

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



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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.

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