The Pomegranate READERS’ FORUM

We are pleased to be able to resume publication of our Readers’ Forum. Please contribute 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. Deletions are indicated by ellipses (...) and the full text will always be made available upon request. Writers of published letters will have their subscriptions extended by one or two issues.

Chas Clifton writes:

Maggie Carew’s excellent piece in The Pomegranate #4, with its thesis that William Shakespeare had some knowledge of ceremonial magic, is intriguing and provocative. I wish to point out one misreading of his text, however.

Shakespeare, as Carew rightly said, preferred to elevate ordinary language rather than write some artificially latinate tongue. So he would not have gone to Classical mythology for “eyas/Aias/Ajax” in the lines, “… an aery of children/little eyases, that cry out on top of the question …”

An eyas is a young hawk or falcon, and the image is one of a nest full of hungry little birds, mouths gaping, up in an “aerie” or “eerie” or “aery” or however you wish to spell it — a place where raptors nest.

Although falconry tended to be an upper-class recreation, perhaps he thought his audience would have some passing knowledge of it, the sort that we might have about yacht racing from watching footage of the America’s Cup races. And the wealthier of them might well have gone hawking themselves.

If you know falconers, when they get going with the Anglo-Norman technical jargon, it’s like a quick trip back to the late fifteenth century, let alone Shakespeare’s era!

Maggie Carew replies:

I am grateful to Chas Clifton for pointing this out to me. The whole point of The Pomegranate is that we should learn from it — contributors as well as readers. We always learn from our mistakes. However, I have no excuse for a second mistake in the essay, this one made not from ignorance but from carelessness. It was Shakespeare’s mother, Mary Arden, who died in 1609; his wife outlived him and inherited the ‘second-best bed’. Documents exist which show that Shakespeare was good to his mother and provided well for her after she was widowed, so he must have loved her, and her death might well have affected him in the way I suggested.
Carmella Huggins writes:

Thank you very much for Jenny Gibbon’s excellent article on the Great European Witch Hunt. I especially enjoyed the “Burning Times Quiz.” My husband, who is not a Pagan but is a lawyer, took the quiz and scored 9 out of 10! “Of course,” he said, “trial by neighbors is going to be a bloodbath. Of course things like this happen when central authority breaks down. Of course the Inquisition refused to persecute witchcraft and protected the accused whenever it could. Don’t you people know any European history?”

I would like to ask one question, however. The article never mentions the actual source of the preposterous (and embarrassing) figure of ‘Nine Million Women.’ The first record I know of it was as a dedication at the entrance to Old Gerald’s Witchcraft Museum on the Isle of Man. Did Gardner simply make it up, or was he quoting an existing source?

Jenny Gibbons replies:

Matilda Gage is the person originally responsible for the estimate that there were 9,000,000 deaths in the Great European Witch Hunt. Gage was a suffragist and an early feminist writer. The figure first appears in her book Women, Church, and State (1893). If I remember her book correctly, she was describing how the Church had oppressed women throughout time. Since at that point the Great Hunt was generally blamed on the Catholic Church, I believe Gage created the figure to emphasize the enormity of the Church’s “crimes against women”.

Gage offered no evidence to support this number, and there was no reliable information available to her: at the time, no one had counted the trials of any country. And although she wrote when estimates were at their absolute highest, her figure was still uniquely enormous. The highest estimates of the time generally fell into the one to three million range.

From Gage, the figure entered popular history in two ways. First, as Ronald Hutton noted in Enchante, Gerald Gardner used the number in his witchcraft museum and in The Meaning of Witchcraft. Gardner didn’t credit Gage or cite her directly, though she appears to be his source.

Second, Mary Daly used this estimate in her book Gyn-Ecology. Unlike Gardner, Daly did credit Gage. Many authors picked the number up from Daly’s influential book and repeated it, usually without crediting (or questioning) its source. It quickly became “common knowledge”: a “fact” everyone knew, but no one could explain.

Cat Chapin-Bishop writes:

I’m writing to tell you of my disappointment with Mara Keller’s article,
“The Interface of Archaeology and Mythology: A Philosophical Evaluation of the Gimbutas Paradigm.”

I have always loved the implications of Marija Gimbutas’ work. I had never seriously thought about women as important in prehistory before I read her stuff, and I have found it continuing to liberate my imagination even as, through wider reading, I’ve come to see more and more of her ideas as resting on less and less of a foundation … Keller wants me to take Gimbutas’ “methodology of archeomythology” seriously (and I want to, Goddess knows!) but she doesn’t give me much in the way of reasons for it: there is very little examination of the details of the interpretations Gimbutas makes, and virtually no attempt made to define “archeomythology”, let alone defend it. … And she goes into great detail to explain the theory of knowledge held by Plato, I suppose in order to support the suggestion that Gimbutas’ work ought properly to be evaluated according to the rules for noesis, or “mystical intuition” as opposed to — what? — critical thinking, such as ordinary and less loveable theories are subjected to?

Frankly, this seems like smoke and mirrors to me — or maybe just a plain old-fashioned appeal to authority sort of argument: “Marija Gimbutas (who is smarter than you because she spoke twenty languages) and Plato (who is smarter than you because he’s a famous dead philosopher) both thought this kind of argument made sense. So who are you to question it? … To me, this is less a “feminist epistemological critique of modern science” then it is an almost insulting disdain for my ability to think for myself when given evidence to consider. …

Cat Chapin-Bishop holds an MSW from the University of Illinois, and has a private practice in psychotherapy.

She is also a Wiccan High Priestess and longtime feminist and gadfly.

Jenny Blain writes:

… I’m sure others will raise questions of interpretation of the archaeological data, which I’ll refer to here only briefly. Suffice it to say the old concepts of both peaceful “Old Europeans” and warlike “Indo-European speaking invaders” have been challenged on the basis of what is found in their burial or dwelling sites (as well as on theoretical grounds).

How about the “Kurgan” invasions, and the changes they wrought in society? Surely they occurred — doesn’t the Cavalli-Sforza article demonstrate this? The answer, I’m afraid, has to be “No”. Cavalli-Sforza et al (Science, 259: 639-646, 1993) are displaying a principal components mapping of present-day population data. To illustrate their technique and its results they give maps of Europe showing the values of the first to fourth principal components from
Keller wants me to take Gimbutas’ “methodology of archeomythology” seriously (and I want to, Goddess knows!) but she doesn’t give me much in the way of reasons for it... virtually no attempt is made to define “archeomythology”, let alone defend it.

Statistical analysis of gene frequencies, based on 95 genetic markers. Frequencies for the third principal component for Europe, responsible for about 10 percent of the measured genetic variation, are on a gradient from approximately south-east to north-west. This map is “data is search of a theory”, and could be explained by Gimbutas’ postulated rapid expansions of bronze-age warriors, [however] Cavalli-Sforza et al, [invoke] Renfrew’s theory of an earlier, slower, spread of neolithic farming people, bringing with them their language — which would make the “Old Europe” neolithic dwellers speakers of Indo-European languages. Indeed, say Cavalli-Sforza et al, it may be that both, together with some much later “expansions of, for example, the Scythians and of barbarians who infiltrated or conquered the Roman Empire before and after its fall” may be responsible, so that “a sharp distinction may require better genetic and archeological data” (p.642-3). Other events have been proposed to account for the map — such as Jonathan Adams’ and Marcel Otte’s suggestion of an earlier (~9,000 b.p.) rapid expansion of a particular Mesolithic gatherer-hunter population (Current Anthropology: in press. See http://www.esd.ornl.gov/ projects/qen/Indo2.html). Adams and Otte conclude that from the Cavalli-Sforza data there is no way to evaluate the “truth” of these competing hypotheses.

Next, the uniqueness of Gimbutas’ vision of a Goddess-worshiping, matrifocal Old Europe. The concept of a Great Goddess, whose culture was destroyed by invaders, can be traced back at least 150 years, and its roots lie deeper. (See e.g. Ronald Hutton, 1997, “The Neolithic great goddess: a study in modern tradition”, Antiquity 71 (1997) 91-9). Gimbutas’ work, and methods of interpretation, took this concept out of the realms of romanticism and into those of feminist discourse, but she did not create the concept. Indeed, Gimbutas’ narrative of the Great Goddess and her civilization, demolished by warlike Indo-Europeans, is merely the other side of the coin of earlier stories of these noble Indo-Europeans bronze age warriors who brought their “superior” qualities as overlords to an “inferior” people. Both are sweeping simplifications, both read

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