
BOOK REVIEW: The New Edition of Leland's *Aradia*

Aradia, or The Gospel of the Witches
by Charles G. Leland

Translated by Mario Pazzaglini, PhD and
Dina Pazzaglini; with additional material by
Chas S. Clifton, Robert Mathiesen, and
Robert Chartowich; foreword by Stewart Farrar.
Blaine, Washington: Phoenix Publishing, 1998.

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In 1899, amateur folklorist Charles G. Leland first published *Aradia, or The Gospel of the Witches*, a collection of Italian spells, conjurations and legends which he claimed to have obtained from a Florentine witch named Maddalena. Leland translated the texts and strung them together with interpretations based on the prevailing folklore theories of his time, suggesting that they were survivals of a pagan religion dating back to the days of ancient Rome and Etruria. From the very beginning, *Aradia* has been surrounded by controversy. Neither Italian nor American folklorists have ever taken it seriously. Leland was suspected of having fabricated the text himself, as well as having invented his key informant. Even those who accepted her existence believed Maddalena, a Florentine fortune-teller of dubious repu-

tation, may have concocted material to satisfy the American folklorist who was paying her for information. In spite of this, as Chas S. Clifton demonstrates in his essay "The Significance of *Aradia*" (pp. 59-80), *Aradia* has become a fundamental text in the 20th century Witchcraft revival. A possible source for parts of the Charge of the Goddess, it has influenced many later Neopagan texts and thinkers, including Gerald B. Gardner or his predecessors in the New Forest coven, Doreen Valiente, and some of the most influential theologians in Dianic Witchcraft.

The publication of a new, expanded edition from Phoenix promises to shed light on many aspects of this intriguing document. The product of interdisciplinary collaboration, it includes Leland's original text plus a new translation by Mario Pazzaglini, essays by several scholars giving historical and cultural background, and some previously unpublished materials. The book is organized into three sections. Part I includes essays contextualizing the material: Robert Mathiesen's "Charles G. Leland and the Witches of Italy: the Origin of *Aradia*," Chas S. Clifton's "The Significance of *Aradia*," and Mario Pazzaglini's "Leland and the Magical World of *Aradia*." Part II consists of the texts themselves: Leland's original version, Pazzaglini's new translation, and a line-by-line translation with the original Italian, a corrected Italian version, the English translation, and annotations. Part III includes commentaries by Pazzaglini on magical principles in *Aradia* and on the firefly verses, an essay by Robert Chartowich entitled "Enigmas of *Aradia*," a ballad Leland composed in Italian called "La Bella Strega" ("The Beautiful Witch") and a photocopy of a letter sent

to him by Maddalena in 1895. As is almost inevitable in collaborative edited works, this one is somewhat uneven in tone and quality. While the new translation is valuable, and some of the contextualizing materials are very helpful in understanding *Aradia* as a document, others are more problematic.

ESTABLISHING AUTHENTICITY

The essays by Robert Mathiesen and Mario Pazzaglini in Part I go a long way towards clearing up some of the mysteries surrounding *Aradia*. In some ways, these are among the book's most valuable contributions. Working with Leland's personal papers in the archives of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Museum of Art, and the Library of Congress, Mathiesen is able to establish that Maddalena was a documented historical person, and that she was Leland's principal informant for *Aradia*, as well as for *Legends of Florence* (1896) and *Etruscan Roman Remains in Popular Tradition* (1892). In fact, about half of *Aradia's* 15 chapters are actually materials which Leland had published in these other works (p. 35). By closely examining Leland's hand-written, pre-publication draft of the texts, Mathiesen concludes that while Leland revised much of the English text as he went along, the Italian parts show no editorial changes, suggesting that he was copying them from another source. This lends some credence to his claims that he received an actual manuscript from Maddalena.

But Mathiesen incisively observes that the text of *Aradia* is clearly intersubjective—it is the product of the interaction between two unique individuals, Leland

and Maddalena, and reflects both their interests. It is apparent that Leland's own views of magic, folklore and 'survivals' shaped his editing, translation and interpretation of Maddalena's materials. At the same time, Maddalena, a consummate fortune-teller, was skilled enough to intuit Leland's interests and predilections, and to select and edit material from her own tradition which she thought would please her patron. Mathiesen makes clear that while this does not detract from the text's authenticity, it does make it idiosyncratic rather than typical or representative of any Italian magical folk tradition.

What is quite typical of an Italian peasant worldview is the oppositional quality of the verses. Mathiesen shows how the anti-clerical, anti-hierarchical counter-religion of *Aradia* is actually in keeping with the flavor of much Italian folklore—the voice of peasants against their historical oppressors, the Church and the landowning elite.

The first part of Mario Pazzaglini's essay "Leland and the Magical World of *Aradia*" (pp. 81-105) further illuminates the peculiarities of the original text of *Aradia*. In translating Leland's Italian passages, Pazzaglini had before him a difficult task. He worked from the original manuscript, now among Leland's collected papers in Philadelphia. The manuscript is in Leland's own hand; the 'original' which Maddalena allegedly gave him has never been found. The Italian in the manuscript has multiple problems which make the translator's work especially vexing: errors in spelling, missing and misused words, lack of punctuation and diacritical marks, and lack of gender agreement between nouns and their modifiers. Pazzaglini explains this by suggesting that Leland



either copied incorrectly, or received a text composed by a person who made many errors in writing Italian. Yet these are not the sorts of errors usually made by a semi-literate native Italian speaker writing down a text. Perhaps the most likely interpretation Pazzaglini proposes is that the text at some point went from oral into written tradition, and that many errors are the result of mis-hearing Italian or Tuscan dialect words. Pazzaglini correctly points out that any collection of folk magical incantations would most likely have existed originally in dialectal form; yet the rhymes in *Aradia* are all close to standard Italian. He infers that at some point the texts went from dialect to standard Italian to English—a series of steps which leaves a great deal of room for mistranslation, misinterpretation and lost meanings.

Pazzaglini has been able to compare some of the material in *Aradia* with material currently in oral tradition in Italy, a fascinating and worthwhile endeavor. While some of his informants recognized in *Aradia* general principles pertaining to the magico-religious worldview of rural Italy (pp. 435- 441), none reported ever having heard of the person of *Aradia* or of any witches' 'gospel.' In fact, the idea of writing down charms and cures is an anathema to most Italian folk magical practitioners. Pazzaglini

accurately observes that the *Aradia* material has very likely been 'de-Christianized' or 're-paganized' (p. 93), because actual Italian folk magical charms all have some Christian content. These observations reinforce Mathiesen's hypothesis about the idiosyncratic nature of *Aradia*.

Pazzaglini finds current Italian analogues to some of the chants and verses in *Aradia*. He points out in this essay and in "The Firefly Verses" (pp. 443-449) that several chants closely resemble widespread, well-known Italian children's rhymes used in counting out, hand-clapping games, dandling, jumping rope, and catching fireflies—an important clue to the origin of some of Maddalena's material. But unfortunately he presents only a few examples of analogues from contemporary Italian oral tradition. Here is where a greater knowledge of folklore and ethno-

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graphic methods would have been helpful. What is necessary here is a systematic examination of multiple variants of these chants to see which elements are stable over time and place, and a comparison of the *Aradia* material with all the other versions. This is not as difficult a task as it might seem; such chants are readily collected from any speaker of Italian (I remember many of them from my own childhood), and recorded, transcribed examples exist in the Italian Dis-

coteca di Stato and in the archives of the Facoltà di Storia delle Tradizioni Popolari at the University of Rome. Yet Pazzaglini seems strangely unaware of these sources. He limits his fieldwork to areas in his native Emilia-Romagna, a region of Italy near Maddalena's Tuscany, but nevertheless significantly different in dialect and folk culture. And he oddly refers to both Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany as "northern Italy," when linguistically and culturally they are better categorized as part of central Italy.

Pazzaglini is unfortunately out of his depth when it comes to observations about the nature of peasant life in rural Italy. Vast amounts of ethnographic data exist on this subject, yet he makes reference to none of it. His lack of ethnographic knowledge leads him to make some inaccurate interpretations: for example, he considers the ubiquitous nicknames by which families and individuals are known as a protective form of secrecy, when in fact they have been well-documented throughout the Latin Mediterranean as a form of social control, the very opposite of secrecy and protection. Even more problematic is his presentation of Italian rural communities as primitive isolates, preserving unchanged the traditions of yesteryear. In

fact these towns are very well-connected through trade and mass media with the European Economic Community and the outside world, and their folklore has changed to reflect new social realities. Many Italian words are either misspelled or not proofread—*strega* ('witch'; singular) and *streghe* (plural) are misspelled occasionally throughout, and on p. 96 he writes *la compagna* (the [feminine] companion) for *la campagna* (the countryside), leading the reader to wonder about inaccuracies in the rest of the Italian.

THE TRANSLATION

Pazzaglini's new translation is cleaner, closer to original Italian, and easier on the modern reader than Leland's artificial rendition. The new version has been stripped of archaisms and other devices Leland used to make the translation sound more 'old-fashioned,' and thus authentic, to his readers' ears. What it loses in poetry it gains in accuracy, at least most of the time.

Much more interesting is the line-by-line translation, because we see the translator at work and comprehend the arduousness of his task. Here, the errors in the original Italian are clearly contrasted with Pazzaglini's attempts to clean them up, to correct the grammatical errors in agreement, verb tense, and phrasing which make the original so

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problematic. Overall, he has done a remarkable job, and most of his interpretations and conjectures seem to be quite plausible. Occasionally, however, he slips up. On p. 408, for example, in translating Diana's curse upon Endymion, he translates "Che il tuo cuore ritto sempre possa stare / E al amore piú non portai fare ..." as "To have your heart always remain withdrawn / And you will no more be able to make love ..." (p. 408).

In fact, the couplet means something more like "May your heart always remain rigid / erect // And [may you] no longer be able to make love." Diana is either wishing upon Endamone a hard heart, or, more likely, 'cuore' (heart) is a euphemism for penis, as it often is in stornelli (Italian satirical songs), in which case she is cursing him with a perpetual case of priapism. Of course, no translation is ever perfect; but here, as elsewhere, Pazzaglini's missteps could significantly affect the interpretation of the work.

COMMENTARIES

If *Aradia* is not the book of shadows for a 19th century Italian witch cult—and at this point it should be amply obvious that it is not—then what exactly is it? Some of the commentaries by Robert Chartowich and Leland's Italian ballad "La Bella Strega" hint at answers. Chartowich suggests in his essay "Enigmas of *Aradia*" (pp. 451-460) that the material preserves references that might have originated with the Albigensians, one of the heretical groups persecuted by the Inquisition for worshipping Sophia, Isis and Diana (p. 455). Could fragments of this oppositional belief system have survived in the folklore of central Italy, to emerge in the legends of *Aradia*?

He further speculates on the connection between the fireflies, wheat sprigs, fairies and the Eleusynian Mysteries—but here his methodology seems to be based more on free association than on any kind of systematic discipline. His insight are provocative, but not supported by data; they provide material for further investigation.

The ballad Leland composed in Italian is illuminating because it shows that he knew Italian well enough to compose (bad) poetry in imitation of an existing folk tradition, and it demonstrates many of the same kinds of grammatical errors as the Italian verses in *Aradia*. This suggests that whatever Maddalena may have given him originally, Leland probably had a hand in re-shaping it. This was not at all unusual for 19th century folklorists, many of whom sincerely believed they were 'restoring' to ancient texts their 'original' meaning. In so doing, however, completely new works were born. The Grimm brothers, whose *Kinder und Hausmärchen* (1812) set the standard for European folktale collections, heavily edited their material, combining versions, changing endings, and otherwise shaping them to suit their own romantic aesthetics. Elias Lönnrot compiled the Finnish folk epic *The Kalevala* from fragments of ballads which had never been part of an epic tradition. It is in this scholarly context that Leland's *Aradia* must be understood. Neither a forger nor an inventor, Leland was merely compiling and editing material as many of his contemporaries had already done, shaping it to reflect his own biases and beliefs about the folklore as 'survivals' of a religion from an earlier historical period. In attempting to systematize his materials, he actually created a new and unique document.

Aradia

or The Gospel of the Witches

Expanded Edition

This special edition features contributions by several eminent writers:

Mario Pazzaglini, PhD, whose family origins on both sides are deeply rooted in the area where *Aradia* originated, has spent 25 years working on a new translation. He gives a line-by-line transcription showing where Leland made his original errors as a result of his lack of comprehension of the dialect of the area. The new translation is then presented in the same format as the original edition (which is also included here). Mario's research notes are included as well.

Robert Mathiesen, PhD, has been a member of the faculty of Brown University for over 30 years. During the last decade most of his research has been on the historical development of magical theories and practices in Europe and the Americas from the Middle Ages to the present. He writes on the origins of *Aradia*, including the culture and religion of the area, as well as the difficulties involved in translating the book.

Chas Clifton has been studying witchcraft and the occult for over 25 years and has a long list of published books to his name including *Modern Rites of Passage*, *Witchcraft and Shamanism*, and *Sacred Mask, Sacred Dance*. He writes on the significance of *Aradia* on the revival of modern witchcraft.

The foreword by Stewart Farrar includes a short biography of Leland.

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Perhaps we should look at *Aradia* as the first real text of the 20th century Witchcraft revival. In fact, it strongly resembles the materials in many of our books of shadows: collections of folk rhymes, charms and stories from multiple sources with an attempt to systematize them and give them an underlying theology. Mathiesen, Pazzaglini and the editors of this new edition are to be commended for making this material available to scholars in a way that begins to expose the mysteries which have long surrounded it.

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*She is a native speaker of Italian, having grown up in Italy and the United States. She has done field research in Italy on traditional festivals and folklore, as well as on Pagan groups in the San Francisco Bay area, and is currently completing a book on ritual and expressive culture in the movement. She is the author of several articles on Paganism, the guest editor of the special issue of *Ethnologies* devoted to Wicca, and has also published extensively on Italian folklore. During the course of her Pagan research, she became a Gardnerian initiate.*