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Exploring the Paths of Classical Witchcraft in Modern Practice

The broad category of Classical Witchcraft, which has become popularly known as Traditional Witchcraft is a wide and diverse category of practice that stretches across cultures and history. There are many examples and forms that this version of Witchcraft takes, and many angles that the work of magic can be explored from. Classical Witchcraft was heavily influenced by alchemy and astrology, drawing from the medieval grimoire tradition and ceremonial magic. It also has elements of Christian and Jewish Gnosticism and remnants of early Pagan traditions. There were many local magical traditions whose folkways grew from contact with the local land, and any fragments of mythology that happened to make their way in. The practices of Traditional Witchcraft do not come from a single tradition but are a collective of occult wisdom preserved throughout the ages in different forms. These obscure practices speak of a Universal magical understanding of the inner workings of nature that have been lost to time in their complete and unbroken form.

Connecting With the Land

These are the rustic practices of the hedge rider and cunning man that characterize the traditional witch's practice. Our altars are outdoors, erected as needed in the sacred groves that nature provides and the land is given back when our rites are complete. The tools that we use are often forged by nature, hewn by the elements; rough looking compared to the pristine tools of the ritual magician. We work with roots and herbs creating potions and formulas for journeying and leaving our physical bodies behind. We seek to forge connections and partnerships with spirits both dark and light to further our knowledge and experience. The symbols and connections we seek to form our own personal cosmology come from the mythology of antiquity, the language of the stars and the plants and those practices rooted in tradition and history. The idea of traditional witchcraft is not one that is opposed to innovation, but one that embraces an exploration of the Witch archetype and the spirits that have allied themselves with our practice. New symbolic connections are made within the practitioner through direct experience often guided by familiar spirits, which allows one to develop an individual set of spiritual tools that can be used to enhance their practice.

There are a number of symbol sets that the traditional practitioner can draw from to inform their practice. Some of the broadest categories that contain the most symbols would be the sister sciences of astrology and alchemy. These classical sciences of antiquity contain everything from correspondences for various stones and herbs, to symbols associated with the celestial bodies or distant stars, and images representing complex spiritual operations and transmutations through the various alchemical processes. Even for a practitioner of folk-based practices these ancient sciences can add additional layers of power through their informed applications. By understanding the diverse forces and entities represented by these symbol sets we can unlock the keys to contacting and incorporating these primal forces into our Work.

The practice of *Wortcunning*, the investigation of the occult properties of plants, and the research of plants historically associated with magic and sorcery are all within the auspices of esoteric herbalism or green witchcraft, which is often a large portion of the traditional witch's

focus. Herbs, roots and plant preparations are often included in many classical spells and rituals and are often the focal point of such rites. *The Poison Path*, as it has become commonly known takes particular interest in the infamous plants of the medieval witch's garden, often poisonous and mind altering in nature. These plants have been seen as teachers to those spiritually inclined individuals since the times of the tribal cultures practicing European Shamanism. It is this connection to the spirit world that earned these plants the name "entheogen" which means to connect with the Divine. This is also why they were seen as a threat by the early Church, hence we find mention of them in Inquisition papers that describe the infamous *Unguentum Sabbati*, the Witches' Flying Ointment. A study of traditional plant practices assists the modern practitioner in finding specific plants that are willing to act as allies.

Finding Spiritual Allies

The traditional witch is on a quest of discovery to find the elder spirits that are most aligned with their art, and to connect with them through ritual, myth, and symbol. These deities are hidden in plain sight oftentimes within the widely known pantheons of classical mythology. There are certain archetypal themes that are followed by the pantheons of the world's mythology often repeating certain themes and categorizations, while others blend together in different ways. The entities that are most sympathetic to the practice of magic are the shapeshifters, the Underworld guides, and keepers of the realms of the dead. They are the spirits of the crossroads and the in-between places that we seek to forge connections with because it is they who acted as teachers to our earliest ancestors. Those spirits who first showed interest in humanity bringing us Fire, and teaching us the arts of civilization are also part of this group of entities. These are the entities that the traditional witch and green sorcerer seek to form mutual contracts with.

It is a common theme in mythology that certain spirits for various different reasons took it upon themselves to teach humans how to grow and harvest food from the Earth by following the seasonal cycles. These were the first tutelary spirits who helped us transition from hunting and gathering to establishing cities and civilization. The Promethean Spirits of the fire and forge were also teachers to humanity, often punished by the ruling class of gods for helping humanity become more godlike. They taught us how to draw metal from the Earth and how to shape it into weapons and tools, the art of the blacksmith is highly symbolic and when ritualized sheds light on numerous mysteries. These are the gifts of artifice, given to mankind by the spirit world for their betterment. The spirits within this category are patrons of the arts, and as such the arts of magic, alchemy and astrology are within their realms. It was these very gifts that incited the jealousy of the gods, and we see many tutelary spirits transformed into trickster spirits that cannot be trusted. This led to their eventual association with the Devil of folklore, as well as the mythos of Lucifer the Lightbringer who figures prominently in traditional witchcraft lore. In traditional witchcraft, rekindling a connection with these initiatory teacher spirits is a central theme in the *ethos* of the witch.

Spirits of the Witch's Wood

The spirits most closely aligned with modern traditional witchcraft are the multitude of beings that make up the realms of elemental and nature spirits, the spirits of the green realm.

They are a large and multi-faceted category of spirits of the land and individual plants, as well as the powerful *genius loci* that have grown overtime in sacred places. These are our closest allies and most familiar spirits who willingly seek to work with us. They make up the Fairy Host, the many land-wights and other guardians of place. They are also our personal plant spirit familiars with whom we cultivate our own private relationship with. There are many unique benefits for both the practitioner and spirit of this mutual relationship. One of the quintessential practices of traditional witchcraft is the facilitation of spirit pacts and relationships with the beings that present themselves as allies.

The ruling spirits of the Wildwood are tricksters and shapeshifters with many lessons and secrets to share if we can solve their riddles. They are patrons of the herbalist and alchemist, and can teach us about a plant's unique medicine as well as the nature of a particular plant spirit. They can help us understand how to approach potential allies and the appropriate offerings to make. Initially it is through the study of classical plant lore and historic records that we come to understand the particular *genius* or *daimon* of the plant in question. Further understanding is gained through regular communion and contact with the physical plant in its natural environment and the spirit of the plant as well. Regular offerings and pacts made with the plant ally help to empower it and manifest its qualities in one's life and practice. The point being to gain an individual inner understanding and connection to the particular spirit.

Old Lore Applied in a Modern Context

No matter how ancient our lore is, no matter how reputable the source it comes from; we are still modern practitioners reconstructing historical practices from fragments of data that have been collected over time. Traditional witchcraft can be very intuitive, but there is also an academic side to Old World Witchcraft. I embrace the idea of armchair occultism, or more appropriately academic occultism, which is the applied practice of one's occult studies to gain new understanding. After a certain point that one has internalized enough occult concepts to build their own symbolic cosmology or magical language; they can then incorporate insights received through congress with familiar spirits and other tutelary entities. Many of these symbols, rituals, and gifts received in congress with spirits are unique to the individual, and at this point they are able to start compiling their own collection of lore received directly from the Otherworld.

The Poison Path, or Crooked Way; also known as *Veneficium* to the Romans and *Pharmakon* to the Greeks, is like the Traditional Witchcraft of the green sorcerer. It is part of the wider umbrella of classical old-world witchcraft, that is the focus of traditional practitioners. The path of poisons is informed by the spiritual themes present in Old World Witchcraft and Classical mythology. Many of the plants within this category are poisonous, but they also contain powerful medicines for the mind, body and spirit. The Poison Path is not exclusive to the Baneful Herbs of infamous medieval witchcraft, but any plant with a profound spirit medicine. By studying the chemical composition of these plants and the different effects they have on the human body and psyche; we are able to develop a more nuanced understanding of the occult properties of these plants as well. These are the plants most associated with magic and witchcraft. Often visionary in nature they assist us in reaching out to the spirit world, others

provide the means for spirits to manifest in our circles. Many of these plants have connections through their mythology and folklore to those beings most commonly connected to Witchcraft. The study of traditional plant practices not limited to the green realm, but contain many of the magical beliefs that were once widespread. It is the goal of the traditional practitioner to piece together these fragments into a working system.