution and murder of thousands and the subjugation and terror of millions more. In the Middle Ages both Jews and Witches served as the scapegoats for widespread social tension. This method of transferring blame and fear from an enemy without to an enemy within provided an enemy within reach, one "waiting to be massacred, imprisoned, tortured, burnt" (Ginzburg 1991: 52).

According to this view, nothing like a religion survived the trials and persecutions of the Inquisition. Any pagan practices or beliefs evident during the medieval period consist of little more than fragments or folk beliefs surviving from the older religious traditions of Europe. Perhaps the belief in pagan deities and the religious underpinnings of rituals vanished soon after the arrival of Christianity whereas magical rites, such as fertility rituals, continued because peasants perceived them as efficacious. Murray claimed to occupy a middle position between these two positions. She argued that European Witchcraft grew out of the ancient fertility religions of pre-Christian Europe. She maintained that the pre-Christian traditions of Europe survived Christian persecution and that traces of this religious cult still existed (Murray 1917: 228).

Unfortunately, Murray drew her portrait of Witchcraft by selecting and distorting data to fit her thesis. Murray mixed up the beliefs of accused Witches with their practices and took the confessions of those condemned by the Inquisition as factual representations of Witchcraft in the Middle Ages. This proved necessary in part since the only support for her thesis came from confessions extracted under torture. However, whereas Summers and others embraced these testimonies as proof of supernatural devilry, Murray went to great lengths to find rational explanation for facts she took at face value.

Unfortunately, some of these lengths both approached the ridiculous and the academically dishonest. Neither Murray nor Summers examined the data in terms of its cultural context, looking at the societal background that lent these beliefs, fears, and stories credibility and purpose. This enterprise remained firmly in the hands of those who disbelieved in the reality of Witchcraft, either as the work of Satan or as a religion.

Critique of *The God of the Witches*

In *The God of the Witches*, Murray extended and refined the arguments presented in *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*. Since *The God of the Witches* represents a continuation and emphasis of the thesis put forward in her other works on Witchcraft, any critique of this work must also refer back to Murray's early book. The central thesis for all of Murray's work on Witchcraft, that:

Pagan folk practices and beliefs, whether Greco-Roman, Teutonic, or Celtic, did not die out with the introduction of Christianity but rather remained and constituted the fundamental substratum of witchcraft (Russell 1972: 37).

received a more forceful presentation in *The God of the Witches*. In addition to extending and refining her arguments, Murray popularized them. *The God of the Witches* appealed more to non-academics than did her earlier writings, and even though it was shortened and tightened and written twelve years after *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, Murray neither addressed the critics of her first work nor did she try to redress errors pointed out by scholars in the field. In fact, her treatment of the subject matter proved more rigid, more extreme and less acceptable in *The God of the Witches* and even more so in her last work, *The Divine King in England*.

This rigidity extended beyond picking and choosing sources on the basis of whether or not they supported her thesis. In order to strengthen her argument in the second book, Murray further damages the quality of her work by manipulating data in a more blatant and obvious fashion. The doctoring of quotes in order to build her case for a naturalistic religion makes Murray's extensive reliance on supporting documents suspect, rather than supportive of her thesis.

Another major shortcoming of Murray's work lies in her organization of the material. She lumps together examples from varied cultures and times as if they all fit neatly together. For instance, in the first chapter, "The Horned God," Murray begins with art from the Paleolithic period and moves quickly to gods of Mesopotamia and Egypt to the Greek God Pan and on to ancient Britain, pronouncing these diverse deities to be equivalent, and then equating this

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construct with the Christian Satan (1931: 23-40). Fairies, the Irish Tuatha-da-Danann, the Neolithic peoples of Britain and accused Witches also appear as related (1931: 55-58). The sheer flood of 'evidence' from such a variety of sources added to her credibility in the eyes of a general audience who were awed by what appeared to be extensive knowledge.

The God of the Witches also appealed to a popular audience through the use of well-known historical or quasi-historical figures which Murray creatively linked to the 'Old Religion.' Joan of Arc, Saxon saints, British royalty, and biblical figures such as Joseph and the prophet Samuel appear in her parade of characters (1931: 150-70). While this tactic may appeal to the general public it lends an aura of unbelievability to Murray's arguments. Murray's strong desire to support Frazer and align her work with *The Golden Bough* caused her to emphasize the idea of the divine victim, or dying and resurrecting god, more so in *The God of the Witches* than in her earlier work (1931: 121-28). The final chapter, "The Divine Victim," goes into this aspect of her theory in great detail, referencing British kings, Thomas à Becket, and Joan of Arc as examples of participants in this rite (1931: 160-97). This tendency reached its height in her last book, *The Divine King*, where Joan of Arc, Gilles de Rais, various kings of England, and several of their wives, ministers or favorites all volunteered for the honor of the status of Divine Victim (Simpson 1994: 94).

As a work of serious scholarship, *The God of the Witches* fails in most respects, nevertheless, it served to further research on the part of other scholars. By appealing to the popular imagination and gaining a wider reading for *The God of the Witches*, Murray not only changed popular culture, but her work also formed one of the foundations for a new religion's sense of identity. As such, it remains as important in this small part of the field of religious studies as J.J. Bachofen's work in the area of feminist studies of religion. Sometimes, as

Later scholars, such as Arno Runeberg and Carlo Ginzburg ignored the exaggerations of Murray and built upon the strengths of her ideas.

Mircea Eliade stated, what remains important is the effect an idea had on popular culture, not its validity.

Murray's Influence on Later Scholarship

Margaret Murray once presented herself as the middle ground between the certain belief in the supernatural nature of Witchcraft and the equally certain view that Witchcraft, supernatural or otherwise, never existed (Parrinder 1963: 103). Today her work occupies the extreme margin in a schema that completely discounts the work of writers such as Montague Summers. Murray and her place in the scholarly study of the religion of Witchcraft remains an important consideration for contemporary scholars. Her stature as a scholar appears evident; equally evident is her fall from grace. This fall did not result from her choice of subject matter, but in her treatment of the data. Julian Franklin wrote of Murray's academic dishonesty and expressed regret at this turn of events:

In 1931, Dr. Margaret Murray published a book entitled *The God of the Witches*. All who admired her as an Egyptologist and folklorist of outstanding merit were saddened by this publication because in it Miss Murray had bent the facts to fit the theory (Franklin 1971: 72).

However scholars viewed her work, they had to confront it and the contributions Murray made to the field. According to Margot Adler, author of one of the few scholarly books on contemporary Witchcraft and Paganism:

The primary value of Murray's work was her understanding of the persistence of Pagan folk customs in Britain and her realization that Witchcraft could not be examined in isolation from the comparative history of religions or from the study of anthropology and folklore (Adler 1986: 48-49).

While Murray gave evidence for pagan survivals in Britain, little evidence exists which supports the existence of the organized cult that she proposed (Adler 1986: 48). Nonetheless, to discount the confessions as presenting only the fantasies of the accusers likewise remains untenable. Later scholars, such as Arno Runeberg and Carlo Ginzburg ignored the exaggerations of Murray and built upon the strengths of her ideas. Arno Runeberg's book, *Witches, Demons and Fertility Magic*, published in 1947, lent new credibility to Murray's central thesis (Cohn 1975: 113). Carlo Ginzburg suggests that in the end, Murray and

her thesis prevailed (1991: xix). Ginzburg utilized the same sources as Murray, the trial records of the Inquisition, and corrected many of the shortcomings of Murray's treatment of the same. Ginzburg's work actually seemed to support the idea that Murray's work contained an element of truth. Like Murray, he claimed that a pervasive belief in a Goddess, profoundly related to the world of the dead, possessed many local and interconnected variations.

While acknowledging the failings of her work, Geoffrey Parrinder refers to *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* as "one of the most outstanding modern books on witchcraft" (1963: 12). Parrinder goes on to state that Murray's later books, namely *The God of the Witches* and *The Divine King*, revealed a progressive tendency to radically rewrite history. In trying to press her case too hard she negated the value of her earlier works (1963: 106).

A recent and surprising support for Margaret Murray lay in the ideas of Mircea Eliade. In his essay, "Some Observations on European Witchcraft" he acknowledges the errors in Murray's work although he also argues that:

What medieval authors designated as witchcraft, and what became the witch crazes of the fourteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, had its roots in some archaic mythico-ritual scenarios comparable with those surviving among the Italian benandanti and in Romanian folk culture (Eliade 1976: 85).

Academics, it seems, sometimes run too far in the opposite direction when a theory or its author runs into trouble with credibility. The truth all too often lies in the middle, not in the extremes.

Conclusion

Whether one engages in "maleficography," the study of the study of Witchcraft, or studies the origins and ideologies of contemporary Witches, the work of Margaret Murray holds an important position in any research. Though deeply flawed, her work represents one of the main theories in this area of study. It remains the task of the careful researcher to shift through Murray's manipulations to get at the truth of data when researching the history of witchcraft. Murray led an enigmatic career and if only academic circles debated the merit of her work its flawed nature would guarantee it a negligible role. Elliot Rose expresses this enigmatic quality when he writes:

... if I insist, thus ungallantly, that she is not to be trusted, it is without any intention of blame, and only because at the time I write no one is more often treated as an authority on the subject or has committed more nonsense to print (1962: 56).

Although Rose's verdict is not the last word on the subject, critiques of her

work and the presence of a veritable choir of academics pointing out its flaws make exercises into this area unproductive. Reference to Murray and her work and critiques of the same exist in nearly every contemporary work on Witchcraft. But another facet of influence exists and the need for further research into this area remains unfilled.

Murray's books on Witchcraft and the works of other authors following the Murrayite tradition helped found a new religion and stimulated its rapid growth. Her views sparked the interest of Gerald Gardner who, two years after England's repeal of the Witchcraft Act in 1953, wrote *Witchcraft Today*, agreeing with Murray's theories, and stating that he, as a modern Witch in England, had practiced the "Old Religion" since 1939. The founder of Gardnerian Witchcraft, which most modern Pagans consider to be the oldest form of Wicca, Gardner claimed to have met and been initiated into a pre-existing tradition of European Witchcraft as practiced by the 'New Forest Coven.' He is now credited with 'reinventing' Wicca, drawing additional inspiration from the writings of Aleister Crowley, Masonic rituals, and other occult elements.

How members of a religion form their self-identity and a sense of continuity with the past serve as major focuses for religionists. The Wiccan and Neopagan communities contain members who, by and large, read Murray, Frazer, Russell, Robbins, and the host of other academics who work in the field. Their knowledge of and ability to argue viewpoints based on this corpus of literature make a comparable knowledge of sources a necessity for field research. This fact makes the study of Murray and her work worthwhile today. The inspiration that Gardner drew and contemporary Witches draw from the Murrayite tradition remains self-evident. This fact alone gives her books on Witchcraft a continuing place in history.

Nancy Ramsey is a doctoral student in Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She has an MA in Religious Studies and another in Sociology from the University of South Florida. Her main area of research is Wicca, Neopaganism and other assorted Goddess and nature religions. She may be reached at <NRamsey679@aol.com>.

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EXCAVATING SITES OF PRODUCTION: Margaret Murray's Theory of Religion in Context

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Even though many scholars and practitioners of Wicca recognize English archeologist and historian Margaret Murray's influence in significantly shaping the Wiccan myth of origins, the implications of her scholarly method and colonial contexts have received little attention. This is a problem because her work — despite all the necessary qualifications — serves as a record of Pagan origins for Neopagans and Witches. When contemporary Witches tell the tale of Witchcraft's survival under European Christianity we often replicate Murray's renditions found in *The Witchcult in Western Europe* (1921) and *The God of the Witches* (1931). In fact, the naturalization of this story and its variations is fairly well advanced; that is, her account is largely taken for granted, her authorship and its construction in particular time and space effaced by with its repetition. Unaware of Murray's historical and methodological contexts we — academics and Pagans — miss the extent to which her work is informed by and could be burdened with empire-servicing theories of comparative human development, Western notions of universality, and individualistic and feminized trends in Victorian Protestant piety. Our inattention to these issues is perhaps a result of shortcomings in the accuracy of her characterization of European Witchcraft. However, if we dismiss Murray with this critique we miss an opportunity to explore the transfers of power which occur between western colonialism, ideologies, academic productions and contemporary myth. This paper begins to address these problems.

I will start with a very brief overview of Murray's life and work, drawing primarily on her autobiography.¹ From there I go on to outline the Western theories of human origin and cultural change that were operational during the peak of colonization and Murray's formative years. Then I focus specifically on Murray's theory of religion and the ways in which it is marked by her own

historical-religious context. Finally, I focus still closer on Murray's treatment of European Witchcraft, showing how her use of comparative religion allowed her to bring to bear her accumulated knowledge in order to fill a gap she found in European history with Witchcraft.²

Born in Calcutta, India in 1863, Margaret Alice Murray was the daughter of British colonists, who — like many of their compatriots — sought their fortunes in British holdings throughout the world. As was usual for her time and class, young Margaret was sent to Europe for most of her formal education. She returned often to India to visit her mother, father and sister who continued to live there for several more years. Beginning in 1894, Murray studied Egyptology at University College in London and worked with Flinders Petrie, one of the founders of modern archeology. In its infancy, archeological study of Egypt was often short-handed, and Murray soon found herself not only in the position of student, but also that of teacher. With Petrie away on excavations a great deal of the time, her own archeological work had to be squeezed between academic sessions. Nonetheless, in the winters of 1902 and 1903 she — the first woman to do so — led her own excavations at Abydos, Egypt. This pattern of alternating teaching and fieldwork persisted with occasional family related interruptions until WWI put a stop to work outside of the country until 1921. Further, her sense of women's particular responsibilities to others finds expression not only in the contexts of her work and family but also — as I shall discuss later — in her theory of religion.

During the latter war years, Murray — then fifty-one and having exhausted herself working in a military hospital — traveled to Glastonbury with orders to 'rest.' There she became interested in Joseph of Arimathea and the myth of the Holy Grail, which she wrote up in "Egyptian Elements in the Grail Romance."³ From the Grail she moved to Witches, publishing her first paper on the topic in 1917, then a book — *The Witchcult of Western Europe* — by 1921. In the latter she organized the mass of material she found in the Witchcraft trial records, augmenting her material with cross-cultural comparisons. With the end of the First World War, she left Europe for a dig in Malta. Returning to the topic of Witches in 1931, Murray published *The God of the Witches*, a reworking of the material in *The Witch-Cult of Western Europe*. In *The God of the Witches*, Murray proceeded from having proven the existence of an organized pre-Christian Pagan religion to argue more forcefully for its universal elements.

In 1931, she again left Europe to spend 2 years excavating among the megaliths of Minorca. Despite her formal retirement in 1935, she worked until 1938 on

Petrie's last dig in Palestine, excavating at Tel Ajjul and cataloging the pottery uncovered there. Once again war interrupted work outside of Britain. After this, her last dig, she continued to publish general writings on Egypt. In 1963, she published her treatise on the origin of religion and her autobiography. She died later that year at the age of 100.

Murray's life and writings indicate that she was a beneficiary of the Enlightenment and its possessive curiosity regarding many diverse peoples in the world. This was a long-lived curiosity, fed by explorations, colonization, appropriation and scholarly speculation. Social scientists of Europe debated the relationships between so-called primitive cultures, setting up scales and typologies, theories of origin, and theories of cultural advancement or degeneration.⁴ Degenerationist theories argued that from a pristine state of 'true' culture and religion humanity had deteriorated in varying degrees toward barbarism. Progress theories, on the other hand, held that civilization evolved from savagery and barbarism although at different rates among different peoples. Proponents of both theories tended to identify their own culture as most closely matching the highest expression of civilization. By the time Murray entered the field the 'progress' narrative dominated.

Part of the progress narrative — as Murray received it — involved the concept of cultural diffusion. Diffusionist theory basically argues that elements of culture cross political and cultural borders much like molecules in solution pass through permeable membranes. Like other diffusionists in late nineteenth century Britain, Murray saw this process as leading to cultural advancement, even when facilitated by armed invasion. This view, as advanced for example by John Myers and Arthur Evans among others, was used to account for the origin of Europe. They argued that both hostile migrations of Indo-European peoples from the north and more peaceful exploration missions from as far south as Greece and Egypt, made Europe and specifically Great Britain a sort of melting pot, in which a hybrid culture developed and quickly advanced.⁵ Late 19th and early 20th century German scholar Gustaf Kossinna agreed in part, while claiming that higher civilization proceeded from a solely Northern German origin point, in fact from territory recently annexed by Germany.⁶ While Murray granted that invasions by 'barbarians' and 'savages' could result in a degeneration of culture, for the most part she assumed that diffusion resulted in human social progress. Her comments on war support this interpretation:

Though war may be regarded as a terrifying and horrifying factor, destructive and hateful, it often has a stimulating effect on a nation, which had lapsed into a condition of sloth after long periods of peace ... War often sweeps away many old

ideas and customs which are outward and which clog and prevent advance. That alertness of mind so necessary in times of danger, lifts the whole nation forward on the path of civilization.⁷

In fact, the beauty of archaeology for Murray was that through it "one could study 'one small portion of the world,' one small nation and trace it through the vicissitudes of its advance in civilization until it is overwhelmed by a higher culture or obliterated by an invasion of barbarism."⁸ Apparently another

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advantage was that it foreclosed criticism of the colonizing enterprise as well. Colonial oppression and exploitation were unfortunate inevitabilities figured as culture building in much the same fashion that suffering is sometimes said to build character.

Returning to the pathways of her work we begin to see that Murray's social-historical location was not only intellectually but also materially implicated in these methodological and political issues. Her scholarly travels neatly matched the steamer and train routes of her childhood as well as the trade routes between Britain and its colonies. Even her writings on the Witches of Europe are related to her childhood travels. Her interest in them stemmed from her youthful fascination with local legends and prehistoric excavations near her Uncle's vicarage — where she lived when 'home.' Furthermore, war — the strong arm of colonization — was not only a factor in the diffusion of culture, but also shaped the very course of her work. The British colonial possessions visited by Murray were, after all, taken by conquest. Even competition between colonial powers factor here: were it not for WW1, she might never have stayed in the English countryside long enough during her adult years to write about Witches.

In addition to general notions of cultural progress, Murray was intrigued by the

development of religion over time. While she certainly was involved in the material advance of culture through her work in archeology, when Murray wrote specifically about religion in particular her discourse shifted more toward mental advance. As humans evolved mentally, faculty for religion likewise

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For Murray, males were essentially responsible for themselves. Women on the other hand were (are?) instinctually responsible for themselves and children . . .

evolved. Through archeology one could study this advance because archeology is, according to Murray, “the study of the Advance of Man, mentally and therefore spiritually.”⁹

Thus we can see that, for Murray, the spiritual was subsumed under the mental: “religion must keep pace with the developing mind.”¹⁰ This emphasis on the mental side of religion should not be surprising given that, for Murray — as for other liberal Protestant thinkers and social scientists of religion — religion in general had to do with *feelings*. And feelings, by virtue of our being human, were common to us all.¹¹ The primary feeling as regards to religion, for Murray was and continued to be an awareness of an “Unseen over-ruling Power which Science calls Nature and Religion calls God.”¹² For Murray, strongly influenced as she was by a privatistic Protestantism, religion involved — again — “a *feeling* that prompts the worship of God.”¹³

This feeling is universal. Although the names for God may change, the powers to which humans are subject remain the same: we need food, shelter and something to believe in, according to Murray. “The family is still the unity, the mating of the sexes still continues and children are brought into the world, life and death still walk hand-in-hand, the changes and chances of this mortal life are still as uncertain as ever they were.” The resultant feeling is one of “utter dependence of Man for the bare necessities of life on powers that he could not control.”¹⁴ Rituals, while their outer forms change, are essentially about accessing this power to provide “help in time of trouble, comfort in sorrow, and courage in the face of death.”¹⁵ Yet for Murray — who we will remember was

also an evolutionary diffusionist — the expression of this fundamental commonality both varies across cultures and is influenced by cultural contact.

But with what human experience did these universal religious feelings originate? What prompted this mental awareness? Murray wrote that the occasion of this “phenomenon not shared by other members of the group, yet . . . known and recognized in all groups,” occurred at *quickenings*.¹⁶ Yes, the source of religion for Murray was to be found in pregnant women. In fact, Murray asserted that males had no use for the earliest religion: it was a religion for women. For Murray, males were essentially responsible for themselves. Women on the other hand were (are?) instinctually responsible for themselves and children: “This individual personal responsibility belongs to the woman only and cannot be shared, it is in a category all by itself. Though the transmission of life requires the union of the two sexes, the full responsibility of guarding that contribution to the preservation of the race is confined to her sole keeping.”¹⁷

In addition to instinctual responsibility was capability. In tandem with the biological capacity to reproduce was the ability to readily accommodate the added physical demands of child-bearing and rearing. That is, women have superior mental abilities which enable us to assume responsibilities for more than one.¹⁸ This is Murray’s own uniquely gendered connection between instincts for ‘survival of the self’ and ‘survival of the human race.’ Women, in their very essence, bridge individual and human survival.

The nature of this twinned survival impulse is protective. Yet its source as well as the source of the pregnancy remained unknown and hence unseen. According to Murray, with the first movement of the child, women conceptually recognized a fierce sense of ‘protection.’ Emotional, conceptual, the source of protection was linked by Murray with the very physicality of pregnancy only to quickly become a mental concept. In time, protective Power was expressed through decorative markings (especially red), amulets, and the heads and mandibles of particular people and/or animals. Eventually religion went from being a sense of protectiveness to being a means of protection, a tool with which to engage ones environment. Markings on the bones of the dead and specialized placement of skulls and mandibles became protective tools through Murray’s treatment of religion, revealing awareness of a Power which came from a beyond of some sort — a not apparently here, or necessarily now — and hence an Unseen which intervened against “imagined future eventualities.”¹⁹

While what immediately marks Murray's place in Enlightenment approaches to religion is her search for a universal origin for religion within a model of human development, prominent as well is the active role of 'concepts' and 'conceptual thinking.' Religion is more mental than physical, despite its very physical beginnings. We can also see a strong individualist bent in this all-encompassing theory. Murray's origin of religion is found alone, in "still moments."²⁰ Thus, we see here the influence of Murray's privatistic Protestantism. Murray's first religious experience for humanity was an individual experience of feeling. It was not a group activity. And while she described it ostensibly occurring among women who lived together for their own protection and said that others knew and recognize it, the origin of religion was for the most part a private cognitive experience, conveyed to others but not shared with them.

Yet not only was this an individual experience, but it was also a gendered experience. Murray's universal women's experience dovetailed with historically particular Victorian notions of womanhood. The origin of religion conformed to a family model which very much resembled Murray's own struggling middle-class work and family life. While she never had children, her sister and other women around her did and those events impacted her life. Remember here that in addition to the years she spent holding down the fort at the Department of Egyptology at University College while Flinders Petrie took the best seasons in the field, there were also times during which family responsibilities kept Murray from her fieldwork. Furthermore, Protestantism during the industrialization of Europe, and the United States for that matter, was marked by the privatization and feminization of religion. We can see here shades of the Cult of True Womanhood with its emphasis on women's natural responsibility for both domestic and religious upkeep. Like many scholars in anthropology and archeology in her day, Murray then projected this model back to human origins.

Both archeology and anthropology were, for Murray 'modern sciences' involved reciprocally in the 'Study of Man.' The difference for Murray was simply that one concerned the past and the other the present. The importance of anthropology for archeology was that one needed to know the present in order to interpret the past. In return, archeology provided information about traditions which informed anthropological interpretations of contemporary cultures. Past and present inform each other in a feedback loop:

The past is understandable only by realising how closely it resembles the present, for then it is possible to differentiate the *essential* factors from the non-essential,

the *permanent* from the transitory, and to mark the effect of climate and natural conditions on customs and beliefs.²¹

Those artifacts and practices which seem to appear in both past and present must be essentials which endure. Their sameness is apparently self-evident.

The universal consistency of religion was crucial to Murray's treatment of European Witchcraft. Since universal forms of religion grow out of basic human

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experience while varying from condition to condition, particular expressions of basic forms could then be used to explain, or even substitute for, each other in a comparative religion approach. Thus Murray's own cultural experience provided a resource for her understanding of the origin of religion. In *The Witch-Cult of Western Europe* we can see that she used the congregational model of Protestant church organization as a comparative tool to characterize the organization of European Witch covens.²² Additionally, the animal images she found throughout the Witch persecution documents provided many opportunities for cross-cultural comparisons. She wrote:

In many religions the disguising of the principal personage — whether god or priest — as an animal is well known. The custom is very ancient — such disguised human beings are found even among the Paleolithic drawings in France; and on a slate palette belonging to the late pre-dynastic period of Egypt there is a representation of a man disguised as a jackal and playing on a pipe ... From the *analogy* of other religions in which the custom occurs, it would appear that it is a ritual for the promotion of fertility; the animal represented being either the sacred animal of the tribe or the creature most used for food.²³

The theme of fertility reoccurred when she discussed the Witch dances recorded

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The Western imperial Enlightenment project could incorporate/appropriate anything, including its own primitive past.

in the trial documents.²⁴ So established in the literature by this time is the category 'fertility dance' that she could simply refer to it as a universal type. The following quotation illustrates her application of this comparative approach:

When any ceremony is performed by several people together it tends to become rhythmic, and a dance is evolved which, after a time, the actions are so conventionalized as to be almost unrecognizable. The so-called Fertility Dances are a case in point, for though they were once common throughout the world they survive in recognizable form only among the more backward peoples. In Europe the details have not always been preserved, and it is often *solely by comparison* with the dances of savages that their original meaning can be seen.²⁵

Obviously the comparative device was especially important for Murray's claims about Western European Witchcraft. Holes in the historical record could be filled using this approach. Appealing to European concerns with things European, she wrote in *The God of the Witches*:

...but the religion of those early times [in what became Europe] has been entirely neglected, with the exception of a few references to Mother-goddesses and to burial customs. The student of early religion begins his subject in the early Bronze Age of the Near East and totally ignores Western Europe in the Stone Ages ... There is, however, a continuity of belief and ritual which can be traced from the Paleolithic period down to modern times. It is only by the anthropological method [that is, a gap-filling comparative method] that the study of religions, whether ancient or modern, can be advanced.²⁶

Her conclusions drawn from the evidence of the trials were in part justified by

the prevalence of apparently similar practices elsewhere. Thus 'gaps' in European history were filled by comparison and reading anti-Pagan literature and prosecution documents in light of prehistory. Indeed, Murray's writing is filled with references to filling in 'gaps.'

In conclusion, Murray's attempts to explain religion as a whole by assembling its parts are in line with much of early Western European writing on religion and for that matter culture. In her 1910 presidential address, "The Value of European Folklore in the History of Culture" Charlotte Sophia Burne argued that European folklore could serve an explanatory function between 'savage' and 'advanced' cultures of her day.²⁷ The beauty of universal theories such as Murray's is how easily they assimilate each new bit of evidence as one more example proving the assumptions held at the outset. The Western imperial Enlightenment project could incorporate/appropriate anything, including its own primitive past.

Were Murray's characterization of Witchcraft in Europe less influential all this may not matter. However, Murray's work as well as that of her contemporaries is appropriated by contemporary Witches and Neopagans as a story of origins. We should keep in mind Gordon Melton's observation of which Chas Clifton reminded us in an earlier issue of *The Pomegranate*: "The first holy books of the Neopagans were anthropological texts."²⁸ Both practitioners of Wicca and scholars need to be aware, in the present case, of both Murray's method and its context to further our understanding of what I see as universalizing, comparative, and appropriating tendencies in some of our textual sources.

It is not the purpose of this paper to 'blame' Margaret Murray (or anyone else for that matter) for her own time, nor for some disturbing trends now found in contemporary Wicca and Paganism (and much of the New Age movement as well). Rather, it is my thesis that her life and work provide a useful entrance point to grapple with some of the following troublesome questions. What can we learn from the 'paper trails' between Murray's account of European Witchcraft and contemporary Wiccan self-perceptions? Where have we unwittingly and/or uncritically imported Western colonialist tendencies in our sacred histories? Particular historical contexts enabled (or disabled) the histories Murray chose to tell. In turn those histories, together with the manner in which we appropriate them, open and close possibilities in our particular present. What possibilities do these accounts open and close in terms of how we see and conduct ourselves? What possibilities are we opening and closing when we tell

our stories, and are they the ones we want?

Furthermore, a look at the notion of comparative religion provides an opportunity to consider what are perhaps more pressing issues: The very idea of a universal category of religion assumes that all the diverse things we chose to call religion at some basic level are about the same thing (hence their placement in the category religion). The belief that one can take an objective stance above all the particularities to see the big picture is part and parcel of Western modernist thought.

Such a worldview also justifies the assimilation/acquisition of knowledge, peoples, lands, and cultures by those who manage to achieve such intellectual heights. The only boundaries that matter are our own, and these boundaries — by virtue of being enforced by hegemonic status — serve as relatively safe havens should the ‘natives’ get restless. In the event of unrest in the colonies or battles between empires, Murray could return ‘home’ to Great Britain and write about Egyptian elements in the Grail romance, unencumbered by the particular political battles being waged over and in this colony as she intellectually traveled time and space in her quest to link ‘religion’ around the world. If being a beneficiary of Western imperialism becomes too distasteful to me, I can ‘return’ to its pre-imperial home — a past unsullied by hegemonic privilege. In this manner, the products of colonialism can be used to enable neo-colonialism.

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1. Margaret Murray, *My First Hundred Years*, (London: William Kimber, 1963).
2. It would also be interesting to explore her bridge between European Witchcraft and ancient Egypt.
3. I have not yet seen this reference.
4. c.f. Bruce Trigger, *Gordon Childe: Revolutions in Archeology*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), esp. “Archaeology Before Childe” 20-31 and George W. Stocking, Jr. *After Tylor: British Social Anthropology 1888-1951*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995).
5. Trigger, *Gordon Childe: Revolutions in Archeology*, 30.
6. *ibid.* 25-26.
7. Murray, *My First Hundred Years*, 203.
8. Murray, *The Splendor That Was Egypt*, new and revised edition, (New York: Hawthorn Books Inc., 1949, 1963), xvi.
9. Murray, *The Splendor That Was Egypt*, xvii.
10. *ibid.* xvi.
11. c.f. J. Samuel Preus, *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) esp. Chs. 5, 7, and 8 on Hume, Tylor, and Durkheim respectively.
12. Murray, *The Genesis of Religion* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963) 1.
13. Murray, *The Splendor That Was Egypt*, xix, emphasis mine.
14. *ibid.* xix.
15. *ibid.* 124.
16. Murray, *The Genesis of Religion*, 59 and 64.
17. *ibid.* 69. In fact Murray argued that this was still the case.
18. *ibid.* 65-69.
19. *ibid.* 26, esp. 64, and 80, fn. 38. Here Murray is making reference to K. P. Oakley’s work, *Man the Toolmaker* (British Museum) distinguishing humans and animals on the basis of the ability to imagine ‘future eventualities’ as she argues for the evolution of religion from its beginnings in the ‘childhood’ of humanity.
20. *ibid.* 60.
21. Murray, *The Splendor That Was Egypt*, xix, emphasis mine.
22. Murray, *The Witch-Cult of Western Europe*, 13.
23. *ibid.* 60-61, emphasis mine.
24. *ibid.* 130-131.
25. Murray, *The God of the Witches*, 106, emphasis mine.
26. *ibid.* 13.
27. c.f. Charlotte Sophia Burne, “The Value of European Folklore in the History of Culture” in *Folklore* 21 (1910) 14-41.
28. Chas S. Clifton, “Aradia and the Revival of Modern Witchcraft” in *The Pomegranate* Imbolc 1997, 11. Melton’s comment was, I believe, made at the Philadelphia American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting (November 21, 1995), during a session on New Religious Movement methodology.

James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough*: A Critical Appreciation

by Fritz Muntean

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There is a lake near Rome known as 'The Mirror of Diana.' An ancient volcanic crater, the lake is perfectly round and almost completely enclosed by steep wooded slopes. Lake Nemi and its surrounding forest, in our age, is a heavily numinous landscape still. In classical times, there was a sacred grove of Diana at Aricia on the shores of this lake, and in command of this sanctuary was a royal and priestly steward of nature known as the King of the Wood. Sword in hand, this sacred king paces around a sacred oak in a sacred grove by an ancient sacred lake, in the extraordinary opening scenes of Sir James George Frazer's pioneering study of magic and religion, *The Golden Bough*.

This enormous piece of work, first published in England in 1890 and expanded twenty years later into 12 volumes plus a supplement, is now recognized as "a milestone in the understanding of man's cultural past, and a profoundly significant contribution to the history of ideas" (Gaster 1959: v). In *The Golden Bough*, Frazer took the vast body of mythical and anthropological material available in his day and constructed an over-all picture of how, at the primitive level, humanity in general might have thought and behaved, and how that primitive mentality persists even into the modern age. Not only did the book provide a frame of reference for interpreting and understanding the phenomena of particular cultures, both ancient and modern, but Frazer's work also "helped reveal the full significance of mythology, which otherwise might have remained an airy fancy with no social or psychological relevance to modern humanity" (Vickery 1973: 5).

In the intervening hundred years, *The Golden Bough* has had enormous influence on the rapidly expanding fields of anthropology and sociology, as

well as the studies of mythology and religion. The book, however, is not without its flaws. Frazer seems to have been willing to present as sober hypotheses even the most outrageous series of assumptions. To his own credit, Frazer predicted, with the Victorian scholar's amazing capacity for detachment, the future destruction of many of his ideas. This prediction has substantially come true, and so most of this essay will take the form of an appreciative critique. First, however, let us look at *The Golden Bough* itself and review Frazer's main theories of magic and religion in both the primitive and ancient world.

According to Frazer, such royal and priestly stewards of nature as the Arician King of the Wood are found among primitive peoples everywhere. As magician and priestly king, chief and war-lord, protector and engineer of human and natural, he literally incarnated the well-being of the community. As a result, this priest-king had to be kept alive and well at all cost. Over the course of the centuries, savage humanity developed for this sacred and essential purpose, strategies — both actual and symbolic — such as magic, taboo and sacrifice.

In Frazer's model, magic is based on two major principles. First is *homeopathy*: the idea that 'like produces like.' In accordance with this principle, the priest-king serves also as the bridegroom of a corresponding female deity and mates with her annually to produce fecundity for the people. According to Frazer, such 'sacred marriages' are commonly found in both ancient and primitive cultures. They are a formal expression of the idea that sexual intercourse promotes vegetation—an belief which also inspires the orgiastic practices Victorian society believed to be characteristic of primitive seasonal festivals.

As the embodiment of the spirit of fertility, the priestly king is a human god, and special care has to be taken to prevent any impairment of his 'soul' or vital essence. The 'soul' of all human beings, it is believed, can quit the body temporarily in moments of sleep, sickness, or stress; grow enfeebled through old age; or be deliberately (even accidentally) extracted by malevolence (or incompetence). Accordingly, all primitive people are subjected to a more or less elaborate system of taboo, by which such calamity is supposedly prevented. These systems of taboos are based on the second principle of magic — *contagion*: the idea that things or persons which have once been in contact can for ever after have an influence on each other. The priestly king, by virtue of the superior importance of his 'soul,' is subjected to these taboos to an increased degree.

Frazer's discussion of the beliefs and behavior of the ancient Greeks and Romans, detailing the ways in which life and thought in classical antiquity strongly resembled that of the primitives and savages, may have appealed to his cultured readers who were just beginning to feel a little uneasy about the superior literary value of classical mythology. But it is now no longer accepted that the 'dying and reviving gods of ancient religion,' ie, such figures as Adonis, Attis, and Osiris, merely personify vegetation.

allowed temporarily to exercise sovereignty. The Roman Saturnalia is evidently a relic of this institution, as is also the European Feast of Fools, with its Lord of Misrule, Abbot of Unreason, and the like.

The concept of a priestly king as the dying and reviving embodiment of fertility

If, however, despite all precautions, the priestly king of savage society does show signs of bodily defect, blemish, or disease, he has to be deposed or put to death while he is still hale and hearty, in order that the divine spirit which he has inherited from his predecessors can be transmitted to his successor while it is still in full vigour and has not yet been impaired. Frazer maintains that it is often the custom among primitive peoples to slay or depose the king in any case after a fixed term, and this explains, according to Frazer, the institution of seven-, eight- or nine-year kingships often attested in antiquity (e.g., Minos of Crete) and a survival may be seen in the annual election of mock sovereigns, like the Kings and Queens of the May, in European folklore. Between the removal of the old king and the installation of the new, normal life is in a state of suspension. This is represented in popular custom by a period of license in which the normal order of society is halted or deliberately inverted, and a slave, misshapen person, or condemned felon is

is supposed to appear not only in ritual and popular custom, but also in mythology. According to Frazer, examples of this are found in the classical myths of Attis, Adonis, Osiris, Dionysos, and the Scandinavian myth of Balder, all of whom Frazer understands as divine protagonists in the same, ubiquitous, recurrent vegetational drama. This explains why Frazer's priestly king at Lake Nemi carries a sword. In the tradition of sacred kingships everywhere, succession to the priesthood at Aricia could be won only by a person who managed to slay the 'reigning' incumbent in single combat. In order to qualify for this sacred if savage task, and to ensure proper transmission of the indwelling spirit of fertility, every aspirant to the office of King of the Wood had first to pluck a golden bough or sprig which grew high up on a sacred tree. Frazer identifies this bough or sprig, with its numinous allusion to Aeneas at the gates of the underworld, as the parasitic mistletoe, which is credited in European folklore with all manner of magical properties.

With its ubiquitous recurrence of oak trees and mistletoe, maternal goddesses and seasonal slaughter, sacred kings and dying gods; with its universal usage of magic (both homeopathic and contagious), sacrifice, and taboos; the circle is closed and Frazer's labyrinthine system of primitive and classical magic and religion is complete. But any summary of Frazer's argument gives little idea of how it actually feels to read *The Golden Bough*. A modern reader is struck by the great (and in the 12 volume edition absolutely mind-numbing) mass of 'evidence'—whose relationship to the matter being argued is frequently anything but evident. One reason for such a profusion of data is Frazer's unbridled willingness to digress. Another is the oceanic nature of the subject material, in which virtually any topic, as in a dream, may turn into any other.

His original Victorian readers, however, were quite untroubled by these failings. Frazer's predecessors included F. Max Müller, a professor of Sanskrit at Oxford, who believed myths to be the result a linguistic breakdown that had occurred since the collapse of a pre-literate Golden Age. His theories were avidly opposed by Andrew Lang, a classic scholar and a brilliant wit. But by 1890, after a generation of controversy between Lang and Müller, most readers were weary of arguments about changes that may or may not have occurred millennia ago in the reconstructed languages that might have been spoken by the Indo-Europeans. On the other hand, everyone recognized the lore of everyday life, whether in the exotic colonies or at home in Britain among the lower classes. Everyone could understand the importance of the fertility of the natural world and the anxieties that primitive humanity might have entertained about it.

Frazer also possessed an enormous talent for physical description, and with his complex and almost Biblical rhythms and phrasing, he succeeded in maintaining an entertaining pace while engaged in seemingly endless summarization of extremely prosaic material. In fact, the importance of *The Golden Bough* is really as much literary as scholarly, and from a purely literary point of view, it is certainly one of the most influential works in the twentieth century. At one end of the spectrum is its well-known importance to works like *The Waste Land* and *Finnegan's Wake*. And at the other extreme is its mostly unrecognized effect on serious minor fiction: the novels of Mary Renault, and even Raymond Chandler detective stories. The book provided a unique opportunity for writers like Yeats to have a committed encounter with sacred reality, and for those like Conrad and Eliot to experience in its pages a full-scale confrontation with the primordial forces of evil. Under the influence of Frazer, mythology greatly broadened its significance to literature from what had been a source of predominantly ornamentative beauty to "a dynamic illumination of the wellsprings of the human imagination" (Vickery 1973: 36).

In addition, no other work in the field of anthropology has contributed so much to the psychological climate of our own times. Indeed, what Freud and the psychoanalytic school did for the individual, Frazer did for civilization as a whole. Just as psychology gave us a better understanding of the behavior of the individual by recognizing the ruder world of the unconscious, where so much of our behaviour originates, so Frazer "enlarged our understanding of the behavior of societies by laying bare the primitive concepts and traditional folk customs which, as a subliminal element of culture, underlie so many of our institutions" (Gaster 1959: xix-xx).

Clearly, *The Golden Bough* has now become part of the basis of modern culture, so much so that many educated people who, often casually, employ its arguments are unaware of their origins. However, in spite of the literary value and cultural impact of his work, it is important to remember that Frazer thought of himself, like Darwin and Freud, as a scientist, as one for whom truth and fact were not only accessible values, but the ultimate values. Unfortunately, as a scientific work, the book is seriously flawed. Since the completion of *The Golden Bough*, our knowledge of primitive thought, folklore, and religion has been broadly systematized and vastly increased. Many of Frazer's basic premises have been shaken by the findings of modern scholarship. The reliability of his sources — many of them the unscientific observations of missionaries and travelers — has been seriously impeached, and much of the

information upon which his hypotheses were based has subsequently failed to be collected in the field.

This is not to say that Frazer was a dishonest scholar or an incompetent scientist. He was, however, typical of those '19th century anthropologists' who

Frazer postulated a primitive world that was the diametric opposite of his own Victorian society — with its deep-lying obsessions with sexuality, private property, and social class. ... Frazer blandly assumed as a given that his primitives must be universally promiscuous, non-monogamous, incestuous, and Goddess-worshipping.

started with a favoured theory and then scoured both the far corners of the world and the dimmest recesses of the past for 'evidence' that either supported or could be made to support that theory. Frazer clearly began and ended his work with the substantially unquestioned belief that man moves progressively from barbarism and savagery to a civilized culture, that the evolution of religion — and society in general — is basically the same everywhere in the world, and that the human mind operates in accordance with fixed laws. He believed, along with Lewis Henry Morgan, that the customs and convictions of humanity can be arranged in chronological order; and he made continuous use of the

evolutionary anthropology of Edward B. Tylor, which held that human nature and development are relatively homogeneous and that variants from the norm of a particular evolutionary stage are to be explained as survivals from an earlier state. As a result of his adherence to these superficial interpretations of evolutionary theory, none of which remained in currency past the middle of our century, Frazer seems himself to be a relic of a habit of thought that, if not exactly primitive, then is at least of long ago and far away. He seems to us a victim, finally, of his mountains of data, an unfortunate example of the 'armchair school' of anthropology that was swept away by the advent of fieldwork.

Nowhere are the flaws in Frazer's system more apparent than in his most

central thesis concerning the connection between savage custom and classical myth: the leitmotif of the Golden Bough itself. Frazer's opening description of the sacred grove on Lake Nemi and its warrior-priest has become justly famous as a masterful example of Victorian romantic nature prose-poetry. But far more than half of those 466 words of purple prose is derived entirely from Frazer's imagination. His sole reference for this lengthy description is Strabo's

Frazer believed that Magic and Religion stand in genealogical succession ... only in the very earliest stage of human development did magic exist by itself as the simplest possible exercise of mental powers, specifically, the confused and mistaken association of ideas. When its practical inadequacy as a means of coercing nature was discovered, then the general cultural shift from magic to religion occurred.

shrine." (Glaster 1959: xvi).

The equation of the golden bough of Virgil with the branch at Lake Nemi, and its further identification as mistletoe, serves as the connecting link between all of the various elements in Frazer's theory. It is an all-too-central assumption in the work. But even a casual reading of Book 6 of the *Aeneid* clearly shows that Virgil's magical bough is said to be "like mistletoe" in its golden appearance, so

Geography V.3.12, which itself is a model of verbal economy, consisting of only seventeen words in the Greek original: "He is appointed priest who, being a runaway slave, has managed to murder the man who was priest before him; he is always armed with a sword, keeping watch against attacks and ready to ward them off." The motifs of the tree, the sacred kingship of the priest, and even the golden bough itself, are not even hinted at in Strabo. (Smith 1972: 347-48). Modern scholars now believe that the sanctuary at Aricia was probably no more than an asylum for runaway slaves; and the golden bough, "far from being a vessel of divine power or identical with that carried by Aeneas on his journey to the underworld, was in all likelihood simply the branch characteristically borne in antiquity by suppliants at a

it is unlikely that the branch itself was actually mistletoe, for what classical poet ever compared a thing to itself? In Icelandic mythology, Balder is slain with a shaft of *mistilteinn*, which is alternately described in the text of the saga as being "pulled up" rather than down, as mistletoe would be from a tree, "a tall branch of fate," "a branch that seemed so slender," etc. Mistletoe has none of these characteristics, and furthermore does not grow in Iceland, so whatever slays Baldur — if it is a plant — it is certainly something more reed-, spear-, or arrow-like than mistletoe. More likely what is being referred to is the name of a specific weapon. In the words of J.Z. Smith, one of Frazer's modern critics, "With the collapse of this hypothesis one is tempted to write 'balderdash,' but, alas, the word has nothing to do with the Norse deity..." (Smith 1972: 369).

One of the major themes of *The Golden Bough* is the suggestion that primitive as well as classical deities were primarily vegetative spirits rather than solar gods. Frazer's discussion of the beliefs and behavior of the ancient Greeks and Romans, detailing the ways in which life and thought in classical antiquity strongly resembled that of the primitives and savages, may have appealed to his cultured readers who were just beginning to feel a little uneasy about the superior literary value of classical mythology. But it is now no longer accepted that the 'dying and reviving gods of ancient religion,' ie, such figures as Adonis, Attis, and Osiris, merely personify vegetation. (Andrew Lang called this 'the Covent Garden school of mythology,' in allusion to London's well-known fruit market.) Modern mythologists consider these deities primarily as embodiments of 'providence' in general. The myths and rituals associated with these classical deities are thus no mere allegories of sowing and reaping, but account for the rhythm of nature by furnishing reasons why that providence is periodically withdrawn or absent. In the particular case of Osiris, for example, his character as a god of vegetation is not, in fact, original, but entirely secondary, being a later accretion. (Gaster 1959: xvii).

Furthermore, Frazer's thinking became involved in a complex web of contradictions as a result of the strain that aesthetic idealism had placed on 19th century thought. The most notable example of this is found in *The Golden Bough's* circumspect and dispassionate catering (one might even say 'pandering') to "the fascination with the interrelationship of pain, love, and death that polite Victorian society had for so long tabooed" (Vickery 1973: 34). Frazer was a follower of John F. McLennen, who died in 1881, but who had developed in the middle of the century two topics that served to pervade (and distort) the study of religion through the 1920's: exogamy and totemism. (Ackerman 1987: 80). In the manner of Morgan, McLennen and J. J. Bachofen,

Frazer postulated a primitive world that was the diametric opposite of their own Victorian society — with its deep-lying obsessions with sexuality, private property, and social class. Under their influence, Frazer blandly assumed as a given that his primitives must be universally promiscuous, non-monogamous, incestuous, and Goddess-worshipping. “With an almost salaciously maternal attitude of concern, he delighted in their pranks and pleasures, while regretting their naughtiness” (Malinowski 1944: 186).

Even more unfortunately, he widely popularized the armchair theories of these philosophical anthropologists, many of which were already being discredited in his own time, ‘re-popularizing’ some of their typically Victorian theories of ancient matrolatry, savage sexuality and the nature of primitive family structure, which — subsequent to the publication of *The Golden Bough* — enjoyed a resurgence of credibility and began appearing in equally popular works by Engels and others (including Freud) before the turn of the century. They contributed to the anthropological calamity of Margaret Mead’s theories in the 1930’s, were further repopularized in the 1950’s works of Robert Graves, and continue to resurface as unquestionable givens in the popular ‘anthropological’ fiction and ‘Golden Age’ polemic writings of today. This latter is particularly ironic in that Frazer was clearly opposed to the Neo-Rousseau Golden Age theories of his own day as represented by Müller, Bishop Whatley, and others.

Even more ironic was Frazer’s reaction to Freud. He rejected psychoanalysis and could never be persuaded to read anything by Freud or his school, “in spite of the fact that Freud’s anthropological contributions are clearly based on Frazer’s writings” (Malinowski 1944: 182). It is interesting to note that one of the major differences between the theories of Freud and those of Jung is based on the fact that Jung took it on himself to do his own ethno-mythological research, and came as a result to dramatically different conclusions than had Freud in his reliance on Frazer’s material.

Frazer believed that Magic and Religion stand in genealogical succession, that Religion is due to a refinement of the more primitive ‘magical’ mentality. According to Frazer, only in the very earliest stage of human development did magic exist by itself as the simplest possible exercise of mental powers, specifically, the confused and mistaken association of ideas. When its practical inadequacy as a means of coercing nature was discovered, then the general cultural shift from magic to religion occurred. (Vickery 1973: 43). His effort to trace universal Ages of Magic, Religion, and Science led Frazer to believe in a rigid, uniform progression from magic through religion to a positive science as

the pathway toward understanding that humanity was in fact in the process of following. While early man was supposed to have moved historically from a society founded on the hunt through a pastoral order to an agricultural state, he also progresses from a psychological state controlled by magic to one under the sway of religion, and finally to a scientific view of life.

Frazer never mentions the name of Jesus, but only the slowest of his readers could have failed to make the comparison ... If Christianity derives from primitive fertility or vegetative cults in which the dying and reviving god is central, then “the uniqueness of Christianity is dissolved in its emergence from primitive fertility cults”

an equally deep-seated hostility between priest and scientist that occurs later in human history. The basic premise of *The Golden Bough* relies on a belief in the essentially magical character of primitive outlook and primitive behavior. Yet throughout Frazer’s voluminous presentation of factual material, he unintentionally confirms — not his untenable theory of magic as a misapplied principle of association, nor even his evolutionary theory of three stages — but the sound and (to a modern reader) correct view that science, magic, and religion have always controlled different phases of human behavior.

The real difference between magic and religion is to be found first in the subject matter. “Religion refers to the fundamental issues of human existence, while magic always turns round specific, concrete, and detailed problems” (Malinowski 1944: 200). Whereas science is embodied in technology, based on

The polemical subtext of *The Golden Bough* becomes more apparent to the modern reader when Frazer begins to align magic with science in basic outlook. According to Frazer, both magic and science view the world as rigid and invariable and founded on impersonal laws, the knowledge of which permits us to gratify our wishes in any respect. Religion, on the other hand, is in Frazer’s mind opposed in principle to both. Religion regards the world as elastic or variable, capable of being altered by the superhuman powers that created it. Frazer believed that the deep-seated hostility between priest and magician that he postulated in antiquity was the forerunner to an

observation and contained in systems of knowledge, magical systems are revealed, not through observation and experience, but in mythologically related miracles. Religion, on the other hand, takes the eminently practical form of public or private ceremonial, prayer, sacrifice and sacrament.

By using (we would now say ‘misusing’) the evolutionary point of view, which focused on lower or less developed forms of nature, *The Golden Bough* could trace sophisticated religious concepts such as incarnation and immortality to primitive mimetic rituals and misconceptions about natural phenomena — both of which were based, according to Frazer, on a faulty psychology of association — and thus provide the explanation for current modes of belief. Frazer never mentions the name of Jesus, but only the slowest of his readers could have failed to make the comparison between the pagan rites — that result from an imperfect (because irrational) understanding of the universe — and contemporary Christianity. Basically, Frazer employed the ‘objective,’ scientific comparative method as a weapon to finally dispatch Christianity specifically, and religion in general, as an outworn relic of misunderstanding, credulity, and superstition. If Christianity derives from primitive fertility or vegetative cults in which the dying and reviving god is central, then “the uniqueness of Christianity is dissolved in its emergence from primitive fertility cults” (Vickery 1973: 67).

Frazer intended with his evolutionary methods and voluminous material to free humanity from the clutches of Religion and to allow the universal acceptance and unfettered advance of the obviously (to his mind) superior model of Science. Yet it is Frazer’s elaboration of mythological material, along with the more recent work of anthropological scientists and scholarly mythologists — which he more than partially inspired — that has led to our modern reevaluation of religion, even of magic, as a positive and creative cultural force, the very study of which promises to not only enhance our potential to become more expressive and creative beings, but to enable us (just possibly) to bring the fearsome run-away results of a century of uncontrolled scientific inquiry under some kind of enlightened and ethical control. I believe that we owe to Frazer the honour of making elaborate use, not of his naive theories, but of his enormous volumes of information — by essentially not throwing out the timeless baby of mythology with the muddied Victorian bath water.

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BOOK REVIEW: The Witch in History

The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations

Diane Purkiss (University of Reading)
London: Routledge, 1996

*Review by Ronald Hutton
University of Bristol*

The dust-jacket of this book defines Diane Purkiss as a Lecturer in English; within its pages she prefers to describe herself as a feminist literary critic. It is a potent combination, and has resulted in a thoroughly individual and very important book. Its preoccupation is with the manner in which images of English witches have been formed and manipulated during two distinct periods of history, that of Elizabeth and the early Stuarts, and the late twentieth century. In tackling the job, the first half of Dr Purkiss's identity has given her an instinctual love of texts and of language, reflected in her own exuberant and often very funny use of words. The other half has reinforced both an attachment to current critical fashions and ideologies and a style which might be politely described as pugnacious, although I suspect that she herself might prefer the expression 'feisty'. A reader is given little option other than to applaud or to fight back; this one, perhaps unsurprisingly, is going to do both.

The book opens with a firework display of destructive polemic, in three bursts. The first attacks radical feminist views of early modern witchcraft, the second the views taken by modern witches, and the third the treatment of the subject by English historians. Of these the first is the most effective, because the target is most compact and Dr Purkiss is writing with real understanding of the issues.

She is not primarily concerned to demonstrate, as other academics have done before, that the radical feminist notion of the Witch Hunt is wildly unhistorical, but to show how and why it evolved and to argue against its message in feminist terms.

The result is devastating, and the more so because of Dr Purkiss's genius for aphorism. The myth of 'The Burning Times' is shown to have evolved as part of the feminist concern with domestic and sexual violence during the 1970s. It is damned for reducing the victims of the Hunt to suffering bodies, never allowed to speak for themselves, for destroying the historical specificity of both the Hunt and the Nazi Holocaust with which the myth associates it, and for portraying women as merely the helpless victims of patriarchy. The writers with whom she takes issue are the major figures of the genre — Mary Daly, Andrea Dworkin, and Starhawk — and although the first two have hardly been immune from feminist criticism since the 1980s, their stature in itself enhances the importance of the intellectual demolition carried out in these pages. My only reservation concerning it is a difference of emphasis, that she tends to view the feminist community in its own terms, as a seamlessly international one, whereas I am more inclined to perceive the myth of The Burning Times as a specifically American discourse, rooted in the culture of the modern United States. This does nothing, however, to vitiate her comments.

The treatment of modern pagan witchcraft, by contrast, suffers from the fundamental weakness that Diane Purkiss does not understand the phenomenon with which she is finding fault. She constructs an image of it which it is itself a myth, a mashing together of three different genuine entities. One is American feminist witchcraft, based upon the idea that the witch figure and its divine complement, the Goddess, can be evoked by any woman bent upon personal liberation. The second is Wicca, a mystery religion developed in England and based upon a rigorous process of training and initiation and a cosmos polarized between equal female and male forces. The third is hedge witchcraft, the modern version of cunning folk, featured here in its commercialized form of individual practitioners offering occult services for money. The sources from which she creates this confusion are a themselves a medley, of influential writers (like Starhawk), authors who have had no impact in Britain (such as Elisabeth Brooke), advertisements, and conversations with individual witches who are quite rightly kept anonymous but who are also left completely unlocated within the complex society of present-day witchcraft. All this material is vaguely considered to be normative.

The problems with the result include straightforward errors; Sir James Frazer was an opponent, not a proponent, of the idea of ancient matriarchy, and relatively few modern witches worship a Mother Goddess. Gerald Gardner, the publicist (and perhaps creator) of Wicca, did not fail to acknowledge the

... modern pagan witchcraft [is] a mashing together of ... different genuine entities. One is American feminist witchcraft, based upon the idea that the witch figure and its divine complement, the Goddess, can be evoked by any woman bent upon personal liberation. The second is Wicca, a mystery religion developed in England and based upon a rigorous process of training and initiation and a cosmos polarized between equal female and male forces.

contributions of his pupil Doreen Valiente because of gender bias, but for the simple reason that not until after his death did Valiente wish her identity as a witch to be known; the distortion of the facts here itself suggests a hint of such bias. When these misunderstandings are cleared away, Dr Purkiss proves to be most effective once again on her home ground, when revealing the woolliness, nostalgia, and impracticality of the thought of American feminist witches and the supercharging of the same qualities by crass commercialism. The creation myth of Wicca is efficiently knocked to pieces; but then it has been disintegrating amongst Wiccans themselves ever since the 1970s. The *joie de vivre* of the chapter makes it another marvellous read, and this reader only wishes that it had been based upon better information.

The section upon academic treatment of the Hunt suffers from a similar lack of instinctive understanding, combined with sheer bad luck. As Dr Purkiss notes, professional study of witch trials has apparently languished in English universities since the celebrated socio-economic analyses of Keith Thomas and Alan Macfarlane in the early 1970s. What she apparently did not realise at the time of writing was that this is largely because for about ten years historians

have been awaiting the completion of major research projects in different areas of the field, by Robin Briggs, James Sharpe, and Stuart Clark. Since she completed her book, two of these have reached publication and the third has been submitted. All have in common a rejection of the functionalism of their predecessors, an emphasis on the need to reconstruct holistically the mental world of the participants in the trials, and a perception of the enhanced importance of folklore studies and psychology in the interpretation of the Hunt. These are exactly the approaches taken by Diane Purkiss herself. Such a pattern demonstrates vividly how much scholars work within common intellectual atmospheres at given moments, while weakening Dr Purkiss's claim that her feminism provides her with a dramatically different perspective.

This said, to some extent the claim stands up. She is novel and convincing in her demonstration that the sceptical writers upon witchcraft in the early modern period were if anything even more misogynist than the demonologists. There is truth and justice in her assault upon the neglect by most English historians of recent theorisations of childbirth, maternity and the body by feminist writers. The obvious defence against the latter, however, is that the writers concerned are locked in an ongoing debate, and that scholars not expert in the issues at stake would like to see it resolved before they employ the latest contributions to it as worthwhile theoretical constructions; the formulations favoured by Dr Purkiss, notably those of Helene Cixous, have themselves since been challenged as misleading by other feminists.

Likewise, she is accurate in her criticisms of the sceptical and rationalist discourse which has prevailed among historians of the Witch Hunt ever since the Enlightenment. What she seems not to appreciate is the context of that discourse, at least until the mid-twentieth century; that it was the product not of a smug cultural hegemony but of liberals terrified of the potential for irrational violence in human society. It was certainly blinkered and sexist, but it was applied to a specific purpose, of hammering home the folly and pointlessness of the Witch Hunt until there was absolutely no danger that it could break out again. We certainly need to move beyond it now — and for thirty years scholars have been doing so — but it should be granted some virtues in its time.

A similar blindness to context weakens the force of Dr Purkiss's comments upon Margaret Murray's characterization of the Witch Hunt as the destruction of a surviving pagan religion. She accuses the historians who attacked it in the 1970s of savaging a soft target with motivations of gender prejudice, with the assertion that the faults of the Murray thesis had been agreed upon by experts

ever since it was first aired in 1921. What she plainly does not realise is that Margaret Murray's books only became best-sellers during the 1950s and 1960s. During that time they not only made a huge impact upon the general public and a host of popular writers, but their main argument was repeated by leading historians such as Christopher Hill, Sir Stephen Runciman, and Sir George Clark, as well as archaeologists, folklorists and pioneers of oral history. The intensity of the attack in the '70s derived from the realisation that fifty years of criticism within the small body of experts upon the subject had apparently been unavailing, and that the Murray thesis had to be stopped once and for all.

After all this sustained finding of fault with others, the natural reaction of a reviewer is to feel that whatever Diane Purkiss now has to say upon her own account, it had better be damned good. The delightful discovery which follows is that it actually is so. First, she uses trial records to reconstruct the experience of encounters with a presumed witch from the point of view of successive female witnesses. The result is to draw us, convincingly, into a symbolic world in which the witch-figure operates as antihousewife, antimother, and antimidwife, a screen onto which are projected a set of specifically female fears and worries. Then she links beliefs about witches and their familiars to prevailing theories concerning the nature of the human body, and of the female body in particular. At a time when medical opinion had long held that bodies flowed with substances which threatened to get out of hand, a woman was seen as especially leaky and permeable, and a witch as effectively boundless and so dangerously intrusive. This insight is illustrated repeatedly from popular sayings and customs. An especially effective case-study takes its starting point from the contemporary medical belief that a mother's milk was the blood which had nourished the foetus, and which after birth was purified through the heart before being pumped into the breasts. Within this system of thought, the suckling of the animal familiar with blood, generally from a teat concealed in the groin, was the use of a polluted organ in a polluted place, a nurturing with poison of an entity created to do evil.

The final part of this central section is devoted to considering the defences provided by accused witches, and displaying the range of very different strategies which they adopted. Some actively sought an identity as users of good magic, others created counter-tales about themselves using materials provided by the accusers, and yet others created their own materials. Virtually all struggled hard to reassert control over the meaning of their lives. Looking at the mass of information which Dr Purkiss has assembled to illustrate this point, one of the most striking aspects of it is that it is derived from accounts of trials

in which the defendant was found guilty; her analysis of it helps us to understand what must have gone on in the (naturally much more sketchily recorded) majority of witchcraft cases, in which the defence was successful

In this fashion, Diane Purkiss provides a set of genuinely new and valuable perceptions of the subject, accessible to her as a feminist writer. She proceeds in the final third of the book to pull off the same trick, but this time with a

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heavier emphasis upon her skill as a textual critic, by analysing the representations of witches in Elizabethan and early Stuart drama. The present reviewer was quite prepared to be overawed by her sparkling reinterpretation of the famous set of canonical texts, although it must be admitted that here she is most firmly upon her home ground and he is furthest from his own. A historian's range is, however, quite wide enough to assess the worth of her comments upon the relationship of the stage with wider culture, and these again seem to be both accurate and important.

More than anybody before, she brings home not merely the diversity of early modern opinion concerning witches, but the sheer variety of channels through which it could be mediated — parents, neighbours, sermons, ballads, pamphlets, learned literature, and plays. She is also a pioneer in the way in which she emphasises how complex that relationship between drama and the complex matrix of wider culture actually was. The stage was very far from being a mirror for society; rather, it was a world with a dynamic of its own and an equivalent variety of ideas. For one thing, trials of witches (at least in the

Home Counties) and plays about witches did not follow the same trajectory; the former had passed their peak and were in decline when the latter were most fashionable. For another, stage representations did not depend upon stories from trials, or the beliefs in which they were rooted. Not only did they draw upon alternative sources, notably the classics and the handy trove of material made by the sceptic Reginald Scot, but produced witch-figures far more flamboyant, more theatrical, and more essentially ridiculous; and in the process may actually have helped to foster scepticism about witchcraft in metropolitan (and thus national) culture.

Not even a review with as generous a word-limit as this can do real justice to the mass of insights, suggestions, and provocations provided by so rich and combative a work. In its author's eyes, it appears to function mainly as a battering-ram, driven first against the errors of contemporary feminist mythology and then against those of a male-centred academic historiography which is itself based in patriarchal culture. It is to congratulate rather than to diminish her that this reviewer sees it more as an important and unanticipated addition to a set of innovative new publications by English scholars upon early modern beliefs and trials concerning witchcraft; not so much a stone hurled into a stagnant pond, as part of a wave of exciting research, in a subject which seems finally to be coming of age.

A longer version of this review first appeared on the Reviews in History website at <<http://ihr.sas.ac.uk/ihr/reviews/introw.html>>. For the complete review (as well as a reply by Dr Purkiss) see <<http://ihr.sas.ac.uk/ihr/reviews/hutton.html>>. Reviews in History is highly recommended by The Pom editors.

For further reading on the issues raised in this review, please see:

- Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality, and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 1994).
- Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (London: HarperCollins, 1996);
 - James Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in England, 1550-1750* (London: Hamilton, 1996);
 - Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997).

Our readers' attention is also directed to Professor Hutton's review of Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts by Anne Barstow, which appeared in Enchanté magazine #19 (1994).

THE POMEGRANATE: Readers' Forum

To the Editors,

Reading your web pages, I was intrigued and impressed by your new journal. I especially appreciate the requirements for backing up with notes and references articles and contributions. However, there is a point I am curious about. While you use the terms Neopagan and Pagan community, and seem to be aiming at the general Pagan population, upon reading further I find only Wiccan material. We are not Wiccan, and we do wonder if you are being accurate in your advertising that you are truly going to be for the general Pagan population. You may not be aware, but there are those of us that are feeling that the Wiccan faith with its many variations is doing its own form of converting and proselytizing. Your publication as it is presented so far, appears to us to be doing something of the same, in that you appear to be a 'Pagan' publication, yet only seem to have Wiccan influence and information.

This is not to be critical or to be seen as any sort of negative statement, only an observation from some of us outside the Wiccan world that are quite happy with our own Pagan lifestyles, but who deal quite a lot with Wiccan burnouts just as we do Christian burnouts.

Only a thought, Marion Skydancer

The Pom Editors reply: All four of The Pom's editors are Wiccan, and as a result so are most of the people whom we know well. So when we shook the bushes for material to put in the first issue, what fell into our collective lap was (surprise!) articles on Pagan topics written by Wiccans. We assumed that most of The Pom's content, particularly the articles on The Golden Ass and 'Pagan Deism' (as well as the review of Enchanté magazine) would be of interest to everyone in the Neopagan community, regardless of their tradition or

denomination. On the other hand, upon re-reading some of these and other articles, We've noticed that many of us have casually used the terms 'Wicca' and 'the Craft' where 'Pagan' would have been more appropriate. Likewise, we have had a tendency to automatically say 'Coven' where 'Coven/Circle/Grove, etc' would be more correct. We promise to be more careful (and more inclusive) with our language in future.

At any rate, the best way to assure that your own interests are met is for you and your fellow practitioners to submit articles from your (non-Wiccan) point(s) of view and give us a chance to print them. We would particularly appreciate an article (or a letter) on the following subject, about which we are all curious:

There are several Pagan circles in here in the NW whose members cast a circle with a wand or athame; salute the four quarters; invoke and draw down ancient European deities; raise spiritual energies through chanting, dancing, or guided meditations; perform acts of magic; share cakes and wine; and devote the circle by grounding the energies raised — but who claim not to be Wiccans! We're not saying that these people are 'wrong,' but we are curious and we would appreciate any explanation of this apparent contradiction that our readers could offer.

Dear Editors,

Congratulations on a truly remarkable first issue of *The Pomegranate*. I appreciated Kate Slater's shrewd book review, adored the interview with John Yohalem, and incorporated Margarian Bridger's framework for Pagan deism into philosophical exploration with potential fellow practitioners. Never have I encountered such a substantive (and handsome!) Pagan publication. Here's my subscription, and my heartfelt encouragement to keep up the great work.

May I ask for a point of clarification? As Chas Clifton points out in his engaging and impressively researched article, the modern-day Charge of the Goddess draws heavily on wording from *Aradia*. A footnote directs interested readers to a source analysis published in *Enchanté*, in which Ceisiwr Serith traces contributions to the contemporary Charge from Valiente, Gardner, and Crowley as well as Leland. Then, in Maggie Carew's intriguing interpretation of *The Golden Ass*, Isis' majestic self-declaration upon appearing to Lucius Apuleius is cited as "the model upon which the Wiccan Charge of the Goddess

is based." Carew goes on to ask, "Who would have guessed that Apuleius' hymn to the one true Goddess would be adapted in our century for the worship

Has a literary or traditional connection been established between the hymn to Isis in *The Golden Ass* and the Dianic material of *Aradia* that evolved into The Charge of the Goddess? Or are the similarities coincidental, but not unexpected ...

of the Goddess of the Witches?" Not Ceisiwr Serith, apparently!

Has a literary or traditional connection been established between the hymn to Isis in *The Golden Ass* and the Dianic material of *Aradia* that evolved into The Charge of the Goddess? Or are the similarities coincidental, but not unexpected — a result of the nature of the Divine and Her relation to the mortal realm? Much obliged for any clarification, and many wishes for continued successes!

Sincerely, A. Kantola

Dear Editors,

I was introduced to *Aradia* before any more current Wiccan material, and the work has had a particular interest to me ever since. I agree that it is one of the root sources of the modern craft, and as such deserves a more respectful treatment. I am curious about one thing: while another root source of modern Wicca, Murrays' works, have been refuted for serious lapses in scholarship, some modern historians have concluded that Murrays' basic premise was sound: that there was indeed a surviving "witch cult" in Europe into the period of the inquisition (Carlo Ginzberg, *Ecstasies*). Has Leland's work ever received any academic validation, or even condemnation? Granted some modern witches would rather have *Aradia* dismissed, but I can't help but think that the work of the 19th century folklorists like Leland are still a useful source for those of us in the 20th century craft revival. Also, I remember thinking about *Aradia* when I read Jerzy Kozinski's novel, *The Painted Bird*. His fictionalized autobiography of surviving the Nazi and later Soviet takeovers of Eastern Europe contain some

accounts of surviving folk magic that could have come straight from Leland. Perhaps the trail isn't as cold as we might think, even though the roots that survived of the ancient traditions into recent times are considerably less Gardnerian than we could wish...

Eric Wegner

Chas Clifton replies: My thanks to A. Kantola, whose letter prompted me to re-read the wonderful final chapters of The Golden Ass. I have no trouble in seeing the 'names' section of Isis's speech ("Some know me as Juno, some as Bellona of the Battles; others of Hecate ..." etc.) as prompting the composition, by Doreen Valiente or whomever, of the 'names' portion of the Charge of the Goddess. I think that Maggie Carew goes a little to far in saying that Apuleius' hymn "would be adapted in our century ..." But think it certainly served an inspirational function. To claim that Apuleius' hymn influenced the Aradia text, however, would be a leap of a different magnitude. In the absence of evidence, I would not say there was a literary connection, unless, perhaps, it came through the medium of the Roman Catholic Church. Various writers have claimed that Mariolatry absorbed much of the Isian liturgy.

And next, thanks for Eric Wegner, perhaps I will have to re-read Jerzy Kozinski's The Painted Bird as well and look for echoes of folk magic.

Chas S. Clifton, University of Southern Colorado

Dear Pom Editors:

Thanks for your review: "Inside the Sieve" in the Imbolc 1997 issue of The Pom. I see I shall have to add *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft* to my library. I'm delighted that someone has tackled a subject which has fretted me for several years now. I've been worried about what researchers were concocting about modern Pagans, and knew that much of their data had to be skewed, because I saw some of it being gathered. In 1991, Shelley Rabinovitz from Carleton University came through Winnipeg on her thesis trip, which would produce her paper "Spells of Transformation". We welcomed her and did our best to make her at home and answer her questions truthfully. But at that time the local scene consisted of perhaps a dozen 'old-timers' (most of them under 40, almost all childless), and two or three dozen newbies — persons with

three or fewer years of formal practice, with more book learning than practical experience. I fell quite firmly in that latter group, I'm afraid. By 'local scene' I mean those people who would speak to researchers — there were and are many pagans here who are quite private and have nothing to do with us loopy beginners.

At that time I might describe the 'scene' as roughly divided into three groups — a very large and militant Dianic population, a smaller, perky group of friends who did pagan PR and offered open circles, and a separate group of more serious magical practitioners. The groups overlapped, but all three self-selected for a number of traits, and thus limited the kinds of people who would be comfortable and persist as members of the 'scene.' For instance, homophobic newcomers wouldn't last long, nor would high-powered career people. Into this mix of exalted newcomers came the researcher. She might have believed she was writing on a steady-state culture, but nothing could have been further from the truth. She was instead observing the heated ferment of a young population who had gotten drunk together on books and ritual, and had not yet had the spiky corners rubbed off their interrelationships by long years of acquaintance. Some of her interviews were one-on-one, some in groups. I really don't know what accepted practice is for sociological research, but I can't believe that answers collected (in some cases) by a show of hands at a potluck dinner would be considered rigorous data. How could a group questioning fail to create some skewing to the data — not towards white-bread normalcy in this group, but towards mutually supportive revelations of hurt and grievance? Ms. Rabinovitch may have been "true to her data," but data isn't any more reliable than the care which yields it.

Over the years I have answered questionnaires for perhaps eight researchers, mostly university students in religious studies or sociology. Many of these people do not clearly understand what sort of thing they are researching. What use, then, can their results be? I am glad somebody (Carpenter) took on this subject, since somebody should. If there is a university student out there, here's a new idea for a paper — find only older practitioners, over forty, with more than ten years experience in the craft, also selecting for stability (employment, children) and for interests outside the craft (carpentry, astronomy, knitting). Ask these people your raft of questions — if they will speak to you.

Holly E. Nelson, Winnipeg
<redking@pangea.ca>



Shelley Rabinovitch replies: I am sure what you are suggesting would also make a very interesting study, but it would in itself skew the results. I cannot understand why the writer feels only older, or long-time, Pagans are either normative in a given community — or the ones which one should be interviewing. My research was Ethnography: describing a given religious community.

I stand by my research techniques as an anthropologist of religions, having had my methodology approved by my advisor of the time, my department, and the Ethics Committee of my university. Most of my work was face to face, person by person. I cannot control who volunteered to be interviewed, but I can say with absolute surety that those I spoke to across Canada during my research were typical of the public and private Pagans I have met in Canada, the USA and the UK. My mix ran from newly minted Pagans in their teens to elders in both age and experience, many of those being over 40 years of age.

The fact is that most Canadian cities have a very high percentage of those who fit the description Ms Nelson gives of Winnipeg's young Pagans. An overview of any religion includes the elderly, the young, the 'newly-converted,' and the well-established membership. If I had wanted to do a study of Elders in Neopaganism, I would have done one. However, that is a different thesis still waiting to be written.

*Shelley Rabinovitch
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The most exciting, interesting and provocative part of many Neopagan magazines and journals has often been the Letters to the Editor or Readers' Forum sections, and it is our fondest hope that The Pom will prove no exception to this rule.

We would especially appreciate it if someone from either the Reclaiming Collective or the Belili Project would respond to Ronald Hutton's recent article on Marija Gimbutas and the Neolithic Great Goddess.