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# The Pomegranate

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# The Pomegranate

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A NEW JOURNAL OF NEOPAGAN THOUGHT

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# The Pomegranate

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See the inside back cover for further details

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*The Pomegranate: The Journal of Pagan Studies* is published for the interdisciplinary study of contemporary and classical Pagan religions, including Wicca, Witchcraft, Druidism, Ásatrú, Odinism, as well as other forms of revived and diaspora Paganism. We welcome articles and essays from historians of religion, environmental historians, social scientists, and independent writers and scholars whose work engages or is informed by current academic research.

## The Pomegranate Readers' Forum

*Please contribute to our Readers' Forum so that we may continue to present this valuable venue for the exchange of ideas. Letters may be edited to conserve space or to avoid repetition. Writers of published letters will have their subscriptions extended.*

JO PEARSON WRITES:

*Editors' note: Jo Pearson continues her commentary on Sylvia Townsend Warner and Margaret Murray, begun in her article "Wicca, Esotericism and Living Nature" (Pom 14: 4-15) and in her letter to our Readers' Forum (16: 56):*

Another influence on Sylvia Townsend Warner was Pitcairn's *Trials of Scotland*, in which the account of the witch trials was of particular import. Pitcairn had stressed that 'the actual speech of the accused impressed upon me that these witches were witches for love; that witchcraft was more than Miss Murray's Dianic cult; it was the romance of their hard lives, their release from dull futures' (ibid.: 1989: 59). This something Townsend Warner was certainly trying to get across about women's lives in the early 20th century, though we may now argue with any definition of witchcraft as a mere escape from hard lives and dull futures!!! Nevertheless, I would argue that there is still some truth in that, though it should be looked at more positively, in terms of empowerment, who needs it, and where they find/get it. But that's another issue.

The reference [in Prof Pearson's earlier posting] is to Harman, Claire (1989), *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography*,

London: Chatto and Windus, which is where I dug out this information.

Jo Pearson  
The Open University

DANIEL COHEN WRITES:

I've just read Chas Clifton's article in *The Pomegranate* 16. It brings to mind a question that has interested me for some time.

There is a psilocybin mushroom (*psilocybe semilanceata*, known as the Liberty Cap mushroom) which is so common in the British Isles that there have been regular 'psilocybin festivals'. Because they grow naturally, picking and eating them is legal, and the natural process of drying them in the sun may (I am not sure) also be legal. Anything like oven-drying counts as processing and immediately becomes illegal.

Despite its prevalence, I have never seen any mention of this mushroom in herbals and magical writings. I would like to know why. I can think of several possible reasons, but I have no evidence for any of them. Among the possible reasons are:

1. That I have not read enough sources. That's certainly true as regards old texts, but I have read a lot of modern magical works and (as in your article) it has not been mentioned.
- 1a. That modern writers know of this mushroom (by now, that must be true), but, because of its prevalence and harmlessness, have not mentioned it for fear of being accused of promoting drug use.
2. That it is a comparatively recent import and did not exist in the British Isles when the herbals were written. If this is true I don't know how one would find out. It's not particularly likely to be mentioned as a new arrival in any writings about the country.
3. That its uses were not known to the old writers. That seems very unlikely, considering the knowledge of other plants and



fungi. It's also fairly common in continental Europe, according to the books on fungi that I've looked at. Incidentally, it would be interesting to know how the current knowledge came about.

4. That its use was known but was a genuine secret, never disclosed.

I tend to go for this last explanation, because it is the most romantic, in the absence of any evidence for other possibilities.

On a vaguely related topic, I've felt for a long time that there would be a really interesting research project (not for me, though) on looking at strange ingredients in magical recipes and comparing them with vernacular names of plants. Then, perhaps, someone could test for efficacy! As an example, I was once asked where to buy adder's tongues, and was able to point out that adder's tongue is a type of fern.

Daniel Cohen  
London

#### JILL ADIX WRITES:

I received a copy of *The Pomegranate's* issue 16 in the mail and was pleased to have been made aware of this publication and its format. I have recently concluded my master's degree from Antioch University, Yellow Springs, OH in Psychology and Womens' Studies, and with that behind me I am able to devote more time to my individual reading choices as opposed to volumes at a time. However, after I read some of the articles in your publication I find myself perplexed over some of the discussions that are transpiring within this format. Since you are interested in additional insights I have decided to offer mine to the turmoil.

First, the discussion regarding the article in the *Atlantic Monthly* by Charlotte Allen and her insights into the goddess spirituality movement of which she mentions and critiques Starhawk, her published works, and her involvement or commitment to the movement itself, are of

concern to me. I offer as my defense my perception of the understanding, or lack thereof, that Ms Allen suggests regarding the material and its intent. The comments are somewhat similar to the response letter that Starhawk, herself, wrote.

Any scholar (seeker) should realize that when involving oneself in a particular theoretical discussion or research project that there are going to be discrepancies and differences of opinions regarding the "factual" evidence. Furthermore, tangled within there is the problem of what is considered actually "factual" and from what source the facts are derived. As Starhawk mentions, Ms Allen used references from books that Starhawk had written 20 years ago. And then Mr York's comment—that our words of early writings are to come back to haunt us—appears as a slap in the face to anyone who strives to be involved in the continued evolving of one's mind and opinions as one ages and becomes more diverse and enlightened in one's understanding of life and its many elements. Would Henry Ford be held responsible (chastized) for not including power steering and brakes in the first automobiles he made? Do we fault Thomas Alva Edison for the current electrical power problems of the California area? These two examples show the results of the expansion off/from the original theory. As additional aspects of the original theory became known to diverse observers or researchers' inclusions and expansions on the original theory's format may be realized, notwithstanding that all inclusions are not for the best or supportive of the original intent.

With this in mind, as students of the world and life we look to our own involvements and perceptions for examples and referencing. I know for one that I did not know in fourth grade how to do logarithms in math or anything about the new math that now is the part of an accepted teaching curriculum. For one, I was too young and the other had not been "invented" as yet. But if we use restricting

## ... FROM WHOM DID MS ALLEN GET HER RESEARCH INFORMATION? IT WOULD NOT APPEAR THAT SHE THOROUGHLY RESEARCHED THE GODDESS MOVEMENT ... OR ITS PARTICIPANTS BUT RELIED ON THE UNDERSTANDING AND BELIEFS OF OUTSIDERS.

conditions as prescribed by Mr York (haunting words), does this mean I am wrong now if I learn anew, expand my capabilities, or learn from my mistakes? The point being that as we go, we grow, hopefully.

Yet, is that in fact what is happening? It would not appear so.

With the rejection of materials that are controversial or contrary to the accepted norm, or the opinion of only one theoretical paradigm, a methodology that is controlling and one-sided emerges, it would seem. That is the problem that seems to be a part in Ms Allen's understanding of the "goddess movement", it is not only one theory nor is it one of a female dominated religion, theory, premise, or practice. The goddess movement, as with Wicca, holds to a shared position, ie, Riane Eisler's term partnership way. The Wiccan belief promotes a shared theology that exists between/among the two: male and female, yin and yang, light and dark, etc. It is not one, that is of itself, otherwise there would be no other. This separation makes for comparison/contrast to a one, not to control or dominate, but to cooperate.

The theology that has emerged within the Judeo-Christian motifs is seen from what appears as a western Indo-European cultural based practice which was focused on the sun/son, hero/god motif. Making the sun/son the dominator/god theme excluding other gods

and goddesses in its wake. While pagans, which includes Wiccans, Native Americans, Astrau, Druids, etc, have come to understand and utilize the male/female duality with its varied aspects. An attempt is then made to realize and actualize this duality within ourselves as well as others. The diversity and complexities of universality with all its ramifications is sought. This is often done in motifs that are familiar and related to our own individual conscious knowledge. Due to each of us being an individual as well as a part of the whole, each experience is individual to the participant and still a part of the whole. Carl Jung used the term archetype to attempt to define these motifs.

Ms Allen seems to misunderstand the premise of Wicca and the goddess movement as a female dominated sect, which is not my understanding of the pathway, of which I for one am personally involved in.

For me the concept of the archetype relates to a symbolic understanding of a much more elaborate and complex ideology allowing for the diversity and understanding of the potentiality of more than one possibility. The son/sun hero/god theology does not exemplify the male/female motif as a partnership or shared relationship, which is a point in many goddess circles rites, where there is an honoring an acceptance of the yin/yang in each and all.

*continued on page 55*

## A Modest Look at Ritual Nudity

by Ronald Hutton  
University of Bristol

*This article is an excerpt from an upcoming book on Wiccan origins. It has been lightly edited for brevity; lacunae are clearly indicated by ellipses.*

In the spring of 1990 I concluded the writing of a book on what was known of the pagan religions of the ancient British Isles, with a section which drew a series of comparisons and contrasts between those religions and the set which made up modern British paganism. One of the differences which I suggested specifically concerned the religion of modern pagan witchcraft, called Wicca: that 'no known cult in the ancient world was carried on by devotees who all worshiped regularly in the nude', as some varieties of Wiccan certainly do.<sup>1</sup> I would not subsequently have used the word 'cult' in this context, for although it was employed here to refer to specific forms of ancient religion for which it might well be valid, it could create confusion by seeming by extension to include Wicca itself. In a later publication I was to look more closely at these formulations and declare that Wicca was more complex than cults, and deserved to be distinguished from them as a full-blown religion.<sup>2</sup> Since 1990, I have also had further opportunity to reflect upon the rest of that statement. On the one hand, the more that I knew of other magico-religious practices, the more convinced I

became that my wording had been essentially correct: that Wicca was remarkable in its use of ritual nudity. On the other, it became ever clearer to me that this single sentence represented an entirely inadequate consideration of the subject. This article sets out to substantiate both opinions.

First, it is necessary to look more fully at the place of nudity in Wicca itself. Wiccans themselves have traditionally supplied two justifications for its importance in their workings. One, which has regularly appeared in print for five decades,<sup>3</sup> is that the body naturally releases a field of magical energy which clothes obstruct. The other, which I have often encountered in conversation, is that the nudity of all members of a coven reinforces a feeling of equality and democracy between them. Neither seem particularly satisfying to me. The first may well be a self-fulfilling justification, in that people who are used to being naked to work ritual magic would very probably feel disempowered if made to do it in robes or other dress. It is also true that there seems to be no easy means of evaluating the practical success of groups who practise magic in the nude against those who do not, whether magic is defined as a symbolic system, a means of self-transformation, or a process by which practical results can be achieved by the literal operation of apparently arcane power. What seems disturbing about the concept that clothed magicians are inherently second-rate is that it would consign to this inferior category the most famous and sophisticated societies for the practice of ritual magic which are known to history, including the Golden Dawn, the Stella Matutina, and the Ordo Templi Orientis. Both a sense of justice and common sense

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should run against such a conclusion. As for the idea that ritual nudity reinforces equality within groups, it encounters the problem that most Wiccan covens are organized according to a hierarchy of training and responsibility, with a single person or couple in clear overall charge. They may operate consensually, but are emphatically not based upon a principle of equality of membership.<sup>4</sup> There may, however, be a symbolic truth in the statement, if a mutual state of nudity reinforces a sense of common purpose and identity among group members.

In a more recent book,<sup>5</sup> I suggested from my personal acquaintance with Wiccans that there were two practical reasons for the persistence of the custom. One was that it demands a high degree of trust and confidence between members of a coven, and so provides a powerful test for the existence of harmony and unity, without which the rituals cannot be effectively worked. The second was that, in combination with other components normally present, such as candlelight, incense, and music, it conveys a very powerful sense that something abnormal is going on; that the participants in the circle have cast off their everyday selves and limitations and entered into a space in which the extraordinary can be

achieved. If the experience generates a degree of nervousness—which is initially the case for most people—then this can have the effect of increasing their sensitivity and receptivity and so call forth more powerful ritual performances from them.

None of these considerations, however, explain what ritual nudity is doing in Wicca in the first place. A straightforward answer to this question, which I have sometimes heard, is that it reflects the personal tastes of the individual who was certainly the first great publicist of the religion, and perhaps the main force in its conception: Gerald Gardner. There is no doubt that he was a convinced naturist, with an ardent belief in the physical, moral, and magical benefits of nudity,<sup>6</sup> and left to itself this could indeed make a complete explanation. The latter appears trivial, however, if a step back is taken and this aspect of Wicca is examined in relation to all its other characteristics, as manifested when it first appears at the end of the 1940s. It gave a particular value and emphasis to precisely those phenomena which Western societies had long feared or subordinated, honouring the night above the day, the moon above the sun, the feminine above the masculine, and wild nature above civilization,

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MYTHOLOGICAL SCENES IN THESE WORKS.

presenting itself as a form of paganism which made no compromises with Christianity, and holding up the figure of the witch for admiration and emulation. It was as a part of this package that nudity, traditionally used in those same societies most commonly as a symbol of shame and weakness, was turned into one of confidence and power. Its blatant presence in ritual was just one example of the way in which, during the middle decades of the 20th century, Wicca crashed the barriers of convention.<sup>7</sup>

All this has made the point, once again, that Wicca is very unusual. The problem now is to settle the question of exactly how unusual it is in the single respect of ritual nudity. There is no doubt that in this respect it was unique in the context of 20th century Western culture, but did it have ancient prototypes? A scholar moving into this area has few recent signposts. Most of the research into ritual nudity in general, and in ancient Europe and the Near East in particular, was carried out by German academics in the decades around 1900.<sup>8</sup> The main book in the subject, published by J. Heckenbach in 1911, must have been one of the last academic works to be written entirely in Latin; the learned

author was clearly afraid that if he used any living language, then his subject matter might corrupt the unsophisticated and impressionable. These works argued for a large part for ritual nudity in ancient religion, although Heckenbach stretched the definition very widely to encompass (for example) the common notion that sanctuaries should be entered, or magical rites performed, barefoot.

In evaluating the evidence, any historian faces serious problems of interpretation. Some of these concern material remains. On the one hand, it is true that sculptures, vase-paintings, and wall art across the Mediterranean and the Near and Middle East show a lot of naked people. On the other, there is often no apparent means of distinguishing literal from mythological scenes in these works. In Graeco-Roman artistic convention, many gods, a few goddesses, many heroes, and many nymphs, were traditionally portrayed as naked or near-naked. This was one way in which they could be distinguished at a glance from ordinary humans. The occurrence of nudity in some scenes of Middle Eastern art likewise raises questions of metaphor. The rulers of Sumerian city-states are sometimes shown kneeling unclad before a deity. This may be a literal scene of

worship, but it may be an artistic expression of the comparative lowliness and humility of the human worshipper.<sup>9</sup>

Two particular examples from the Graeco-Roman tradition may serve to point up these difficulties. One consists of the celebrated paintings from the walls of the co-called Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii, which have been connected, from some of the symbolism incorporated, to the mystery religion of Bacchus or Dionysos. In a central scene, a young woman is shown dancing nude, and next to her another is crouched semi-nude over the lap of an older female who is apparently comforting her. She is being scourged by a tall figure, apparently male, who is aiming blows at her bare back. These reliefs have very commonly been interpreted as successive stages of a rite of initiation into the religion, but there is a glaring problem in doing so; the figure administering the beating has large wings. They may, of course, have been theatrical props donned by a human being for the rite, but they may also indicate that the whole assemblage belongs to the world of dream or myth.

The second example consists of an alabaster bowl of unknown date and provenance, with nude figures of seven males and nine females carved around a winged serpent or dragon in the interior. It also bears an inscription which seems to be a passage from a poem associated with another famous mystery cult, of Orpheus. In the 1930s it attracted the attention of three scholars working in the German academic tradition, who interpreted the internal scene as the representation of an actual rite of the cult, involving nude worshippers.<sup>10</sup> This reading may be correct, but there are two major difficulties associated with it. The first is that

although the association between the object and the Orphic mysteries is arguable, it is not firmly proven. The second is that if such a connection exists, then the scene may be, once again, a symbolic rather than a literal one. The human figures may exist in the same realm as the serpent or dragon at the centre or the winged cupids carved on the exterior. One of the inscriptions refers to the creation of the world, and it is possible that the scene portrayed is related to that event.

These case-studies typify the problems of using material evidence in this field, and those relating to literary evidence are no simpler. Nobody ever seems to have tried to argue that the celebrants of the public and established religions of ancient Europe, North Africa, and the Near East undressed to take part in them. Some misunderstanding can be created by references to specific festivals. For example, the poet Ovid stated that the priests who ran around Rome striking at people with thongs on the feast of the Lupercalia were naked. Other contemporary sources prove that he was speaking economically; they were in fact attired in special girdles or loincloths of goatskin.<sup>11</sup> Another Roman poet, Martial, could challenge his reader with the question 'Who brings clothes to Flora's festival, and permits whores the modesty of a wrap?'. The implication, in context, is that such actions are absurd, and so at first sight this strongly suggests that the Floralia, the feast with which the Romans welcomed summer, was celebrated with nude rites. Again, a sufficiency of other testimony proves that Martial was referring not to the religious ceremonies but to the games and entertainments with which the festival had become associated, and which were

commonly provided by prostitutes. The younger Cato was so shocked by a striptease act in one of the theatrical performances that he stormed out of the auditorium.<sup>12</sup>

These potentially misleading texts still have their place in the historiography of the subject. They have taken their place among the pieces of evidence assembled by writers such as Heckenbach for a relatively widespread occurrence of ritual nudity in the ancient world. Furthermore, Ovid attributed the rituals of the Luperalia to a god whom he equated with the Greek Pan; a guess which has no basis in objective data, was not made by any other known Roman author, and is rejected by modern scholars.<sup>13</sup> It is possible, however, that the influence of this famous passage, linking a rite of a horned god to nakedness, may have had some additional bearing on the adoption of the latter tradition by Wicca.

When these distractions are removed from the record, the latter still contains a few references to stark nakedness in the mainstream religions of the European and Near Eastern ancient world; but all seem to be associated with special rites of passage or consecration rather than regular worship. One example is provided by Ibn Fadlan's famous description of the cremation of a Viking chief upon the Volga river in the 920s. The man who lights the funeral pyre has to walk to it, bearing the torch both backwards and completely unclothed.<sup>14</sup> The fact that he reverses the normal direction of movement as well as the normal mode of dress suggests that at that moment he is being set aside from the rest of humanity, and from the general nature of the world, to precipitate the dead man into a different realm. Likewise, the Greek geographer

Diodorus Siculus recorded that when a new 'Apis' bull was chosen to represent divinity in one of the state religions of Hellenistic Egypt, it was kept for forty days at the city of Nicopolis before being taken along the Nile to its shrine at Memphis. During this period it was guarded only by women, who exposed their bodies to it as a religious act.<sup>15</sup> The significance of this was not reported by the ancient author, or not known to him, but if it really happened, then it was presumably linked to concepts of regeneration and fertility. The caution entered against unquestioning acceptance of the report as fact applies even more strongly to the customs reported by Graeco-Roman authors of people whom they regarded as barbarians. Into this category would fall the declaration by Pliny that at festivals of the native British their married women processed naked and painted black.<sup>16</sup> It may be true, because it seems certain from classical sources that warriors of the tribes of north-western Europe sometimes dyed their bodies and rushed into battle naked. It may also be a titillating fable, brought back to Italy by somebody willing to have fun both at the expense of the Britons and of a credulous Roman audience. None of these cases approach the Wiccan tradition of regular ritual nudity for all participants, and they seem to provide the closest equivalents to be found in the official and public religions of the ancient world.

It has not been among these religions, however, that modern scholars have found most of their apparent evidence for the custom. The most productive hunting-ground has been among the mystery religions of the Graeco-Roman world, such as those of Dionysos and Orpheus

## ... RITUAL NUDITY HAD A PLACE IN ANCIENT EUROPEAN RELIGION AT CERTAIN KEY MOMENTS OF TRANSFORMATION, BUT ... ANY OTHER ROLE FOR IT IS UNPROVEN AND ... IT VANISHED FROM THE WESTERN RELIGIOUS TRADITION AT THE END OF ANTIQUITY.

mentioned above. In dealing with these, a cautious investigator faces an obvious problem; that the very nature of closed and secretive bodies of worshippers is to provoke curiosity, gossip, speculation, and slander among outsiders, and almost all the relevant sources are represented by writers who were not, or are not known to have been, initiates themselves. In making a link between Orphism and ritual nudity, one of the commentators upon the carved bowl discussed above quoted an early Christian bishop, Epiphanius, who asserted that the Orphic mysteries were particularly worthy of reproach because women were believed to appear in them naked.<sup>17</sup> So indeed they may have done, but the testimony of a fervent protagonist of a rival religion, reporting hearsay while making a catalogue of false beliefs, is not the most reliable form of evidence.

The other two scholars to identify the bowl as an Orphic cult object fell back on Heckenbach for corroboration of an association between Orphism and nude rituals. He provided them with a line from the Athenian playwright Aristophanes: 'it is the custom for novices to enter unclothed'.<sup>18</sup> This throwaway allusion is characteristic of the in-jokes which clutter Greek comedy. We have no certain knowledge of its meaning. It may

not refer to mystery religions at all, let alone to Orphism in particular, and if it did, then we have no evidence that Aristophanes was drawing upon accurate information, as opposed to rumour, concerning ritual practices. There is, moreover, a real possibility that it concerns an altogether different custom. One of the signs of the coming of adolescence to a Greek boy was that he was allowed both to put off the clothes of childhood and to strip naked to participate in the adult male world of the gymnasium. In some places the novice youths were called *ekdyomenoi*, 'those who undress'.<sup>19</sup> This could have been Aristophanes's point.

Likewise, the great Graeco-Roman philosopher Plotinus asserted in one of his lectures that 'those who would rise through the degrees of the holy mysteries must cast aside their clothes and go forward naked'.<sup>20</sup> This may be a literal statement, or it may be a metaphor for the need for spiritual purity and candour. Another example of this sort of difficulty attends the women's mysteries celebrated at the sanctuary of Artemis at Brauron in Greece, which were rites of passage for young women approaching the age of marriage. Vase-paintings suggest that for some of the time the girls were naked, but



**THE RECORDS FOR CHRISTIAN  
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THEIR OPPONENTS, BUT NOT WHETHER  
ANY OF THOSE OPPONENTS ACTUALLY  
PRACTISED IT.**

again, these scenes may have had a symbolic or mythological significance.<sup>21</sup>

There is, however, good reason for believing that all of these three pieces of evidence may be accepted as references to ritual nudity in religious mysteries, but in a limited and specific capacity: rites of initiation, in which the postulant was completely undressed at the opening and then re clothed at the conclusion. There is a clear metaphor here of rebirth, and also an equally clear cultural context; that in the ancient Greek and Hellenistic world, the custom of a bath followed by dressing in new robes was not merely the usual purification of somebody about to engage in religious rites, but of anybody about to undergo a rite of passage, such as coming of age or marriage. Some Greek sanctuaries, such as that of Artemis Kranaia, had special bath-tubs for the priests. Before initiation into the Eleusinian mysteries, celebrants all bathed in the sea, although this seems to have taken place after dark and with some modesty; when the courtesan Phryne did so in full view of other participants, proud of her beauty, she got into serious trouble.<sup>22</sup>

There are two very different items of source material which are good evidence for the occurrence of nudity in ancient initiation rites. One consists of a set of

wall-paintings at a Mithraeum at Capua in Italy. They show an initiation into this most famous of all the mystery religions of the Roman Empire, that of Mithras, and in every one the postulant is naked and blindfolded, while the person leading and directing him is clothed.<sup>23</sup> The other consists of records of ancient Judaic and Christian baptism. Under the Roman Empire, both Jews and Christians were noted for their dislike of the human body and their aversion to its display unclothed. The Greek gymnasia, in particular, disgusted them. This makes it all the more remarkable that contemporary testimony strongly suggests that converts to Judaism were baptized nude and makes it absolutely certain that Christians were.<sup>24</sup>

Baptism into the early churches was very much a reception into a mystery religion. The postulant had to prepare for two years, and to enter an intensive period of fasting and prayer seven weeks before the event. The actual rite was a private one among a group of initiates, in which the postulant removed all her or his clothes, women loosing their hair as well, and was anointed at several points on the body with holy oil before being immersed in water and dressed anew in white. It was usually directed that in the case of the

baptism of a woman, another female should do the anointing; but if there was no other woman available then the whole process was in the hands of the priest. There is a cautionary tale of a Palestinian monk called Conan, who was asked to baptize a particularly beautiful woman and could not find a female Christian to help him. He fled in panic, only to intercepted by John the Baptist who appeared from heaven to deal with the crisis. John made the sign of the cross three times over Conan's genitals, rendering him permanently incapable of sexual desire; after which everything was fine. It is hard to believe that such a custom would have been incorporated into a religion which loathed and feared nudity as much as early Christianity, unless it was regarded as an indispensable, or at least common, part of initiations into mystery faiths.

All this data seems to be tending to a conclusion: that ritual nudity had a place in ancient European religion at certain key moments of transformation, but that any other role for it is unproven and that it vanished from the Western religious tradition at the end of antiquity. If this is so, then one significance of its presence in Wicca could be that the latter religion seeks to sustain throughout all its workings the intensity and transformative power of initiatory experiences. This may be so, the conclusion would be premature, for it ignores the association between mixed-sex nude rites and Christian heresy. Such rites were a recurrent theme of denunciations by orthodox churchmen of deviant sort of Christian from the second to the 17th centuries. It must be admitted that it was not a very common theme. Heretics were mostly, and persistently, accused of devil-

worship, cannibalism, sexual orgies, incest, and child sacrifice.<sup>25</sup> It must be thought that in that catalogue nudity would be such a tame or incidental item as to be hardly worth mentioning. This can, none the less, be argued the opposite way; that those few cases where it is included may be the more significant.

The trouble with those cases is that none of them are supported by the two sorts of source-material which give real insights into the beliefs of the unorthodox: writings produced by heretics themselves, or confessions provided by them under interrogation and deposited in legal archives. They are found instead in accusations made against aberrant traditions by churchmen determined to blacken their reputations, who may have had no first-hand knowledge of them. This phenomenon, and its attendant difficulties, has already been encountered in the case of Epiphanius and the Orphic mysteries. The same bishop is found again, in a different work, accusing the closed, quasi-Christian sect of the Barbelo Gnostics of enacting certain rites in which the initiates were 'completely nude'.<sup>26</sup> An episcopal colleague of his, Hippolytus, denounced members of another Gnostic sect, the Naasenes, for allegedly holding a nocturnal ceremony by firelight, in which the worshippers, all men, 'must undress and become as bridegrooms' to a female entity representing one form of an indivisible supreme deity.<sup>27</sup> There are also references to the Adamni, a small group of Gnostics who were believed both to live and to worship naked—an ancient naturist club. All these references are from the south-eastern end of the Mediterranean, and there is a single one from the opposite corner; the Synod of



Saragossa in 380 condemned the Spanish heresy of Priscillianism because (among other things) its members reputedly read and interpreted the Bible in the nude.<sup>28</sup>

...

The records for Christian unorthodoxy, therefore, prove that ritual nudity was an occasional charge used by the orthodox against their opponents, but not whether any of those opponents actually practised it. It is not surprising that it became associated at times with the supreme heresy of the later Middle Ages and early modern period, the newly-identified religion of satanic witchcraft. From the early 15th to the early 18th centuries some churchmen and lay magistrates made a speciality of describing the characteristics of this religion and trying those accused of adhering to it. For the purposes of the present enquiry, it is remarkable how little attention they paid to the role of nudity in the rites and festivals attributed to witches. Thumbing through the classic texts of demonologists in the period—the 15th century *Formicarius* and *Malleus Maleficarum*, and the later works of Jean Bodin, Martin del Rio, Henri Bouguet, Nicholas Remy and Pierre de Lancre—a historian finds little or no reference to the practice. Nor does it feature much in the confessions extracted from alleged witches. This may, again, be a matter of priority, for the scholars and magistrates were most interested in the more spectacular aspects of the religion which they were attempting to eradicate, which were the familiar litany of accusations made against earlier heretics, of devil-worship, child-sacrifice, sexual orgies, to which was added the making of magic to destroy and injure other humans. It is interesting, however, that when nudity is mentioned, it some-

times echoes the ancient tradition of initiation into mysteries. For example, a woman interrogated in 1480 at Calcinato in northern Italy claimed that when she made her pact with the Devil, she did so nude and kneeling.<sup>33</sup>

By contrast, the nudity of witches is a very prominent feature of the art of the period, especially that of northern Europe and above all of Germans. From the opening of the 16th century, artists regularly portrayed witches attending the sabbat and casting spells as unclad. This may have been a reflection of the fact that most of the alleged practices of the witch religion on which the demonologists concentrated did not lend themselves to respectable representation in works of art. To paint or draw witches nude may have been an easy way of representing their essential depravity. It may matter more, however, that to portray witches was one of the very few socially sanctioned ways in which artists in Germany in particular could express the female nude. It must be significant in this context that the first notable artist thought to represent the nude witch, Albrecht Durer, used poses drawn ultimately from ancient depictions of pagan goddesses. It is not even absolutely certain that he ever depicted witches at all. Of his two works normally placed in this category, one shows four women posed in attitudes taken directly from classical representations of the Graces, and may portray the three goddesses of the Judgement of Paris receiving the apple of discord. The other, showing an old woman riding on a goat or capricorn, echoes a medieval figure commonly used to personify lust, and taken in turn from an ancient iconic pose of Aphrodite or Venus.<sup>34</sup>

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identity as witches of some of the women portrayed by two of Durer's pupils, Albrecht Altdorfer and Hans Baldung Grien, probably inspired by sermons upon the witch religion preached in the city of Strasbourg, where they worked, during the 1500s. Grien in particular made them into one of the main themes of his work, and famously used it to conflate the image of the female body with associations of sin and menace to turn it into a diabolical vessel in itself. His obsessive treatment of it in this way may have been rooted in his own psyche, but it may also have been provoked by the epidemic of syphilis then sweeping Europe. Whatever the reason, his influence seems to have been decisive in ensuring that for the rest of the century, the primary concern of artists engaged in portrayals of witchcraft was not the emphasis on the devil as the source of witches' power, made by the literary demonologists, but on the moral and sexual disorder represented by the unclad female body.<sup>35</sup> Even when Satan became more prominent in the genre, the convention of nudity remained. When Pierre de Lancre produced his celebrated book on the witch religion in 1611, he placed no emphasis on the state of dress of witches at the sabbat, preferring instead such

details as their reversal of social norms by such customs as dancing back to back. When the second edition appeared, two years later, it was decorated with a very elaborate engraved frontispiece of a sabbat by a Polish artist, Jan Ziarnko, which incorporated all the features described by de Lancre and added nudity for the celebrants.<sup>36</sup> This provided some of the most famous images of witchcraft to emerge from the whole early modern period, and helped to reinforce an artistic tradition of the naked witch which was to continue steadily through the work of major later figures such as Goya, and persists until the present.

The question of whether early modern witches actually worked naked is rendered a non sequitur by the total absence of evidence for any actual witch religion in the period; the satanic cult of the demonologists does seem to have been a complete fantasy. The single emergence into anything like reality seems to be in the Affair of the Poisons in late 17th century France, when one of the mistresses of Louis XIV apparently allowed a Black Mass to be performed over the naked body of a woman with the aim of securing her power over her royal lover.<sup>37</sup> Even this, however, is still a long way from a tradition of ritual nudity

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among worshippers. The only text before the 20th century, in fact, which makes it a general rule for witches at their rites is the very late and utterly unique one, Charles Godfrey Leland's purported gospel of witchcraft, *Aradia*. This states unequivocally, and famously, that 'as the sign that ye are truly free, ye shall be naked in your rites, both men and women also'.<sup>38</sup> It is notoriously hard, however<sup>39</sup>, to determine how far *Aradia* actually reflects a genuine peasant tradition, let alone a genuine witch religion. As a result, this strange work of the 1890s cannot yet be used as any conclusive evidence for the matter.

There is one slight indication, however, that in the matter of ritual nudity a real popular tradition may underpin both or either the passage in Leland's text and the artistic convention descending from the 16th century. This is that the few references to it in the early modern records seem to derive from reports by common people. For example, the famous work of demonology by del Rio contains an anecdote set near Calais in 1587, where two soldiers claimed to have shot a naked woman out of a fast-moving cloud. She turned out to be middle-aged, very fat, and very drunk,

and only slightly wounded; and refused to answer any questions. They assumed her to have been a witch<sup>40</sup>. Likewise, children who claimed to have attended sabbats during a panic about witchcraft at the German city of Augsburg in the 1723 asserted that these meetings were full of naked people.<sup>41</sup> It is possible, of course, that by these dates popular culture had already been influenced by the artistic tradition, mass-marketed through woodcuts. There may also be a functional explanation for the belief; that many people of the time slept naked, and witches were presumed to travel to sabbats direct from their beds. The European material alone provides no resolution of this problem.

... It might be suggested again, therefore, that Wicca boldly goes where no religions have gone before, either by taking a Christian stereotype of bad behaviour and giving it positive connotations, or by investing the whole of its workings with the intensity and transformative effect of rites of passage, or by giving all its participants the empowering status normally associated only with liminal figures representing spirits or deities. It might be suggested, but this hypothesis would once

again be premature, for there is another dimension to the subject which has hitherto been neglected in this study, and which must be recognised now. It is based upon the fact that in every inhabited continent of the world there are peoples who have believed in the figure to whom the English traditionally give the name of witch. That is, a human being who works secret and malevolent magic against other members of the same community or district from motives of pure malice, and in a hidden tradition passed on by inheritance, training, or contact with evil powers.<sup>48</sup> All over the world, likewise, peoples who have believed in this figure have also often believed that witches work naked.

... It can therefore be suggested that the nude witch is a very widespread and powerful cultural stereotype. Whether it was ever translated into practice among these extra-European peoples is a difficult question to answer. Certainly most of the actions of role-reversal ascribed to the witch-figure, such as riding on dangerous wild beasts or flying, were flatly impossible in nature. It is possible, however, that people sometimes took on other traits of the figure in order to work destructive magic, including nudity. ... All of these stories may well be products of fantasy or error; but they need not be. What cannot be doubted is the strength of the stereotypical image.

Once again it seems possible to work towards a conclusion: that one of the more common and widely-dispersed beliefs of the human race is that workers of evil magic operate naked, as part of their general symbolic function of breaking the rules of conventional human

behaviour. Again also, it seems possible to credit Wiccans with investing that symbolic function with positive qualities, and its worldwide distribution strengthens a characterization of Wicca as a counter-cultural religion par excellence. Once more, however, a conclusion would be premature, for the most revealing way of putting this image of the witch into perspective is to take a sideways step, into the broader world of operative magic.

Here I am putting my weight behind a wholly traditional distinction between religious and magical activities, one used by many anthropologists and most ancient historians until recently, but first formulated by the ancient Greeks and built into subsequent Western culture.<sup>57</sup> According to this, in acts of religion the human being is essentially a supplicant, asking the divine for favours and then wholly dependent on the divine will for results. In acts of magic the human being has some measure of operative control over the result, at the least by an arcane understanding of the mechanisms of the natural world, and at most by compelling superhuman entities. In holding to this distinction, I do not deny that religion and magic represent different points on a spectrum or overlapping phenomena rather than two different and opposed forms of activity. I do not deny that acts of magic often take place in religious contexts, and vice-versa, and I certainly do not suggest that magic is in some way inherently inferior to religion, or that the distinction between the two need necessarily apply to non-European cultures. I just find that this distinction works well in certain contexts, and one of them happens to be that of ritual nudity. Acts of magic, after all, represent ritual applied to special and extraordinary occasions,

requiring a shift of consciousness or a redefinition of being, every bit as much as rites of passage. It should not be a surprise, therefore, to find that nudity plays a prominent part in them.

It features in what is still the best-known text in Western culture, the Bible, where Saul 'stripped off his clothes also, and prophesied before Samuel in like manner, and lay down naked all that day and all that night. Wherefore they say, is Saul also among the prophets?' Here one of the most famous kings of the Hebrews is apparently transforming his status from monarch to prophet, on being possessed by 'the Spirit of God', by the simple act of removing the garments which indicate his familiar status. This interpretation is reinforced by the parallel account of the prophet Isaiah walking 'naked and bare-foot three years for a sign', putting off all the clothing which symbolically attached him to the world in the manner of an Indian fakir.<sup>58</sup> Such texts had a significant impact upon later, Bibliocentric, Christians: there may be no conclusive evidence of nude worship among Christian sects, but it is absolutely certain that in the years 1653-55 at least a dozen of the first English Quaker missionaries preached naked in public places in imitation of Isaiah and as a challenge to worldly and materially-minded attitudes.<sup>59</sup> It may also have been that they believed that the act of undressing would itself facilitate contact with divine revelation, a conclusion which could be drawn from these Biblical passages.

The same motif is found in ancient Greek and Roman literature, where certain potent herbs are specified as to be picked by a naked person operating at night, to maximize or supercharge their power.<sup>60</sup> Pliny described a cure for an

abscess consisting of a poultice applied by a nude virgin woman speaking a particular charm to Apollo three times<sup>61</sup>. The fact that she had to fast beforehand as well as be naked and virginal suggests that her state of dress was part of a package of purity which set her apart from the corruptions of the world. Nudity also occurs in medieval and early modern European accounts of magic. In particular, it was supposed to be employed by young women in solitary spells and charms by which they sought either to find a husband in general or to win the heart of a particular man. Several appear in collections of 16th century charms.

...

It may be wise to suppose that different symbolic systems might well be in operation across this range of examples. In some of them, the connotations of reversal are apparently most important in the significance of the nudity, while in others those of sexuality and fertility seem to be paramount. What appears to link all together, however, is the sense of the empowerment of an ordinary human being by the act of removing the garments by which she or he is usually recognised or familiar. This is not very far from one major function suggested earlier for the practice in Wicca; of separating off the participant from the everyday world. It may, in fact, be identical. In this perspective, therefore, the place of nudity in Wicca is dependent not so much on its character as a counter-cultural religion, apparent though that is, as on its character as a magical religion. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>73</sup> Wicca self-consciously dissolves the traditional European distinction between religion and magic.

...

Wicca is not then unique in this respect, although it is unusual. In having this particular feature, it does not seem to have been responding to the views of one man, or to certain functional benefits, or even to the impulse to challenge cultural norms in a modern or postmodern context. It is, rather, in a tradition of magical activity which is not merely ancient but virtually worldwide. In reaching this conclusion I have had recourse to a methodology, of prising information from context in a wide variety of historical and ethnographic sources, which is regarded with disquiet in related scholarly disciplines and runs counter to prevailing techniques in them. During the past thirty years historians have tended even more than before to specialize in a particular period of time, to understand it as thoroughly as possible, and to learn how its political, social, economic, and cultural characteristics inter-related. In the same span of time, anthropologists have generally emphasized the primacy of a close and discrete studies of particular societies, and the dangers of attempting to translate concepts between cultures and languages. There is no doubt that these approaches produce excellent results, and that the perils against which they warn, of facile comparisons between decontextualized data, are very real. None the less, it may be suggested that there are some historical and anthropological problems which cannot be adequately treated by a monographic approach alone, and which are best approached by a broad and comparative method. This essay has been offered as an example of that contention.

## ENDNOTES:

1. Ronald Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 337.
2. Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: a history of modern pagan witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 410.
3. Gerald Gardner, *Witchcraft Today* (London: Rider, 1954), pp. 19-24; Justine Glass, *Witchcraft: The Sixth Sense—and Us* (London: Spearman, 1965), p. 101; Patricia and Arnold Crowther, *The Witches Speak* (Douglas: Athol, 1965), p. 148; Doreen Valiente, *Witchcraft for Tomorrow* (London: Hale, 1978), pp. 98-99; Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 60; Janet and Stewart Farrar, *The Life and Times of a Modern Witch* (London: Piatkus, 1987), pp. 85-92; Vivianne Crowley, *Wicca: The Old Religion in the New Age* (London: Aquarian, 1989), pp. 59-60.
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5. *Ibid.*, p. 399.
6. Plain in his ghosted autobiography, Jack Bracelin, *Gerald Gardner: Witch* (London: Octagon, 1960).
7. Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*, pp. 205-40.
8. K. Weinhold, 'Zur Geschichte des Heidenischen Ritus', *Abhandlungen d. Kon. Acad. D. Wissenschaften zu Berlin 1896* (phil.-hist. Kl.), no. 1, pp. 1-50; J. Heckenbach, *De Nuditate Sacrisque Vinculis* (Giessen: Topelmann, 1911), pp. 1-63.
9. Cf. H.W.F. Saggs, *The Greatness That Was Babylon* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1962), pp. 28, 182.
10. R. Delbrueck and W. Vollgraff, 'An Orphic Bowl', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 54 (1934), pp. 129-39; Hans Leisgang, 'The Mystery of the Serpent' (1939), repr. in Joseph Campbell (ed.), *The Mysteries: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks* (Princeton University Press: Bollingen Yearbooks xxx.2, 1955), pp. 194-260.
11. H.H. Scullard, *Festivals and Ceremonies of the Roman Republic* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), pp. 76-78. Ovid's account is in his *Fasti*, II. 267-440.

12. Scullard, *Festivals and Ceremonies*, pp. 110-11. Martial's comment is in his *Epigrams*, I.35.8.
13. Such as Scullard, at n. 11 above.
14. The passage is translated in G. Jones, *A History of the Vikings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 425-30.
15. Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, I.85.3. By contrast, the description by Herodotus, of a similar gesture employed by women en route to the religious festival at Bubastis in the Nile delta, seems to belong to a different category. In his account, they formed part of groups of revellers travelling to the festivities by boat along the river and making merry as they went. When they passed a riverside town, some of the women exposed their genitals to the inhabitants as one of a number of gestures which also included the shouting of mockery at local females. The context seems therefore to be one of ribaldry and playful insult rather than of piety; the equivalent of the modern 'flashing' or 'mooning'. The festival at Bubastis was both the biggest in Egypt at that time and particularly associated with drunkenness: Herodotus, *Histories*, II.60.20.
16. Pliny, *Natural History*, XXII.2.
17. Leisgang, 'The Mystery of the Serpent', p. 254: the quotation is from Epiphanius, *Catholicae et Apostolicae Ecclesiae Fidei Expositio*, 10.
18. Delbrueck and Vollgraaf, 'An Orphic Bowl', p. 132; Heckenbach, *De Nuditate*, p. 13; Aristophanes, *The Clouds*, line 498.
19. Walter Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 29; and *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), p. 261.
20. Plotinus, *Enneads*, I.6.7.
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22. Ibid., p. 78. For Phryne's famous adventures and misadventures, see Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists*, XIII.590-91.
23. M.J. Vermaseren, *Mithras, The Secret God* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1963), pp. 131-33.
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28. David Cressy, *Travesties and Transgressions in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 257-58.
33. Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, p. 260.
34. Peter Streider, *Durer: Paintings, Prints, Drawings* (London: Muller, 1982), pp. 182-84; Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study of Ideal Art* (London: Murray, 1956), pp. 315-16; Charles Zika, 'Durer's witch, riding women and moral order', in Dagmar Eichberger and Charles Zika (ed.), *Durer and his Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 118-40.
35. Zika, 'Durer's witch', pp. 131-40; Charles Zika, 'She-man: Visual representations of witchcraft and sexuality in 16th-century Europe', in Andrew Lynch and Philippa Maddern (ed.), *Venus and Mars* (Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 1995), pp. 147-90; Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 323-35; Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, pp. 125-39.
36. Pierre de Lancre, *Tableau de L'Inconstance des Mauvais Anges* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Paris, 1611).
37. Francois Ravaisson, *Archives de la Bastille* (Paris, 1873), 333-36.
38. Charles Godfrey Leland, *Aradia, Gospel of the Witches* (1990 reprint: Phoenix, WA: Custer, 1990), p. 7.
39. Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*, pp. 141-48; Leland, *Aradia*, trans. Mario and Dina Pazzaglini (London: Hale, 1998).
40. Martin del Rio, *Investigations into Magic*, ed. P.G. Maxwell-Stuart (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 197. See also p. 97 for a general comment that people were sometimes cited abroad without clothes and assumed to be travelling to or from the sabbat.
41. Lyndal Roper, 'Evil Imaginings and Fantasies: Child-Witches and the end of the Witch Craze', *Past and Present* 167 (May 2000), pp. 107-39.
48. For a full development of this perception, see Ronald Hutton, 'The Global Context of the Scottish Witch-Hunt', in Julian Goodare (ed.), *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context* (forthcoming from Edinburgh University Press).
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50. Krige and Krige, *Realm of a Rain-Queen*, p. 251; Stayt, *The BaVenda*, p. 274; Wagner, *Bantu of Western Kenya*, p. 113.
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55. Clyde Kluckhohn, *Navaho Witchcraft* (Cambridge, Mass.: Peabody Museum, 1944), ch. II.3.
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58. I Samuel 19.24; Isaiah 20.2-3.
59. Cressy, *Travesties and Transgressions*, pp. 277-78.
60. Anne-Marie Tupet, *La Magie dans La Poesie Latine* (Paris: Societe d'Edition "Les Belles Lettres", 1976), vol. 1, p. 60.
61. Pliny, *Natural History*, XXVI.60.
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## 'The Terror of Unseen Things': Saki and the *fin-de-siècle* Pagan Revival

by Nick Freeman

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Hector Hugh Munro, better known as Saki, has enjoyed a cult following since he emerged in the early 20th century in the aftermath of the Oscar Wilde scandal. His sophisticated and arch short fiction spoke unflinching to a younger generation keen to read his acid dismissals of parental (and indeed any) authority. Between the wars, Saki was read by those who sought out the comedic forebears of fashionable humorists such as Aldous Huxley and Evelyn Waugh, and it is this status that he has retained ever since. A cruelly comic master of the 'short' short story—most of his tales are only 5-10 pages long—Saki was enshrined as the missing link between Wilde and Noël Coward when the latter introduced Penguin's edition of *The Complete Saki* in 1967 and claimed him as one of the most significant influences on his career (Saki 1982:xii). From such an introduction, Saki's appearance in *The Pomegranate* seems unlikely, but there is throughout his work, a strongly pagan sensibility that exalts the natural world and pays devout respect to its inhabitants. Read in this context, Saki becomes not simply a celebrated humorist but a part of the upsurge of paganism in English culture from the late Victorian era to the First World War, in which he was killed in 1916. In this essay, I shall use 'Munro' to refer to incidents in the life of H.H.

Munro, and 'Saki' to refer to the writer of the stories discussed.

The pagan revival of the period roughly between the 1860s, when Algernon Swinburne shocked Victorian propriety with his *Poems and Ballads: First Series* (1866) and the Edwardian era of E.M. Forster, D.H. Lawrence, Kenneth Grahame and Aleister Crowley, amongst others, has received considerable attention in recent years. Patricia Merivale's study of Pan (1969) has been followed by scholars such as Glen Cavaliero (1977, 1997), R.D. Stock (1989), John Boardman (1998), Ronald Hutton (1999), and William Greenslade (2000). It is not the intention of this article to reprise the narrative underlying these works, or to expand upon Jo Pearson's essay in *Pomegranate* 14. Instead, the piece intends to give a brief overview of the concerns of English writers of the *fin-de-siècle* and its aftermath, and to examine ways in which Saki's fictions both ally themselves with wider movements and pursue a complex series of personal affinities with the natural world.

The late 19th century saw a Britain that was increasingly industrialised. Urban centres faced hitherto unimagined levels of pollution and overcrowding, leading to disease, anxieties concerning 'racial fitness', and a general concern with the supposed virility of the nation (Greenslade 1994:41-46). Many commentators felt that England in particular had cut herself off from her 'true' essence: by embracing modernity with such a reckless disregard for any consequences beyond the immediately economic, she had seen the health of her citizens eroded and her position as a world power come under increasing threat. Napoleon might have called the English a nation of shopkeepers, but many preferred to regard themselves as a nation of farmers,

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or rather, many middle class urbanites had a sentimental regard for 'the countryside' that persisted often through their ignorance of agricultural practices. Despite the best efforts of informed rural observers such as Thomas Hardy, Richard Jefferies, and Edward Thomas, country and city became increasingly distinct and separated from one another. Jefferies was both an accomplished novelist—his *Wood Magic* (1881) is an intriguing animal fable that deserves to be reprinted—and an essayist who specialised in portraits of rural life. Some, such as *Wild Life in a Southern County* (1879), were fairly realistic in style: others revealed a more mystical sensibility. The collection of his essays edited by Edward Thomas, *The Hills and the Vale* (1909) contains pieces such as 'Nature and Eternity' that reveal a deeply spiritual response to the natural world. Roger Ebbatson (1980:30) communicates this idea particularly well:

The cutting-off of man from Nature, whether wrought by Christianity, intellectual consciousness, industrialism and mechanisation, or by an insidious combination of all these forces, resulted in a civilisation based upon democracy and technology.

Munro (1870-1916) had little time for such a 'civilisation', much as he approved of some of its surface comforts. His life neatly encompasses the *fin-de-siècle*, a key period in the transformation of English rural life from almost equal partner to the poor rela-

tion of the burgeoning city. Although he was born in Burma, where his father was a police officer, he grew up in Devon, England. In an incident that could have come from one of his own stories, his pregnant mother was killed by a runaway cow in a country lane. The young Munro and his two siblings were placed in the care of their grandmother, although in reality this meant a pair of tyrannous aunts. While this would have far-reaching consequences as far as his fiction goes—Saki's tales are filled with unpleasant authority figures, often aunts, who suffer painful retribution in varying ways—it is more significant for this essay that Munro should have been raised in Heaton, near Barnstaple. A.J. Langguth observes that in the years Hector spent there:

... he picked up a knowledge of occult mysteries that lived on among the old women. Only thirty years before his birth and well within Aunt Tom [his elder aunt]'s lifetime, ancient Nanny Oram, the last known witch in Barnstaple, was still casting her spells. (1981:35)

This is not to suggest that Munro himself had any direct experience of 'occult mysteries' as a child, but to point out that he grew up in a place in which the daily doings of the world were not always determined by the laws of science or the orthodoxies of the Anglican church. Piers Brendon (1975:39) notes that Victorian Londoners often felt that each hundred

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miles they went from London took them back a hundred years. By this admittedly prejudicial reckoning, Heaton in the 1870s was imaginatively speaking, still living in the 1670s. Owen Davies's recent study of Devon's neighbouring county, Somerset, *A People Bewitched* (1999), gives credence to the idea of rural South West England living if not in the past, then in a different present from more industrialised regions. He quotes a piece from the *Somerset Yearbook* 15 (1916:36-39), published in the year Munro was killed, entitled 'Witches of Exmoor'. The writer, J.E.G. de Montmorency, remarks:

To town-dwellers the belief in witches and wizards seems absurd. They have their own forms of superstition, and scorn the forms of more primitive people, if indeed the belief in witchcraft can be regarded with scorn ... There is a certain broad open-air healthiness about it that is lacking in the crystal-gazing and palmistry affected by the foolish in great cities from the days of Alexandria to those of London. Moreover, there is a certain reasonableness about witchcraft that is attractive. It is an adjunct of the terribleness of nature. (Davis 1999:21)

Early exposure to a world where witchcraft was not a quaint superstition but a folk practice of very recent memory may have encouraged Munro to regard establishment religion with a quizzical eye.

Whether or not witchcraft was still actively performed in late Victorian Devon may be a moot point, but it was certainly talked about. His direct experience of country life certainly instilled in him a life-long respect for 'the terribleness of nature', and an awareness of the fragile relationship between mankind and the natural world.

Munro was a delicate child who did not go to school until he was 15. His formal education finished two years later when his father returned from Burma and took the family on a European tour in which they visited France, Germany, and Switzerland. Munro did not, unlike many of his peers, visit Greece, the wellspring of 'classical' paganism. Instead, he encountered the wild nature of the Swiss Alps and the looming German forests, suggesting perhaps a parallel with his contemporary Algernon Blackwood, who wrote at length about the pagan nature of such places in stories such as 'The Glamour of the Snow' (Blackwood 1912).

From this point onwards, Munro would be resolutely self-educated. At 23, he followed in his father's footsteps and embarked for Burma and a career in the colonial service, but his health was frail and he returned to Devon to convalesce after 15 months. Interestingly, in this respect, Saki is the opposite of another minor English

colonial servant, Gerald Gardner (1884-1964), who journeyed to the East partially because of ill-health. He might also be compared with Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), who influenced Gardner but whom Saki himself frequently parodied, despite (or because of?) the similarities in their writings on the English countryside. Following this, he left for London, where he became an habitu  of the British Museum Reading Room. In the mid-to-late 1890s, this was haunted by many influential members of London's occult community, such as Aleister Crowley, W.B. Yeats, A.E. Waite, and S.L. MacGregor Mathers, and although it is not known whether Munro associated with them, one wonders if their paths ever crossed. However, like many of London's spiritual adventurers, for instance, 'the young man with spectacles' in Arthur Machen's *The Three Impostors* (1895), Munro's neat attire and studious air concealed a more volatile inner core. Langguth speaks of him 'unleashing elemental passions' (1981:54) in the Reading Room while he was researching his bloodthirsty historical study, *The Rise of the Russian Empire* (1900), and his early comic squibs occasionally displayed considerable nastiness beneath their polished surface.

Despite his assiduous researches he was not initially a professional writer. He worked instead as a journalist for the *Morning Post*, a London newspaper that employed him as its foreign correspondent from 1902-1908. This allowed him to capitalise on his youthful experience of Europe and his Russian researches, and he travelled around the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and Russia before settling in Paris before finally returning to London. Unfortunately, little is known of his life, since his sister Ethel, the jealous keeper of the flame, destroyed

his papers after his death. His biographer, A.J. Langguth, suggests that Munro was homosexual and that his sister sought to cover up the fact, but as the editors of *Edwardian Fiction: An Oxford Companion* (1997:352) remind us, 'a lack of evidence' forces such discussion to be 'largely speculative'. Ronald Hutton (1999:48) has no truck with such equivocation, describing Saki as an 'a gay author' in his brief summary of 'The Music on the Hill'.

Indeed, there are many mysteries surrounding H.H. Munro. His sexuality was shrouded in secrecy, and his spiritual attitudes were certainly not the conventional pieties of his time. As a child, he had apparently pushed a hearth brush into the nursery fire and then pursued his siblings with the flaming brand, shouting 'I'm God! I'm going to destroy the world!' (Langguth 1981:13). Indeed, according to Langguth, his Russian history caused offense in Britain and (especially) in the United States for daring to suggest that Christianity had merely merged with native Russian pantheism rather than destroying it (1981:56). In 'The She-Wolf' (*Beasts and Superbeasts*, 1914), Clovis Sangrail claims to have turned a woman into a wolf, or at least, psychically encouraged her to believe that she might be one, through a process of 'the magic craft ... Siberian magic' learned while living for a couple of years in North-east Russia (Saki 1982: 241). Clovis does not say what 'Siberian magic' involves, but there is no reason to doubt his claim to knowing it. 'To Puritan America, his humor at the expense of religious feeling proved distressing,' Langguth continues (1981:57), but whether Munro was motivated by a genuine antagonism towards Christianity and its followers, or whether he was simply a wit who would sacrifice even Christ for the sake of an epigram is

unclear. Even the idea behind his choice of pseudonym, used for his works published between 1906 and 1914 is by no means obvious. The name seems to derive from a line at the end of Edward Fitzgerald's free translation of the 12th century Persian poem, *The Rubā'iyat of Omar Khayyām*, in which 'Sákí' is compared to the rising moon:

And when like her, oh Sákí, you shall pass  
Among the guests Star-scattered on the Grass  
And in your joyous errand reach the spot  
Where I made One—turn down an empty glass!  
(Fitzgerald 1859:Stanza LXXV, 1879 version)

Following the praise of John Ruskin, the *Rubā'iyat's* English rendering by Edward Fitzgerald (1859) became hugely popular in Victorian Britain, and made its author so rich that he apparently used banknotes for bookmarks. 'Sákí' however did not appear in the poem until its fourth edition (1879): the above lines originally began 'And when Thyself with shining Foot shall pass', changing to 'And when Yourself with silver Foot shall pass' in the 1868 version. 'Sákí' was very much a late addition to the poem, though Munro may not have known this as a variorum edition did not appear until the early 20th century, by which time he had already copied the above lines into his commonplace book and decided on his pseudonym. The *Rubā'iyat* is, in Valentine Cunningham's words (2000:183), 'a sceptical, cynical even, exposition of an "eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die" nihilism' that stands in stark contrast to avowedly Christian Victorian productions such as Lord Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850). That said, Cunningham does not properly acknowledge the poem's more profound metaphysical questions in its investigation of the nature and purpose of life. However, the poem's recognition that the disputation of the intellect is nothing

beside a life of pleasure struck a chord with Victorian bohemians, although the poem later assumed a much wider popularity:

Ah, fill the Cup:—what boots it to repeat  
How time is slipping underneath our Feet:  
Unborn To-morrow and dead Yesterday,  
Why fret about them if To-day be sweet!  
(1859:Stanza XXXVII)

While the reasons why Munro chose his pseudonym remain open to debate, it certainly set the tone for his writing, conveying as it did mischief, mystery and exoticism (see Langguth 1981:60-62). There is no doubt that it was well suited to his literary productions of the years ahead, though as with many pseudonymous writers, it is difficult to know where 'Munro' ends and 'Saki' begins. Was the Persian *nom-de-plume* a mouthpiece through which Munro could advance pagan ideas or sympathies without having to fully admit to them as his own; an outlet for the side of his personality that revolted against Edwardian conformity; or simply a memorable coinage that he discovered early in his career and stuck with as a literary brand name? It is impossible to say, but the former is certainly an appealing idea in the light of some of the fiction discussed below.

Time and again Saki's stories explored a world in which nothing was certain but the passage of time and the ridicule of circumstance. In the stanzas from the *Rubā'iyat* that Munro copied into his commonplace book, Omar mourned:

Yet ah, that Spring should vanish with the Rose!  
That Youth's sweet-scented manuscript should close!  
The Nightingale that in the branches sang,  
Ah whence, and wither flower again, who knows!  
(1859:Stanza LXXII)

Langguth's reprinting of the entry from Munro's commonplace book suggests either that Munro miscopied the poem, or that the biographer's printer made a mistake in

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reproducing his notes. The original version of Fitzgerald's work has 'Alas' instead of 'Yet ah', and 'flown' in the final line where Langguth gives 'flower'. As the 'flown' obviously refers to the Nightingale and not to the Rose, I have corrected the quotation above. A commonplace book is an informal journal in which favourite or significant passages from other literary works are copied for personal use. In such a world, where as Walter Pater remarked in his notorious conclusion to *The Renaissance* (1873), 'all melts under our feet', life must be grasped and savoured. Such enthusiastic *carpe diem* sits uncomfortably alongside Victorian and Edwardian convention. One wonders whether, as a man impatient with prevailing religious attitudes and influenced by Oscar Wilde, Munro endorsed Pater's encouraging his readers to 'burn always with a hard, gem-like flame', or else on 'this short day of frost and sun ... sleep before evening' (Pater 1973:46). These are certainly views that Saki's young protagonists endorse throughout his work, and it might be asked whether Munro was drawing, however indirectly, on a personal ethic that combined, however implicitly, two strands of what Edwardian Britain would have seen as 'pagan' thought. The *Rubā'iyat's* enthusiasm for the good life combined with ideas drawn from Greek philosophy in Pater to produce the basis of a revolutionary lifestyle, or at least, stimu-

lating literary texts for others to act upon. Pater, a mild-mannered Oxford academic, was deeply shocked when he saw undergraduates taking his words as a sanction of youthful excess. He immediately suppressed the conclusion of *The Renaissance*, and later editions of the book featured it only in a watered down form. Nonetheless, it achieved an 'underground' status in late Victorian culture, and was widely quoted by Wilde and his followers. His novel, *When William Came* (1912), depicts a Britain defeated by Germany in war, and contains what is virtually an address to the reader on what has led to the loss:

They [the British] grew soft and accommodating in all things; in religion ... they had come to look on the Christ as a sort of amiable elder Brother, whose letters from abroad were worth reading. Then, when they had emptied all the divine mystery and wonder out of their faith naturally they grew tired of it ... they were tired of their faith, but they were not virile enough to become real Pagans; their dancing fauns were good young men who tripped Morris dances and ate health foods ... (Saki 1982:767)

Although one can never assume a straightforward correlation between the utterances of characters and their author, such speeches nonetheless suggest a writer pinpointing a profound spiritual malaise in the contemporary world, one requiring radical change that the English are



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unwilling or unable to accommodate.

Saki's major writings comprise six volumes of short stories and three novels, originally published between 1904 and 1924. At first, he was content to set his tales in upper class English society, picking up where Wilde and Max Beerbohm left off. However, there was even in the early stories of *Reginald* (1904) a suggestion that the humour of those writers had been given a keen new edge. In 'Reginald on Christmas Presents' (1982:8), the young dandy rejects a 'George, Prince of Wales Prayer Book' as a suitable gift, before offering a gloriously backhanded defence of Christianity: 'People may say what they like about the decay of Christianity; the religious system that produced green Chartreuse can never really die' (1982:10). Such flippancy may have amused Saki's smart young readers, but they were unlikely to promote a pagan reimagining of British life. Saki was neither a dandified Catholic decadent such as those discussed by Martin Green (1977), nor one of the group of English ruralists surrounding Rupert Brooke that Virginia Woolf dubbed 'the Neo-pagans' (Delany 1987:41). Neither could he be claimed as a follower of Edward Carpenter, George Meredith, or nature mystics such as Richard Jefferies. Instead, Saki offered a unique mix of town

and country, drawing on the witty banter of the social smart set, and depicting a nature that was rarely romanticised and was often the scene of menace, even tragedy.

Saki's fiction often depicts witty, beautiful young men who endeavour to live life to the full by evading adult responsibility for as long as possible. Characters such as Reginald, and his successor Clovis Sangrail, whose deeds were first collected in *The Chronicles of Clovis* (1911), were paradoxically conservative anarchists who ate at the tables of the great and good but nonetheless ridiculed the manners and beliefs of their class. Clovis, like Reginald, is no friend of mealy-mouthed conventional Christianity, and indeed has a number of the characteristics that Hutton (1999:27) notes as instantly recognisable as 'pagan' to late 19th century readers: 'freedom' and 'self-indulgence' being the two most obvious ones, though his surname encourages one to believe he possesses a third, 'ancient knowledge'. He is also quite prepared to ridicule Christianity, or at least, its priggish followers. In 'The Unrest Cure' (*Chronicles of Clovis*), he shares a railway carriage with a boring, prematurely middle-aged clergyman, J.P. Huddle (one of many significantly apt names in Saki's work), and decides that the man needs to be galvanised into new life. This he

attempts by convincing Huddle and his household that they are caught up in a *coup d'état* in the middle of the English countryside, with riotous consequences.

Clovis lives a life informed by the *Rubāiyat*'s enthusiasm for earthly happiness:

One moment in Annihilation's Waste,  
One Moment, of the Well of Life to taste –  
The Stars are setting and the Caravan  
Starts for the Dawn of Nothing—Oh, make haste!  
(1859:Stanza XXXVIII)

The Clovis stories often see a combined assault on convention from their hero's droll asides and from the ungovernable intervention of animals, often domestic ones. Animals force humans to review their relationships and surroundings: the feline protagonist of 'Tobermory' (*Chronicles of Clovis*) is a talking cat who causes havoc by revealing the contents of private conversations. Tobermory is an unnatural beast, who has been trained in the art of human speech by Cornelius Appin, an eccentric scientist, whose name coincidentally recalls the renaissance scientist and mage, Cornelius Agrippa. Human pretensions are mocked to excellent comic effect, but in the end the natural order reasserts itself and Tobermory dies a feline death in a fight with the rector's tom-cat. Appin is later killed by an elephant at Dresden Zoo, perhaps because he was attempting to teach it 'German irregular verbs' (1982:115). The message is clear in such tales. Despite man's scientific advances, nature is not to be trifled with. The minor novelist Rodney Harley (Vansittart 1985:148) remarked that 'Civilisation is against nature, and we are surprised when nature gets the better of the fight.' Saki's fiction pitted nature and civilisation in bitter combat.

While Saki's comic targets in his early fiction were invariably pretension and

vulgarity, his childhood experience of a world outside that of rational explanation and conventional Christianity surfaced at frequent intervals. In 'Gabriel-Ernest' (*Reginald in Russia*, 1910), the English gentleman Mr. Van Cheele is told 'There is a wild beast in your woods' (Saki 1982:63) and sets out to investigate. Although he lives in the countryside, Van Cheele has lost touch with nature, not only believing that he owns 'woodland property' but also violating the natural order:

He had a stuffed bittern in his study, and knew the names of quite a number of wild flowers, so his aunt had possibly some justification in describing him as a great naturalist. (1982:63-64)

Wandering through the woods, Van Cheele encounters a beautiful naked youth, sunning himself following a dip in a woodland pool. Van Cheele and the boy engage in verbal sparring with a homoerotic edge, during which we discover that the boy lives wild in the woods and eats animal flesh. 'I can't have you staying in these woods,' Van Cheele blusters, to receive the coolly ambiguous reply, 'I fancy you'd rather have me here than in your house' (1982:65). Van Cheele's aunt is keen to 'save' the wild boy, christening him 'Gabriel-Ernest', a mixture of the knowingly Christian and the implicitly homosexual ('Ernest' had been a loaded term in the British sexual underworld since the heyday of Wilde in the early 1890s), but he is beyond her help.

It transpires that the young man is a werewolf, who kills a small boy and disappears into the woods. Here, though there is a comic element at work—'He dismissed the idea of a telegram. "Gabriel-Ernest is a werewolf" was a hopelessly inadequate effort at conveying the situation' (1982:68)—the story is deeply unsettling. The unpunished killing of a child is a

surprising topic for a supposedly comic writer, all the more so for 'the Toop child' having been an innocent bystander entrusted to Gabriel-Ernest's care by Van Cheele's aunt. The Van Cheeles's prissy effort to own and control wild nature, whether woodland, a stuffed bird or a werewolf who symbolises what E.M. Forster would call 'the forests and the night', rebound upon them in dramatic and terrible fashion. E.M. Forster's Maurice feels at one with 'the forests and the night' following his recognition of his homosexuality and consequent 'outsider' status in the Edwardian world. See *Maurice* p.196. See too broader contextualisation of his experiences in Hutton (1999:48-50). The fact that Van Cheele is clearly attracted to the young man, who perhaps offers him the chance to regenerate his life through sexuality, only adds to the subversive nature of the story.

'Sredni Vashtar' (*Chronicles of Clovis*) sees another grisly encounter between wild nature and the forces of human conformity. Conradin, a delicate child, keeps a pet polecat in defiance of his guardian. Although the ferret is nominally a pet, for Conradin he is a symbol of defiance and self-assertion, and is gradually transformed into an idol, then a god: 'One day, out of Heaven knows what material, he spun the beast a wonderful name, and from that moment it grew into a god and a religion' (1982:137). Millions of suburban children keep pets in hutches, but it soon transpires that the relationship between Sredni Vashtar and his acolyte imbues one or both of them with unlikely powers. Conradin rejects his cousin's Christianity and chants hymns of praise to the 'lithe, sharp-fanged beast':

Sredni Vashtar went forth,  
His thoughts were red thoughts and his teeth

were white.  
His enemies called for peace, but he brought  
them death.  
Sredni Vashtar the Beautiful. (1982:137, 139)

When Conradin's cousin, or The Woman, as he calls her, ventures down to the wood-shed to dispose of the ferret, something violent occurs. The ferret disappears into the undergrowth with 'dark wet stains around the fur of jaws and throat' (1982:140), and the maid screams upon entering the shed in search of her mistress. As in 'Gabriel-Ernest', the wild creature escapes into woodland at the end of the story, presumably returning to its natural environment. Is Conradin's escape from his guardian's tyranny the wish-fulfilment of a small boy, as with Leo's baleful astrology in the opening of L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between* (1953), an accident, or the result of the ferret acting as a genuine divine agency or avatar of one? We are not told. The story is regularly reprinted in anthologies of horror fiction, yet its mystical centre offers intriguing light on supposedly hide-bound Edwardian England. Clearly some, darker, older powers are abroad in the land, perhaps through the combining of a native beast with orientally styled invocation that Saki may have encountered during his time in Burma.

If Christianity could be challenged in a relatively domestic setting—and here Sredni Vashtar might be seen as quite literally, a (back) garden god—how much more threatening could be the natural world. Unlike his contemporaries Algernon Blackwood and Arthur Machen, Saki had little time or narrative space for extended evocations of the beauty and majesty of nature. The luscious description of the ancient Roman fort in chapter four of Machen's *The Hill of Dreams* (1907), with

... IT IS NOT ENOUGH TO GO OUT INTO  
NATURE; TO SURVIVE, ONE MUST IN  
SOME WAY BECOME IT, BREAKING  
DOWN THE DIVISION BETWEEN THE  
'CIVILISED' AND THE 'NATURAL'.

its sumptuous recreation of Roman pagan life, or the mystical engagement with nature and the elements in Blackwood's *Pan's Garden* (1912) have no parallel in Saki's fiction. Instead, Saki gives brief details, just enough to set up the central oppositions of his narratives. 'The Music on the Hill' (*Chronicles of Clovis*) is a mere five pages long, but manages to be more memorable and convincing in its evocation of the old gods than many much lengthier fictions.

Saki's world view and writing style might have been very different from Blackwood's, but both writers make a crucial distinction between the description of fear within the story, and the causing of it in the reader. Although it is invariably unwise to speculate about the intended readership of literary texts, Saki surely writes for an audience that shares and is prepared to endorse his view of the natural world and human relationships with and within it. In 'The Music of the Hill', readers side against Sylvia Seltoun straight away through the use of subliminal cues. She is compared to a member of Cromwell's army before the rout of the Cavaliers at the Battle of Worcester (1651), a strong suggestion that for Saki her life is based around mechanistic efficiency rather than creative flair, much less respect for tradition. The allusion also suggests that her triumph will be short-lived, in that while Royalist forces were defeated at

Worcester, the English monarchy was restored within a decade. Having married Mortimer Seltoun, a confirmed bachelor, she retreats with him to his country house in Yessney, thinking that she has secured some sort of social victory, but as with so many of Saki's protagonists, her removal from the land is to be her downfall (1982:161):

There was a sombre almost savage wildness about Yessney that was certainly not likely to appeal to town-bred tastes, and Sylvia, notwithstanding her name, was accustomed to nothing much more sylvan than 'leafy Kensington.' She looked on the country as something excellent and wholesome in its way, which was apt to become troublesome if you encouraged it overmuch.

Such attitudes are ill-suited to a place where:

... a steeper slope of heather and bracken dropped down into cavernous combs overgrown with oak and yew. In its wild open savagery there seemed a stealthy linking of the joy of life with the terror of unseen things.' (1982:162).

This landscape reappears in much English fiction of the *fin-de-siècle* and its aftermath, betokening engagement with the numinous (if sympathetic to it) or fear (if not). The presence of the ancient oak and yew mark out Yessney as a pagan site, a supposition confirmed by Mortimer's belief that the worship of Pan still endures in such places:

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PAGANISM'S DEVELOPMENT IN THE  
LATTER PART OF THE 20TH CENTURY.

'The worship of Pan never has died out,' said Mortimer. 'Other new gods have drawn aside his votaries from time to time, but he is the Nature-God to whom all must come back at last. He has been called the Father of all the Gods, but most of his children have been still-born.' (1982:162)

Sylvia, who is 'religious in an honest, vaguely devotional kind of way' is warned that Pan rules this part of the world, but despite hearing mysterious laughter in the woods, she disregards her husband's instructions. Finding a small bronze figure of Pan on a stone pedestal, she removes from it a bunch of grapes left as an offering. She sees a 'brown-faced and rather handsome' boy whom she mistakes for a gipsy, until her husband tells her that there are no gipsies for miles around. He then advises her to avoid all horned beasts on their farm as 'the Wood Gods are rather horrible to those who molest them' (1982:164). Inevitably, Sylvia's transgression must be paid for, and she is fatally gored by a stag being hunted on her husband's lands. The final lines of the story tell of 'a boy's laughter, golden and equivocal' ringing in her ears (1982:166). 'The Music on the Hill' is remarkable for its concision but also for its seeming conviction that the presence of the 'Wood Gods' is a very real one. Patricia Merivale sees it as the finest of the Pan stories that were

published in England during the late Victorian and Edwardian periods (Merivale 1969:180). Langguth (1981:222) by contrast asserts that, 'it takes no overingenious reading to know that her true crime has been marrying a contented bachelor', but while this may be part of Sylvia's mistake, the wider engagement with nature and the gods of wild places in Saki's fiction make such an interpretation rather reductive. The point is reinforced by a passage from *When William Came* (Saki 1982:800):

If there had been wood-gods and wicked-eyed fauns in the sunlit groves and hillsides of old Hellas, surely there were watchful, living things of kindred mould in this dusk-hidden-wilderness of field and hedge and coppice.

Here we see nature superficially tamed but yet exuding its ancient divinity.

*Beasts and Superbeasts* (1914) and the posthumously published *The Toys of Peace* (1919) revealed further inhabitants of Saki's textual zoo. Wolves, hedgehogs, cats, bulls, elks and boars are just some of the creatures that bring about or are brought into, confrontations between humans and the natural world. In 'The Forbidden Buzzards', Clovis Sangrail hatches an ingenious plan to protect the eggs of a rare bird from collectors: though his plan succeeds, the young birds are nonetheless shot 'by a local hairdresser' (1982:333).

This bathetic conclusion gives a chilling glimpse of an England in which ecological equilibrium has been destroyed. Perhaps surprisingly in view of this story, Munro had been a keen egg-collector in his youth, bequeathing a sizeable egg collection to Barnstaple museum. He later graduated to harmless ornithological observation, watching birds throughout Europe and also during his time in Asia. Here he also kept a tiger cub as a pet. Saki himself was an enthusiastic hunter, but even allowing for present attitudes to such, there is a clear distinction between what he would have classed as 'sport' and a hairdresser's casual destruction of endangered wildlife. While Saki's concern for the fate of the natural world might suggest that he has proto-green credentials in some respects, his use of animals and animal motifs in his stories extends beyond such sympathies. Indeed, a modern pagan readership might be inclined to enlarge upon another of Langguth's observations (1981:35):

There was developing a fondness in Hector for skulking animals capable, should the need arise, of inflicting rough justice. Better even than polecats, ferrets and tigers was that most feline of the dog family, the wolf, slinking with yellow-eyed cunning toward its prey.

Langguth sees this fondness for animals as a simple case of identification, but we might wonder whether Saki's favourite creatures have more totemic powers. His recognition of that of wolves in particular, who sing a coronach for a dying aristocrat in 'The Wolves of Cernogratz' (*The Toys of Peace*), or settle an intractable human quarrel in 'The Interlopers' in the same collection, has affinities with contemporary pagan concerns. This is not to suggest that Saki would have considered these creatures as power animals, but their presence in his fiction certainly offers a glimpse of a

divinity far removed from that of mainstream Edwardian piety.

One story that addresses the explicit relationship between the human and the animal is 'Laura' (*Beasts and Superbeasts*). Laura, a mischievous young woman, is dying, and is sure that she will reincarnated as a 'lower organism' (1982:241) because of her pranks:

I shall be an animal of some kind ... I haven't been a bad sort in my way, so I think I may count on being a nice animal, something elegant and lively, with a love of fun. An otter, perhaps.'

'I can't imagine you as an otter,' said Amanda. 'Well, I don't suppose you can imagine me as an angel, if it comes to that,' said Laura. (1982:242)

Laura is indeed reborn as an otter, or at least, her death coincides with the appearance of an unruly she-otter that steals salmon from the larder and generally reprises Laura's human trickery. The animal is hunted down with hounds, and reveals a human look in its eyes at the moment of death. However, this is not the end of the story, for having distinguished herself as an otter, Laura seems to be reborn yet again, as a Puckish Nubian boy who torments her relatives while they are holidaying in Egypt. Throughout the story, the tone is witty and unsentimental, but it is notable that even the seemingly reactionary old buffer, Sir Lulworth Quayne does not dismiss the idea of reincarnation. Of course, the fact that Saki penned a tale on this theme does not necessarily believe that Munro himself was an advocate of similar beliefs, but nonetheless, the story's endorsement of natural cycles and its amused disdain for Christianity is again notable.

Perhaps the attitude towards reincarnation is informed by his life in Burma, or that

his father's accounts of the country, but it is certainly a surprising topic for a seemingly 'main-stream' Edwardian comic writer to broach. Laura clearly identifies with the otter in a way that transcends her deathbed flippancies concerning the joy of daily fresh fish and having an 'elegant, svelte figure' (1982:242). She has no desire to cling to life, and professes herself bored by her nameless illness. It might be argued that Laura shows a pagan resignation in the face of death, realising that while it might be an end for Amanda, it is only a beginning for her, or another point on the great wheel. Laura's casual assumption of a natural hierarchy that seems to run in descending order: rich English woman, Nubian boy, otter, might show her to be less enlightened about race than she is about the workings of the cosmos. If this is a reflection of Munro's own racial views, it exposes another contradiction in his complex personality and attitudes.

Saki never offered an explicit mythos to compare with that of Machen's ideas of the 'Little People' or H.P. Lovecraft's 'Old Ones'. Instead, he created a complex series of stories connected by imaginative association or recurrent motifs that depict a world in which Christianity is frequently impotent or plain foolish, and in which nature's power can never be taken for granted, even in the apparently tame confines of a farmyard or a suburban garden. Arthur Machen's novella 'The Terror' ([1917] Machen 1963), which depicts animals rising up against corrupt human beings is in many ways closer in style to the 'eco-horror' of the 1970s, exemplified by works such as James Herbert's *The Rats* (1974) than it is to Saki, but its concluding paragraphs give some suggestion of the spiritual world that Saki evokes without ever addressing the

reader quite so openly. Machen (1963: 223-224) writes:

For ages he [man] has been putting off his royal robe [spirituality], he has been wiping the balm of consecration from his own breast. He has declared, again and again, that he is not spiritual, but rational ... he has vowed that he is not Orpheus but Caliban. But the beasts also have something which corresponds to the spiritual quality in men ... They perceived the throne was vacant, not even friendship was possible between them and the self-deposed monarch. If he were not king he were a sham, an impostor, a thing to be destroyed.

Saki's recognition of the importance of the natural world should not be overlooked in the champagne bubbles of his society fiction. Here is a writer tackling issues of considerable relevance to contemporary pagans, and who offers fascinating light on the influences that were to help shape paganism's development in the latter part of the 20th century. His concern with the persistence of wild nature even in apparently quotidian environments may be paralleled by the re-enchanted suburbia of some of today's pagan practitioners, while his willingness to see the relationship between human beings and animals as being based more upon complementary qualities than on traditional hierarchy reveals him as a slyly subversive critic of human complacency. Stories such as 'The Music on the Hill' ask penetrating questions concerning 'town-bred tastes', implying that it is not enough to go out into nature; to survive, one must in some way *become* it, breaking down the division between the 'civilised' and the 'natural'. It is perhaps this aspect of his fiction which is the most exciting, and in some ways the most challenging, for a modern pagan readership.

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## Two Souls in One Body: Ethical and Methodological Implications of Studying What You Know

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presented to the Qualitative Analysis  
Conference in Hamilton, Ontario  
in May 2001.*

I did not begin graduate school with the idea of becoming a sociologist. In fact, as a recent graduate with a degree in English Literature and no elective courses outside the Faculty of Arts, I am not sure I could have told you then what a sociologist was, or what sorts of questions they were interested in. My foray into the world of graduate studies was motivated by my personal interest in Neopagan Witchcraft as the religion with which I self-identified. There had been very little academic material produced about Neopaganism as a religious choice by the late 80s, when I began my graduate career, and what there was didn't reflect the vision I had of myself as a practitioner, my perception of the practice, my own experience or the experience of other participants as it had been related to me anecdotally. It was this frustration with not seeing myself reflected in the literature that purported to discuss 'people like me' that propelled me into graduate school in an attempt to give myself the tools to frame the presentation of Neopaganism differently.

During the years I have spent in graduate school, many more works on Neopaganism

have come out of the academy, works in which I could see myself and others whom I know reflected more accurately. Luhrmann (1989), Berger (1999), Orion (1995) and Pike (2001) are all good examples of writing about Neopaganism and Neopagans in which their voices can be heard and in which their perspectives are presented without being negatively prejudged by the author. Each of these works is an ethnography and each contains an account of the process through which the author, who began as an outsider, came to acquire an understanding of the participants' worldviews, narratives and practices, the process which is at the heart of all good ethnography. In some, but not all of those cases, it also resulted in the author adopting a Neopagan religious identity, and redefining herself as an insider.

During the decade that intervened between when I began to define myself as Pagan and when I needed to redefine myself as a sociologist, I engaged in many of the activities that are typical of Craft practitioners: I read books on the Craft and related subjects such as magic, mythology and herbology; I did meditation, visualization and self-knowledge exercises, keeping record both of them, and of my reflections on them; I did spellwork and divination, also keeping detailed records; I wrote down dreams that seemed significant or were particularly clear; I participated in classes at my local occult shop and as I became more experienced I taught a few; I talked to people, mostly non-practitioners, about what it meant to me to be a Witch and tried to dispel misconceptions where I could; I attended public rituals to celebrate and socialize; I went to the occasional festival; I wrote and performed sabbats and esbats, and recorded the feedback I got from others who participated in them; I contributed to a Pagan newsletter; I took a first degree initiation and then, three years later, a second degree; I ran a

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coven; I taught and initiated students; some or all of which is just part of learning to be, and being, priesthood in the Craft. I have seven lined physics notebooks of handwritten notes, feedback, correspondence and diary entries, and another two thick unlined notebooks full of handcopied rituals and ritual elements that are the textual record of my own personal development inside the Craft context. These records extend from 1983 until 1992.

As I moved through my Masters degree in Religious Studies, gradually coming to the conclusion that further work in the Religious Studies department was not going to prepare me to answer the kinds of questions I wanted to ask about Neopagans, and into the Sociology department for my doctorate, I realized that writing ethnographically about Neopaganism was outside of the scope of the possible for me. I had already been socialized into the norms of Neopaganism; I already had an understanding of the worldview and some of how it was expressed through people's forms of living. I could not go back and re-experience my own socialization from a critical standpoint; it was an already accomplished fact. The research process for me would have to involve not how I was going to come to be accepted among Neopagans as a peer, but how I was going to disengage from

that identity and that way of thinking in order to create and establish myself as a researcher.

### EPISTEMOLOGICAL ISSUES

Epistemologically, the chief issue was to problematize my own 'taken for granted' worldview. This is an issue addressed fairly extensively in the theoretical literature. Gadamer, for one, points out that no one approaches an object of study without preconceptions. The structure of knowledge and human knowing dictates that preconceptions, what he calls prejudices or fore-meanings, will arise simply out of one's ability to use a human language and one's position in a historical tradition (1975:191). He suggests addressing the problem of the inevitability of prejudice by problematizing one's relationship to one's own perspective. That does not mean to say that one can divest one's self of it, as the 'objectivity' of the scientific method would seem to dictate, but merely that one is required, if one is to attain understanding, to treat an object as something foreign and in need of understanding even when it seems familiar. This has required the explicit and ongoing acknowledgment that my own perspective is not only simply one interpretation of the lived universe, but also only one of many possible perspectives that could have been derived from my own

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peculiar experiences.

Gadamer likens the process of understanding to the process of translation, whereby meaning that exists in one language must be conveyed in a different language. The trick to translation is not only to convey the literal meaning of the words, which often obscures the meaning, but the sense of the work as a whole. The context of a work cannot just be reproduced pristinely so that it can be experienced in exactly the same terms that the author or another reader experienced it, it must in translation acquire part of the context of the horizon into which it comes, if it is to be understood (1975:236-241). Gadamer asserts that the process of understanding is a conversation in which two parties come to an agreement about the object.

The danger inherent in the study of phenomena in which one is involved is the facile assumption that one already enjoys such an agreement. This assumption of an already shared meaning prevents one from grasping the meaning given to the object by the other. This formulation of meaning solely within one's own horizon makes understanding impossible. Because I shared a certain vocabulary with the subjects of my study, I could not therefore assume that I automatically knew what they were saying. I could not take my own usages and experiences as normative,

although I recognized them as that which constructed, and continues to construct, my own fore-meanings. Language is an especially contested domain within the Craft, and the process of trying to understand my respondents required that I consciously bracket off my own assumptions in order to make the attempt to enter into their understandings and their worldviews. In short, I had to make a conscious effort to keep my pagan self out of the middle of conversations between my participants and my researcher self.

#### ETHICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

In addition to discovering that ethnographic research was going to be impossible for me due to my pre-existing status as a participant, I also discovered that participant-observation techniques would be intensely problematic if I wished participants to have the level of confidence in my commitment to respecting their privacy that I wanted them to have. The choices about the sort of research methodology I would use were guided by my own experience of having been a research subject previously and knowing what it was like to feel exposed and betrayed by a piece of research. This led me to adopt a very conservative set of ethical parameters, consistent with my sense that I was entering a 'spoiled' research site.

A 'spoiled' site is one in which potential participants have been exposed to researchers before, with negative outcomes, and in which researchers are therefore viewed with suspicion. The immediate pagan community in which I lived had been the subject of an ethnography carried out by another researcher some years before. Like me, this individual was an 'insider' to the community, and the 'key informants' of the study were the most active individuals in the community at that time. The research was problematic because the events discussed in the study took place up to three years before the individual adopted the identity of a researcher. The events and confidences to which the researcher was privy, they had been privy to as a member of the community, and not as a researcher. When the study finally became available to members of the community, in all but one case after it had been submitted elsewhere, many of the individuals were unhappy with both what was represented and how those representations were made. Some believed that there were strategic omissions in the data so that they would better fit the interpretive paradigm, errors that only community members and not outsiders could catch; others felt that relationships they had believed to be personal had been exploited and betrayed. The manner in which the events were framed and discussed heightened the level of tension in an already tense community and damaged the researcher's reputation not only as a researcher, but as a trustworthy member of the community. It also served to make all researchers somewhat suspect.

Because of this experience, I felt compelled to take what might, under other circumstances, be considered extraordinary measures to minimize any possible ambiguity about my role as a researcher and my motivations for conducting the research by detaching myself from the activities of the community and by

giving participants clear indications of when our relationship was in the researcher-subject mode rather than that of co-participants. This determination to maintain that distinction in the minds of participants was the primary motivating factor both in my use of formalized settings for my interviews, including the deliberately obtrusive presence of a tape recorder, and my decision not to use participant observation as a data-gathering technique. I consistently presented myself, in all correspondence and conversations inviting participation in the research, as an active researcher on Neopaganism, who was incidentally also Craft, so that it was almost impossible to mistake my intentions.

During the interview stage, I made a point of candidly answering questions about both my Craft background and training and my academic orientations and interests. I proactively divulged information about my current and former associations inside the Craft community, particularly with the large Neopagan organizations, whenever the conversation turned in that direction. As some participants had very negative feelings about some of these organizations, I did not wish them to believe that they had been 'tricked' into making negative comments, or be uncomfortable subsequently, if they learned that I was acquainted with prominent members of those organizations.

In addition to these practical methodological steps, I altered my life outside of 'research time' in the attempt to create myself as someone who was not perceived to be aligned with any of the numerous factions that exist inside the Craft. Although it is difficult, in some ways, for an outsider to gain access to the Neopagan community, it is also difficult to do effective research as an insider if parts of the community will not speak to you because you are perceived to be a member of the wrong 'camp'. I began this disengagement



process while still in the planning stages of the research. As early as three years before the survey and five years before the interviews were conducted, I withdrew from coven membership, ceased to take new students, ceased to have any publicly expressed opinion on happenings in both my own community and others I heard of and ceased to attend most public gatherings. I maintained my existing friendships inside the community, but established myself as somewhat 'outside' its religious and social life.

I did this to in order to gain access to the widest possible cross-section of respondents and to give my participants confidence about the extent to which they would be exposed by the research. I also did it to protect myself and my other identity as a trustworthy member of the Neopagan community. Although I chose to be neither active nor visible as a practitioner in the broader community while my research was in progress, I still identify myself as Neopagan and support the principles that guide interaction within the community. Despite my conspicuous absence for almost a decade, I wished to retain the option to return to a more visible practice at some future time with my reputation for integrity intact.

To the extent that these measures were intended to establish me as non-partisan, facilitate access to practitioners, and prevent excessive bias in the reporting of my research results, I think that they were successful. Upon reflection, however, there were costs concealed in the choices I made that I did not anticipate when I began the research, and which, had I known about them at the time, might have dissuaded me from undertaking the project that I did. I could not have known that I would be delivering my survey to the printers on the way to the hospital to have my first child. I could not have known that I would suffer from severe postpartum depres-

sion, and that my decision to remove myself from the community would mean that I lost access to sources of pastoral support and comfort and social opportunities that would have otherwise been available to me. I could not know that I would remain ill for years after the birth, without the time or energy to write and perform the seasonal rituals with my family. Having decided that coven membership was inadvisable, as was attendance at public rituals, this meant that I did not have the opportunity for celebration and reflection that ritual provides, or the companionship of others on the important holidays. It has also meant that my young daughter, although raised in a household in which pagan values are entrenched, has not had the opportunity to be more thoroughly socialized in a context that is supported by the ritual celebrations that punctuate the pagan year.

But perhaps most of all, I had underestimated the extent to which doing a PhD in sociology would turn me into a sociologist. Having taught myself to ask different questions and look beyond and behind what I had taken for granted before, I am not sure to what extent I can ever return. I am not sure if, when I finally feel like it is 'safe' for me to take up the mantle of 'active practitioner' once again, it will even fit the person I have become in the meantime. I do not know if I will ever again be capable of taking a ritual simply as a descriptive statement about the universe in which I live, and not analyse in the back of my mind the way in which it narrates the transformative potential of modernity. I am not sure if I can attend a social gathering and not look for the subtle conversational markers that point to the articulation of broader tensions in the Neopagan movement. I am not sure I can set aside the sociological lens and immerse myself fully in the lived presence of the

## PERHAPS THE 'OLD-FASHIONED' ADMONITIONS ABOUT BEING AT AN APPROPRIATE DISTANCE FROM YOUR RESEARCH INTERESTS ARE NOT MEANT TO PROTECT THE RESEARCH FROM BIAS AND CONTAMINATION, BUT TO PROTECT THE RESEARCHER'S SENSE OF SELF.

divine. I have gained a way of seeing that has enriched me immeasurably on an intellectual level; it remains to be seen if that has cost me the way of seeing that organized my life, gave definition to my vision of myself and structured my spiritual landscape before I became a sociologist.

Had I known in the beginning the capacity the research process had to make me a stranger to myself, I would perhaps not have chosen to study something that was so close to the heart of my being; yet it was only the urge to study that particular thing that drew me to sociology in the first place. Perhaps the 'old-fashioned' admonitions about being at an appropriate distance from your research interests are not meant to protect the research from bias and contamination, but to protect the researcher's sense of self. Doing responsible sociological research about a vital piece of my own identity has caused me to change the stories I tell about myself, the narratives through which I am constituted. My identity as a sociologist and researcher is too established in my mind and in the minds of others for me to be able to simply set it aside. At the end of the research process that will culminate in my dissertation defense, I will be faced with a different challenge: the task of reflexively constructing a narrative of myself capable of integrating

elements that I am accustomed to bracketing off from each other. Otherwise, I will remain somewhat at odds with myself indefinitely, with two souls in one body.

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## Weather Magic and Global Warming

by Christine Rhone

Heatwaves, hurricanes, droughts, floods—recent years have seen an increase in record-breaking extremes of weather. Scientists have confirmed the fact of global warming. This change in climate is human-made. It used to be commonly believed, before the rise of modern science, that gods and spirits—not people—were in charge of making weather. People could participate religiously or magically in invoking it, directly or through priests, magicians and shamans. We have in some sense come full circle on the issue of weather control with the scientific acknowledgement that people do play a part in what the weather is like.

Of all the phenomena that mediate between sky-heaven and the earth, weather is the natural paradigm. It mediates in the world of nature as it unfolds in time. The connection between time and the weather is so close that the words for them are identical in French. It resonates in the phonetics of time and tempest in English. Other mediating *phenomena*—angels, apparitions, and spirits—do not *show* (Greek: *phainein*) the confines of time but reveal those of culture and outlook. Phenomena in and out of time co-penetrate in weather magic. At their crossing point is needed a respectful offering, food or sacrifice.

A rich illustration of many of these points comes from the early Middle Ages in Europe. In the 9th century CE lived

Agobard, one of the most celebrated and learned prelates in France. Born in Spain in 769, he came to France when he was a child and became archbishop of Lyons in 816 in the early reign of Louis the Pious, son of Charlemagne. Agobard later became known as a local saint. The rare book department of the British Library holds some six or seven fine editions of his writings. It is not uncommon for several copies to be checked out at once, as they are a treasure-trove for a number of special interest groups.

Although many hands have dipped into his writings to pick out a treasure, that of fate played a strong part in preserving them. The last remaining copy of the manuscript was snatched from oblivion by a quirk of coincidental timing. By the early 17th century, the manuscript was gathering dust in some corner of a bookbinder's shop in Lyons. One day, Jean-Papire Masson, a historian and geographer and a hunter of rare manuscripts, went on a foray in the old quarter and happened to enter this shop for a browse. At that very moment, the bookbinder had a knife in his hand and was about to cut up the manuscript to reuse bits of it as binding material.<sup>1</sup> Realizing its importance, Masson bought the manuscript and had it printed up, although this first edition contains a great many errors.<sup>2</sup> Henceforth, St Agobard's treatises came to be included in editions of the collected works of the early Church Fathers. They figure prominently among the writings of their century.

The writings comprise some two dozen Latin treatises and may be divided into three broad categories. The first includes political subjects and the second religious ones. Among the latter is a treatise against the cult of images. Protestant theologians

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have interpreted this to suggest that St Agobard's thought anticipated the Reformation, which took place some six centuries later. In the third category are five treatises on the pernicious influence of Judaism. These are letters to the emperor and members of the imperial court, warning them of the power and influence that the Jews enjoyed in Lyons in the midst of Christian society. These texts were translated by German authors in the 1930s and studied along with such titles as *The Protocols of Zion*.<sup>3</sup> In the see of Lyons, the immediate successor of St Agobard brought his relatively modest attitude to an extreme level of anti-Semitism.

The fourth category comprises writings on superstitions and abusive practises, such as duelling and trials by ordeal. Agobard's anti-ordeal position was rare in its time. Christian commentators generally hold him in high regard as a beacon of rationality and critical thinking.<sup>4</sup> One treatise is entitled "Against the Foolish Opinion of the Mob on Hail and Thunder".<sup>5</sup> This was written to refute the belief, which was very widespread in Agobard's archdiocese, that the weather

was controlled by local wizards, the *Tempestarii*. St Agobard points out the error in this belief, shared by peasants and nobles alike, and insists that the only entity capable of controlling the weather is the Christian God. He gives a great many Biblical citations to demonstrate this, including some from Hebrew history.

This treatise on weather magic, probably written around 814 to 816, provided the inspiration for the title of a cult classic in the field of UFOlogy, written in 1969, *Passport to Magonia: on UFOs, Folklore, and Parallel Worlds* by scientist Jacques Vallée.<sup>6</sup> The first edition was a groundbreaking book that went out of print for years and became a sought-after collector's item. It was finally reprinted in 1993 with a new preface. Vallée's main thesis is that the occurrence of UFOs has deep roots in the old folklore of many nations. In the increased frequency of sightings since World War II and their interpretation, we are witnessing modern folklore in the making. Magonia represents an enchanted place beyond time, a magical land or fairy realm.

The name Magonia appears in a passage that St Agobard wrote as a prime example

PEOPLE, NOT GODS AND SPIRITS,  
HAVE PRODUCED GLOBAL WARMING  
AND HAVE THUS PLAYED THE PART OF  
WEATHER MAGICIANS.  
SKILLFUL MAGICIANS, HOWEVER,  
FOCUS ON DESIRED RESULTS IN THE  
PRACTICE OF THEIR ART. OUR  
MAGICAL ROLE IS THUS FLAWED ...

of the credulity with which he was surrounded. The passage in question reads as follows: "We have, however, seen and heard many men plunged in such great stupidity, sunk in such depths of folly, as to believe that there is a certain region, which they call Magonia, whence ships sail in the clouds, in order to carry back to that region those fruits of the earth which are destroyed by hail and tempests; the sailors paying rewards to the storm wizards and themselves receiving corn and other produce. Out of the number of those whose blind folly was deep enough to allow them to believe these things possible, I saw several exhibiting in a certain concourse of people, four persons in bonds—three men and a woman who they said had fallen from these same ships; after keeping them for some days in captivity they had brought them before the assembled multitude, as we have said, in our presence to be stoned. But truth prevailed".<sup>7</sup>

Sometime in the early 1990s, the details in this passage concerning corn and fruits that had been flattened by wind and magical storms came to be interpreted as a historical instance of a crop circle event.<sup>8</sup> A cartoon illustration of this incident published in a book for children on the

history of Lyons shows the magical wind flattening the corn in a more or less circular shape.<sup>9</sup> There is, however, no mention of any specific shape of the flattened corn in Agobard's treatise. Reports of ordinary weather conditions, such as rain or storms, in connection with crop circle events since the 1980s do not point to any consistent pattern, but there are repeated reports of extraordinary weather or mediating phenomena, such as unexplained lights, sounds and UFOs. A few circle events have been found in ice, carpets, and other materials but nearly all have been in food crops—wheat, barley, and rapeseed.

The equation linking extraordinary weather events with food crops is so close that one can be substituted for the other. A good example of this appears in the oldest surviving literary work of any length, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, dated to around 3000 BCE. The epic contains an account of the Great Flood. In Tablet 11, two gods are speaking to one another. Enki, god of water, wisdom and magic is speaking to Enlil, god of air, wind and storms, who is the executive power of the firmament. The water god gives the storm god a disguised warning of the impending deluge. In order not to appear a liar after

the fact, he makes a play on words and substitutes the words "shower of wheat" for "shower of rain". He says, according to Robert Temple's verse translation, "Oh, what great harvest riches shall this land enjoy! Yes, He who orders the grainheads in the evening—What a shower of wheat shall He rain down upon you!"<sup>10</sup> In California, a traditional story of the Shasta people links volcanic eruptions with salmon, their main food source. The hero Coyote traps thieving hornets inside Mount Shasta. He builds a fire and seals all holes in the mountain. Grandfather Turtle helps by sitting on top like a lid. There is a rumbling noise. Turtle steps aside. Suddenly there is an explosion, and out pop the stolen salmon, all cooked, smoked, and ready to eat.<sup>11</sup>

In religion, weather events often go hand-in-hand with extraordinary foods and sacrifice. The supreme god of the ancient Indian world of the *Rig Veda* was Indra, thunder and weather, who constantly craved drinks of immortal elixir, Soma. The ancient Greek mystery religion, the rites of Eleusis, combined weather with both ordinary and extraordinary foods. At the crux of the rites the initiates, who may have partaken of a psychotropic drink, were shown an ear of barley and the words "Rain, bring fruit" were spoken. Traditional Judaism, a religion in which foods play a consistently important role, retains prayers for good weather in the celebration of Shavuot. Traditional Roman Catholics consult the blood of St Januarius for weather readings.

The art of magic, in contrast to the practice of religion, seeks directly to invoke and influence the spirits, the winds and the weather. The Akkadian-Chaldean inscriptions, thought to date from at least 1800 BCE, are the oldest magical docu-

ments known and contain an incantation concerning the dark counterparts of the planetary gods: "Seven are they! ... They are the day of mourning and of noxious winds! They are the day of fate, and the devastating wind which precedes it!" The Greco-Egyptian Magical Papyri, written down between the 1st and 4th centuries CE, contain an invocation dedicated to the constellation of the Great Bear and these words: "I invoke you, ye holy ones, mighty, majestic, glorious Splendours ... mighty arch-daimons ... ministering to earthquakes ... snow-scatterers, rain-wafters ... tempest-tossing lords of fate ... dew-compelling ... gale-raising ... sky-wandering vagrants ... air-roving ... holy, invincible [magic words], perform my behests".<sup>12</sup>

The connection between food and weather is extended to encompass the process of digestion in the writings of Paracelsus, medical doctor and alchemist of the 16th century and towering figure in the history of western esoteric traditions. In *Archidoxis Magica* he describes the weather as the result of digestive purgation performed by the stars. These empty themselves, thus creating the wind, and "... as man, by natural exercise and the process of excretion, purges the phlegm from his nostrils, so do the stars ... undergo these excretions." The star vapor that flows down by night is called dew, and by winter hoar-frost.<sup>13</sup>

Paracelsus describes the weather in terms of body processes of the stars. The universe is pervaded by a single energy, the astral light or vapor. Three centuries later, another physician, Wilhelm Reich, did much experimental research on controlled weather changes and is said to have been able to produce rain and disperse clouds. This was done through the manipulation

of what he called orgone energy, a single life-force that pervades the universe. This same energy streams through the human body and is connected with sexuality and fertility.

Folklore illustrates the loop of fertility between weather and foodcrops. Female figures were made in many parts of Europe using the last sheaf of corn to be mown. This corn maiden or corn mother was sometimes dowsed with buckets of water to invoke rain for the next year's crops. Rain-making could be done by women who would pull wet ploughs through the fields. Certain springs and holy wells were sources of rain-making, such as the Fontaine de Barenton in Brittany. In Japan, women would go through the village making loud noise and then wrestle naked with each other to induce rain.

The stories of successful weather control effected by magicians, shamans, and medicine men are legion. To mention only one, an eye-witness account is given of a weather miracle performed in 1878 by Last Horse, a Lakota medicine man who was a Thunder Dreamer. As a storm came up suddenly, threatening to disrupt an important feast, Last Horse went to the center of the village with his rattle, raised his face to the sky, and sang a Thunder song commanding the clouds to part. The clouds slowly but surely dispersed and the feast began under clear skies.<sup>14</sup>

Weather is nature's paradigm of all mediating phenomena. A change in global climate is going hand-in-hand with changes in other mediations. More and more people in the West are reporting experiences with spirit messengers of all kinds. It is as though the hole in the ozone layer of Earth's atmosphere were also a widening hole in what separates people from such phenomena. Beyond doubt, the

relationship between sky-heaven and the earth is changing.

People, not gods and spirits, have produced global warming and have thus played the part of weather magicians. Skillful magicians, however, focus on desired results in the practice of their art. Our magical role is thus flawed, because global warming does not have a specifically desired outcome. While global warming may improve the climate locally in some areas, on the whole this "magic" has spun out of control. Breaks are showing in the food chain. This suggests that the balance of food offerings and sacrifice has not been respected. To quench the thirst of their weather god Indra, ancient priests offered long drinks of Soma, the elixir of immortality. To our weather god, denied and nameless, we have burned much fuel made from fossils, the liquid essence of mortality. The weather is now showing us a time of phenomenal change.

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*Christine Rhone is the author, with John Michell, of Twelve Tribe Nations (Thames & Hudson, 1991), the translator of Jean Richer's Sacred Geography of the Ancient Greeks (SUNY Press, 1994), and the translator of Antoine Faivre's Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition (SUNY Press, 2000). She is a contributor to many small press magazines and journals in the UK and the US and a priestess in the Fellowship of Isis. She resides in London, and may be reached at <christine@rhone.abel.uk>.*

## BOOK REVIEWS:

### WICCAN ROOTS: GERALD GARDNER AND THE MODERN WICCAN REVIVAL

by Philip Heselton. Capal Bann Publishing; Chieveley Berks, 2000  
ISBN 186163 1103. £14.95

*Reviewed by Juliette Wood  
The Folklore Society*

The book, in the author's words, attempts to explore 'the historical dimension of modern Witchcraft', and where better to start than with the pivotal figure of Gerald Gardner. Heselton's book considers every source possible—books, articles, newspapers, interview material, hearsay, even the occasional flash of Wiccan intuition—in an attempt to throw light on the events surrounding Gardner's initiation into Witchcraft in 1939. Since the time Gardner 'went public' with his announcement that an ancient Witch cult had survived in England, a number of scholars from both historical and folkloric fields have taken issue with all, or parts, of his theory. Much of what Gardner described did not fit in with Witchcraft beliefs and practices that were known, and there were practical difficulties with the notion that the religion represented a continuity from prehistoric times. Current Wiccan thinking concentrates less on ancient continuities and more on the beliefs themselves. Thus the suggestion that

Gardner got his material from comparatively modern sources, such as Rosicrucianism, Masonism, Aleister Crowley's writings and even fantasy fiction or poetry, seems less an attack on the authenticity of religious belief, and more the workings of a dynamic, vital syncretism. Some scholars, such as Jeffrey Russell, a respected historian of Witchcraft, dismissed Gardner's work and assumed that he made the whole thing up. Thanks to the work of Gardner's friend and pupil, Doreen Valiente, the existence of at least one person mentioned by him 'Old Dorothy' (Dorothy Clutterbuck) has been verified. Heselton's book identifies even more people with an interest in spiritual matters who knew Gardner and much of this book is an attempt to clarify their role.

The main question still remains: how much of the tradition was *in vivo* when Gardner discovered it, and how much did he add himself? This book is a balanced attempt to answer that question, supplying information where it is available and using intuition, perfectly understandable in a writer who writes from a Wiccan perspective, to further his arguments. Information is primary in dealing with the people Gardner met while living in Highcliffe. Heselton clearly feels that Gardner did discover a 'surviving Witchcraft tradition' and that Dorothy Clutterbuck, the Mason family and Edith Woodford-Grimes (Dafo) were all members. Gardner attended meetings of a local Rosicrucian group known as the Crotona Fellowship where he met a group of people who recognised him as 'of the blood'. Heselton identifies them as members of the Mason family, and provides evidence that they were involved in theosophy, co-masonry and Rosicrucianism.

However, whether they were hereditary Witches with an independent tradition of their own (and not just participating in the ongoing evolution with Gardner himself) is more difficult to establish. Although interesting, the material suggesting they were Witches (pp.110-115), depends on hearsay and written hints that date to the 1950's at the earliest, the period when Gardner was busy publicising his system and creating a suitable history for it.

The chapter on Dafo, the Witch who initiated Gardner into the Craft, establishes a possible connection with the Mason family, and a more certain connection with Gardner. It also illustrates both the strength and weakness of Heselton's approach. He suggests (p. 120) that Edith Woodford-Grimes added a hyphen to create a more aristocratic sounding name because of its similarity to a composer called Amy Woodforde-Finden about whom she might have known. There follows a short biography of a composer not connected in any way with Gardner's movement. The amount of information given is commendable, but it can be distracting and tangential. There are a number of contradictory accounts of Gardner's meeting with Dafo, but again the question is whether she was instructing him in an independent tradition or close to him during the period when he himself was weaving the fabric of Wicca from multiple sources. She clearly retired from the proceedings when Gardner began to publicise his material for reasons which are not entirely clear. In his study, *The Triumph of the Moon*, Professor Ronald Hutton suggests that she is the actual person behind the persona of Old Dorothy.

This figure is quite rightly described as

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'a character who looms large in Wiccan folklore'. Heselton is convinced, on the strength of her diaries (actually day books mostly in verse) that she was an important member of the New Forest Witch coven with whom Gardner and his friends from the Rosicrucian society joined up. This reviewer did not find the argument convincing. Heselton tries very hard to find pagan references in the rather conventional nature imagery in Dorothy's diary. He claims, for example, that Dorothy referred to 'a nameless being whom we can only identify with the Goddess'. The issue surely is whether Dorothy identified this being with the Goddess. That Wiccans might do so, only creates a circularity in the argument. A second suggestion, that her use of nature constitutes 'strong and deeply felt pagan expression', is highly subjective (pp.164-65). The same intense nature imagery, and lack of obvious orthodox Christian reference, could be found in other writers, the poet Swinburne for example, but this does not a practising Witch make. And to suggest that because Dorothy liked fairies, the 'wicked fairy' in one of her entries was a coded term for 'Witch', does take speculation a little too far (p.200). However, it is good to have

the extracts and the information on Dorothy, and Heselton himself admits that the case for Dorothy's involvement is far from proved.

Factual information is less readily available regarding the circumstances of Gardner's initiation, namely whether a coven existed in the New Forest and the details of a ritual performed to stop Hitler's invasion. All the sources and their variations are assembled and assessed. However the real problem again is not whether an initiation or anti-invasion ritual took place, but whether these rituals belonged to a pre-existing tradition of Witchcraft or to a new one with Gardner himself as catalyst.

The author treats as reasonable the idea that Witches attempted to stop Hitler's invasion and assesses the likelihood of two earlier anti-invasion stories linked with the Napoleonic Wars and the Spanish Armada. He is personally sympathetic, in the context of the New Forest background, to the notion that William Rufus had some connection with a magical fraternity. If there were supporting evidence for these things, then yes the likelihood of a Wiccan tradition going back at least to the 16th century (the original date given by Gardner for his

Book of Shadows) would be a possibility. One cannot accuse the author of slapdash research, and he admits (p.215) that the evidence for a New Forest coven is not proven. The difficulty is that the author relies heavily in this context on the hearsay/survivalist 'what if' kind of arguments that are most likely to be questioned. Anti-invasion folklore is not unknown, and often, like the women in red petticoats convincing the French that they are soldiers, has an element of credibility and a great deal of narrative embellishment. It is equally possible that these stories are simply a re-working by Gardner (or someone) of the Berwick Witches incident in order to cast his Craft as a positive force for good. The suggestion that the Rufus stone was a focus for Witchcraft (p. 232) is a good example of just the sort of tradition Gardner set in motion. Rufus as Witch leader and sacrifice is found in Margaret Murray's writing. More contemporary documents, for example Walter Map (friend and confidant of Henry II), record prophetic dreams before Rufus's death, but nothing of magic.

What does come across in the more speculative ways in which the author handles evidence is the importance of intuition and belief in reincarnation in Wiccan thinking. In this context, a strict historical time-scale would be less important. While Gardner did not fabricate the events, he was a prime mover in creating rituals in which folk tradition forms the least important element in comparison with various occult traditions. It is difficult to reconcile Gardner's highly organised, hereditary, overwhelmingly positive and ritualised Craft with Witchcraft material from southern Britain or indeed anywhere. Instances of

Witch families are recorded in the trials and many practitioners of magic attribute their material to forbears, but this is not quite the multigenerational, carefully nurtured lines necessary to Gardner's view. Witches working in groups are comparatively rare (except in the trial records and this may very well be slanted), and there is little evidence for books and complex rituals. In addition, the actions of Witches tend to have a domestic focus (and often involve cursing), with little evidence for attempts to alter the course of history as Gardner claimed his Witch coven had done in defending Britain against invaders. (It is worth noting that the Berwick Witches were accused of trying to kill the king, not protect the country). If anything, Gardner's material shows some similarity to the work of cunning men and women, but even here, the tight organisations and the concern with world events is lacking. However there are striking parallels (and this has been pointed out by other scholars, notably Aidan Kelly and Ronald Hutton) with the revival of ritual magic in the 18th and 19th centuries. It does seem, on present knowledge, that Gardner fused the idea that the Witch cult had survived as a secret religion (as argued in Murray and Leland) with principles of Rosicrucianism and Masonism as mediated by Crowley's OTO and other organisations. What Heselton's book does suggest is that the input for this process was probably more complex than anyone realised (or Gardner himself let on). If it has not furthered the argument about organised Witchcraft prior to Gardner, it has certainly illuminated and clarified the contemporary context.

## THE GODDESS AND THE ALPHABET: THE CONFLICT BETWEEN WORD AND IMAGE

by Leonard Shlain  
1983. Princeton UP, xii + 154 pp.

*Reviewed by Brian Hayden  
Simon Fraser University*

It is the central thesis of this book that cultures which do not have writing exist in an idyllic pure state of mental, social, gender, and ideological harmony where goddesses reign or co-reign with gods. According to Shlain, the introduction of writing changed all this, leading to left-brain dominance, and therefore analytical, linear, aggressive, patriarchal patterns of thought and behaviour. To wit:

Prior to the Old Testament, there did not exist any society that prevented women from conducting significant sacraments, but the first religion based on a book, and all subsequent Western literate religions, banned women from officiating over important ceremonies. (p. 111)

The perceptions of anyone who learned how to send and receive information by means of regular, sequential, linear rows of abstract symbols were wrenched from a balanced, centrist position toward the dominating, masculine side of the human psyche. (p. 63)

In every society that learned the written word, the female deity lost ground to the male deity ... women lost their hold and fell from grace—economically, politically, and spiritually. (p. 63)  
Placing the pen the the fighting hand  
etches aggression into the written word ...

Patriarchy and misogyny have been the inevitable result. (p. 44)

Shlain also argues that the Israelites waged wars because they worshiped god through words (p. 102), while ancient Egypt is portrayed as a woman's utopia because picture symbols were used and jewelry was forged instead of swords (p.62).

These are sweeping generalizations and controversial claims, but can they be justified? Shlain's arguments and citations will undoubtedly seem seductive to those with no background in archaeology and anthropology. However, it must be readily apparent to even the most naive student of these disciplines that neither Shlain's information nor his reasoning can bear close examination. One wonders if the entire book has not been put together as a spoof of some of the more outlandish claims by popular feminist writers.

A few simple observations would seem to be in order. First of all, it is hardly the case that preliterate societies generally honoured women or that their roles were balanced and harmonious with those of men. Throughout most of New Guinea, the Amazon, Mesoamerica, and Africa, women's roles in tribal illiterate societies are unenviably low—one needs only to be reminded of such practices as infibulation and female circumcision. Furthermore, if patriarchy developed from writing, why were so many preliterate societies patriarchal? Nor is it the case that every society that did adopt writing became patriarchal. The best prehistoric case is probably Minoan Crete where Linear A and B writing systems were used.

Almost all chiefdoms and states (and many tribes) were established by dint of military might, and as such they tended to be dominated by aggressive males and

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their armies. These are the forces that result in patriarchal systems and complex societies. It was the emergence of complex societies that subsequently led to writing as an attempt to deal with the increasing elaboration of sociopolitical systems.

It is also incredulous that anyone could portray Egypt as a non-violent woman's utopia. The position of elite women may have been relatively high, but the power of Egyptian elites was based on military conquests from the start to the finish, as clearly exemplified by the Narmer Palette and the scenes of Rames II leading his armies in invasions of Near Eastern neighbors. Nor did the Egyptians have a monopoly on making jewelry. Virtually every elite in the world—even in the most patriarchal and militaristic states—have underwritten the production of jewelry.

Moreover, Shlain is in a real dilemma trying to explain how such writing systems—confined universally to a very small number of scribes in every society up until the Industrial Revolution—could have had such a pervasive impact on entire communities and large populations. Furthermore, when one considers that progress in women's rights and increased status for women has gone hand in hand with the truly widespread increases in literacy for entire populations

which has occurred since the Industrial Revolution, it is apparent that Shlain's theoretical bucket has so many holes that it will retain nothing of worth. Does he really think that all literate women, past and present, have succumbed to left brain patriarchal, misogynistic aggressiveness?

Perhaps one would not be surprised to find favorable reviews of books like Shlain's *The Goddess and the Alphabet* in popular Pagan magazines, however, it is distressing to see this kind of book taken seriously in a journal like *The Pomegranate* (Issue 16) which has aspirations of scholastic respectability. From the viewpoint of academic archaeology and anthropology, Shlain's book is yet another amateur attempt to interpret the past by someone with no training in the field, but with some reasonable credentials in an unrelated discipline—somewhat like a movie star trying to be president. The result is what might be generously labelled “archaeological science fiction.” As such, it belongs on the bookshelf alongside tomes by Erich Von Danniken and Barry Fell, and it hardly warrants serious attention except as an unfortunate example of sociopolitical fantasy.

*A COMMUNITY OF  
WITCHES:  
CONTEMPORARY  
NEOPAGANISM AND  
WITCHCRAFT IN THE  
UNITED STATES*

by Helen Berger. 1999  
Columbia, SC: University of SC Press  
Hardcover, 148 pp, \$39.95 Cdn.

*Reviewed by Sian Reid*

No one can accuse Helen Berger of rushing her research. *A Community of Witches* is the product of eleven years of participant observation work among Neopagans in the Northeast United States, including the observation of one coven from its inception to its dissolution more than a decade later. She has supplemented her qualitative work with a more broadly-based survey to which she received more than 2000 responses.

This is neither a general overview nor a narrowly conceived ethnography, although the extensive use of ethnographic material lends the work much of its colour and richness. Readers hoping to discover broad demographic generalizations about American witches or a *Drawing Down the Moon*-style catalogue of witchcraft groups will be disappointed by Berger. Her goal is much more focused and much more academic; she wishes to explore Neopagan witchcraft as a “religion of late modernity”, following the usage of American social theorist Anthony Giddens, and to

examine the changes it is undergoing as it matures.

Berger's analysis is among the finest examples I've seen of the level of insight one can obtain about Neopagan religion when one brackets aside its ‘unusualness’ and takes it seriously as a legitimate product of its cultural context. Using the same sociological concepts that are used when examining other contemporary phenomena, such as routinization, life politics, communities of choice and moral re-embedding, Berger offers her academic colleagues a fascinating example of late modern cultural innovation and adaptation, and her participants and their peers a thoughtful, serious, and grounded interpretation of how their beliefs and practices intersect with and elaborate some of the leading-edge strands of social theory.

If I have a reservation about Berger at all, it is that most of her information sources and observation locations seem to have been dominated by ‘eclectic’ Neopagans. Any differences in attitude or approach between these respondents and more traditional Gardnerian and Alexandrian practitioners are not brought out in the analysis; both sorts of groups are simply considered under the heading of ‘gender-inclusive’ groups, which has the potential to be misleading. To give her the benefit of the doubt, it may simply have been that she did not have access to sufficient numbers of ‘traditional’ respondents for any differences to become apparent.

On the whole, however, this is an extremely well-written and thought provoking analysis. If Tanya Luhrmann's *Persuasions of a Witch's Craft* occupies a prominent place on your shelves, this is one you'll want to tuck up right next to it.

*KEEPERS OF THE FLAME:  
INTERVIEWS WITH ELDERS  
OF TRADITIONAL  
WITCHCRAFT IN AMERICA*

by Morganna Davies & Aradia Lynch

*Reviewed by Stephanie Martin*

This book follows in the footsteps of its sisters, *Drawing Down the Moon* by Adler and *People of the Earth Speak Out* by Hopman. Its focus however is limited to interviews with American Traditional Craft Elders, thus filling a niche that has been awaiting its writing.

The authors' intent was to document the experiences, views, and opinions of those who were instrumental in laying the groundwork for traditional Witchcraft as it exists in the United States today. The authors spoke with Craft Elders from a wide variety of Traditions ranging from Alexandrian to the Tuatha de Danann, as well as other Traditional Craft leaders, including those who are known to the public at large such as Hans Holzer, Judy Harrow, Chas Clifton, Jimahl, Raymond Buckland, Leo Martello and those who are mainly known only within the Traditional Craft sphere.

The first part of the book briefly introduces the various Traditions represented and documents the experiences of the Elders of those Traditions as they first discovered and entered into the Craft. These narratives are reminders to those who are relative newcomers to the Craft (post 1980) of the difficulty that these Elders had in finding books and altar materials, not to mention a teacher or coven!

The second part of the book is a question and answer session containing the opinions of

the previously profiled Elders. Issues ranging from Craft antiquity to opinions on the role that Traditional Craft should play in the Contemporary Pagan movement are contained in this section.

The second part contains the meat of the book. With questions such as: "What are your feelings on Craft degrees and hierarchy?" or "Do you believe that traditional secrecy has helped or harmed the Craft?", the extraordinarily wide range of experience and training comes to the fore. The reader can gain insight into the beginnings of the American Craft movement through the Elders' replies which illustrate the experience of having a long-term involvement in the Craft. The variety of the opinions presented help to illuminate the assortment of the people involved in Traditional Craft as well as, to a limited extent, the differences (and similarities) of the Traditions' philosophies.

This book is an important look into the evolution of the Craft movement from the days when secrecy was still of paramount importance to the more public Craft as it exists today in the United States. Early Craft Elders are getting older and, in fact, three interviewees passed away before the publication of the book. This text gives a voice to many of the Elders who, until this time, have either chosen to remain behind the scenes from the beginning of their Craft involvement (and were known to few outside of their Tradition) or those who have 'retired' and become solitary practitioners. For those interested in Craft history, especially the Craft as it has developed in the United States, this book gives valuable insight into both the roots and the development of the Craft through the opinions of Traditional Craft Elders on relevant matters such as the issues of teaching, public tolerance of the Craft, and even the necessity of Traditional Craft in today's world.

*WICCAN COVENS:  
HOW TO START AND  
ORGANIZE YOUR OWN*

by Judy Harrow  
Citadel Press, 1999  
285 pages. \$12.95 paper

*Reviewed by Fritz Muntean*

*A shorter version of this review is about to appear in an upcoming issue of Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions. This magazine is highly recommended to our readers, who are invited to visit its website at <www.novareligio.com>.*

The last twenty years have seen a noticeable drift away from the coven as the primary organizational unit of modern Witchcraft. A wide-spread desire for acceptance and respectability, combined with a populist call to political action, has led to the current preeminence of large organizations (Wiccan 'Churches' and Witchcraft 'Collectives'). At the same time, the proliferation of popular 'how-to' books about the Craft has convinced many beginners that solitary practice is the norm rather than the exception. By challenging many of the assumptions on which these trends are based, and by providing support and direction to coveners and coven leaders, *Wiccan Covens* may serve to reverse these trends. Harrow's observations on the dynamics of coven organization are based not only on decades of experience, but also on her extensive readings in the sociology of group workings. Considerable progress has been made in this field since the late 70s, and Harrow's readers are provided

with extensive references to state-of-the-art literature.

Harrow encourages her readers to regard Wicca as more of a religious order than a church. Covens, she says, "are not tiny congregations; they are more like non-resident monasteries", and a seminary "is not the same thing as a Sunday School" (83). Although the practice of holding separate events for beginners and experienced practitioners is believed by many to be hopelessly elitist, experience and reflection have convinced Harrow otherwise. Beginner's circles, she believes, are limited to beginning-level activities by the inexperience of the participants, so she recommends that outer- and inner-court activities be separated in order to provide more experienced practitioners with a suitable environment in which to perform their own deeper and more contemplative work.

Harrow makes a firm break with the 20 year-old tradition of militant egalitarianism in Wiccan organization. She states that many groups which begin as non-hierarchical collectives have been observed to develop emergent leadership, whereas lineage-based covens with clearly designated leaders often move toward more collective decision making as they mature. The egalitarian collective may be an ideal toward which many aspire, but it appears to be one that requires more maturity than most beginners can provide (25). What's worse, a premature leap at the ideal state of non-hierarchy may serve to mask the development of covert leadership—with its covert norms, unstated rules, and other unfortunate characteristics—"if anything made more painful by the concealing mask of consensus process" (264).

According to Harrow, the primary value of hierarchical organization in covens is its



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acknowledgment and support of elders. Wiccan elders are those who have been doing the work longer than others, have earned the respect of the community in the process, and whose presence makes it both easier and safer for beginners to work through the process of initiation (133). All recently received wisdom to the contrary, Harrow promotes the traditional model of one coven leader of each gender, on the grounds that it "allows Wiccan students to observe the full range of human functioning in the clergy role" (215). The Priestess as Goddess and the Priest as God may be "a simplistic view, a caricature of human function", but as long as we understand that the masculine and feminine energies which Wiccans represent as God and Goddess do not reside exclusively in one gender or another, it does make the Deities of Wicca easier to understand — especially for the beginner (214).

Readers are cautioned against involvement with those needy and insecure people who view magic as a means to achieve power and control. In contrast to the considerable emphasis on self-initiation and self-empowerment in those segment of modern Witchcraft which are most influ-

enced by the Human Potential Movement, Harrow clearly recommends Erik Erickson's model of maturity (the willingness to move beyond self-absorption by contributing to the human future through teaching or mentoring) over Maslow's emphasis, in his hierarchy of human needs, on self-esteem and self-actualization (193). Coven leaders are also warned that people whose personal lives and careers are constantly in crisis, or those who are mentally unstable in an obvious way, are notorious for interfering with the focus of a group. While in their early stages of development, covens often function as growth and support groups, but the kind of support which covens can provide must not be confused with therapy. Dealing with the in-depth psychological problems of individual group members "is far beyond the competence of most coven leaders" (111).

*Wiccan Covens* does not exactly wage a frontal assault on the non-hierarchical, consensus-based ideal promoted by Starhawk and her followers, but it criticizes many of the assumptions on which these views are based and seems to have been at least partially written as a correc-

tive to the Reclaiming model of coven organization.

Unfortunately, a certain amount of slippage is occasionally apparent between Harrow's professional sophistication and the interpersonal demands of the Wiccan community in which she practices. At one point, she admits that grandiose titles such as a 'Witch Queen' or 'Magus' are overblown. 'Grandparent' "would be both warmer and more accurate". But she still maintains that (apparent evidence to the contrary) the underlying principles of this practice are psychologically sound (257). On several occasions, she informs her readers that the inability to distinguish between myth and truth—as well as the belief that symbols and metaphors are objective facts—are among the more corrosive symptoms of fundamentalism (251). Newcomers, she recommends, should be advised that Wiccans were not the target of the Inquisition, and that nine million women did not die as a result. In spite of this, Harrow continues to refer to the brutal persecution, repression, and destruction of "Earth-based traditions of Europe" (223) and "Pagan worshipers" (260). It would appear that she is reluctant to make a complete break with the currently discredited, though still popular, belief that modern Witchcraft is descended from a tradition which was actively and violently suppressed in the past.

These minor flaws notwithstanding, this book is highly recommended for both practitioners and students of Witchcraft. Its overall professionalism qualifies it as a singular event among writings by leaders of the movement, and it may prove to be a watershed in the evolution of the Wiccan coven.

READERS' FORUM  
*continued from page 3*

From the comments made by Ms Allen, I am inclined to agree with Starhawk and ask from whom did Ms Allen get her research information? It would not appear that she thoroughly researched the goddess movement, witches, pagan theology, or its participants but relied on the understanding and beliefs of outsiders.

*Jill Adix  
Antioch University*

ELEANOR PEREZ WRITES:

I read the letters in your issue #16 from Starhawk and Michael York with great interest. I find myself in an awkward position: as a longtime fan of Starhawk, I'm disturbed to find myself agreeing with Prof York and wondering what Starhawk can possibly be thinking.

Can it be that Starhawk has become this isolated—and her position so sectarian? Is she not aware that, with one notable exception, the scholarly writers whom Charlotte Allen quotes are, themselves, well-known feminists or devoted Goddess-worshipping Pagans? Some of them, like Ronald Hutton, have more time in the Craft than even Starhawk herself.

Ms Allen must have interviewed a large number of Wiccans for this article—I'm a fairly minor player, and she interviewed me. [*Ed note: Allen and her editor exchanged 34 e-letters with us here at The Pom.*] Did Starhawk believe that she was the only one being interviewed? Or is she unaware that the Neolithic Utopian Matriarchate paradigm, with which she identifies so strongly, carries about the same weight among most of the thoughtful Goddess devotees of today as "God created the world in six calendar days" and "Jesus was born of a woman who never had sexual intercourse" does among thoughtful Christians.

I would hate to believe, as Prof York

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suggests, that it is Starhawk's commitment to making a movie of the life of Maria Gimbutas which has caused her position in regard to Gimbutas' later, more contentious, theories to become so entrenched and to be championed so defensively.

But Starhawk's partner in this venture is Donna Read, the woman whose film "The Burning Times" treats as factual the most marginal, even mendacious, information, and which continues to be a major stumbling block for those of us who are working to improve relationships between Pagans and Christians.

The content of Charlotte Allen's article in the *Atlantic Monthly* is scarcely different from any number of pieces that have been appearing in Pagan and New Age magazines for some time. The best example that comes to mind is an article by Richard Smoley in the issue of *Gnosis* magazine dedicated to Witchcraft and Paganism a couple of years ago. [Ed note: "The Old Religion" (*Gnosis* #48, Summer 1998). The Pom reprinted this article in #6, Fall 98.] I know that there are thoughtful and educated people in Starhawk's Reclaiming Collective. Maybe the time has come for them to encourage Starhawk to read more broadly—and perhaps to choose her causes, and her confederates, with greater care.

Eleanor Perez  
UCLA

MARY LOU MOSER WRITES:

It made me very sad to read Starhawk's response to Charlotte Allen's *Atlantic Monthly*

article, but I can't say it was completely unexpected. Those who were surprised and disheartened to find such an unfortunate example of obscurantism, should have been keeping current with Starhawk's more recent writings. In an interview with her and Carol Christ, 'Life, Death, and the Goddess' in *Gnosis* magazine (#48, 1998: 28-34), Starhawk praises "education outside of academia, through [New Age] workshops" and compares it favourably with "the university system of the late Middle Ages, where you have self-organized classes around things people want to learn, with no grades, no external validation for learning ... [where] you can do anything, you can explore anything. You can teach in ways you can't in academia." The introduction and notes to the 20th anniversary edition of *The Spiral Dance* contains a number of equally anti-intellectual and anti-scholarly statements.

Of all the unfortunate policies embraced by the Catholic Church over the centuries, none had quite so negative and long-lasting an effect on civilization as the centuries-long opposition to learning and intellectual enlightenment. Obscurantism is a dreadful burden for any religion to bear, and it is more than unfortunate to find it lurking, as it were, so near the very heart of Pagan Goddess spirituality.

Mary Lou Moser  
Toronto