

Matter-Reality in the Charge of the Goddess: Bodies, Objects, Places, and Sensations

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Limitations

For this study, I am limited to publicly available versions of the *Charge*. Other versions exist which are *oathbound*, that is, for Gardnerian initiates' eyes only. To include these versions in my study and quote from them today would violate my Gardnerian oaths of secrecy.

Background - material religion

- Sonia Hazard describes a “material turn” in religious scholarship.
- Scholars are giving “material things and phenomena – objects, practices, spaces, bodies, sensations, affects, and so on” a central place in the study of religion (Hazard 2013).

Approaches:

- the symbolic, where things and practices carry meanings and ideas
- material disciplines, where things and practices wield power, acting on and shaping humans
- the phenomenological, focusing on the human body and experience of religious consciousness
- new materialism, which rejects human exceptionalism and places objects into assemblages on equal footing with people

Background - material religion

- S. Brent Plate states that religion “is lived out through the bodies of people” (Plate 2015).
- Bodies meet objects, which “bring a sense of value, meaning, and order”
- Objects are engaged through the senses.
- Sensuality and emotion allow religion to endure.
- Material things and events create human experiences which generate traditions.

Background - Material religion in Wicca and Paganism

- Michael York describes a “universal pagan need to communicate with spirit through tangible objects.”
- Witches and Pagans deploy “prayers, songs, music, dance, and costumes as part of an aesthetic assemblage designed both to inspire the worshiper and please the god” (York 2003).
- Christine Hoff Kraemer: Many Pagans employ ritual that engages all the senses and focuses on the body to create divine connection.” (Kraemer 2016)
- Wicca has a deep affinity with materiality, or matter-reality
- Such a foundational Wiccan document as the *Charge* would naturally incorporate bodies, objects, places, and sensations.

Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches - C.G. Leland, 1899

When I shall have departed from this world, whenever ye have need of anything, once in the month, and when the moon is full, ye shall assemble in some desert place, Or in a forest all together join to adore the potent spirit of your queen, my mother, great Diana. She who fain would learn all sorcery yet has not won its deepest secrets, then my mother will teach her, in truth all things as yet unknown. And ye shall all be freed from slavery, and so ye shall be free in everything; and as the sign that ye are truly free, ye shall be naked in your rites, both men and women also: this shall last until the last of your oppressors shall be dead. (And ye shall make the game of Benevento, extinguishing the lights, and after that shall hold your supper thus:) (Leland 1998)

Leviter Veslis - Gerald Gardner, 1949

Listen to the words of the Great Mother, who of old was also called among men Artemis, Astarte, Dione, Melusine, Aphrodite, Cerridwen, Diana, Arianrhod, Bride, and by many other names.

At mine Altars the youth of Lacedaemon in Sparta made due sacrifice. Whenever ye have need of anything, once in the month, and better it be when the moon is full, ye shall assemble in some secret place and adore the spirit of Me who am Queen of all Witcheries and magics. There ye shall assemble, ye who are fain to learn all sorcery, yet have not won its deepest secrets. To these will I teach things that are yet unknown. And ye shall be free from slavery, and as a sign that ye be really free, ye shall be naked in your rites, both men and women, and ye shall dance, sing, feast, make music, and love, all in my praise.

There is a Secret Door that I have made to establish the way to taste even on earth the elixir of immortality. Say, 'Let ecstasy be mine, and joy on earth even to me, To Me,' For I am a gracious Goddess. I give unimaginable joys on earth, certainty, not faith, while in life! And upon death, peace unutterable, rest, and ecstasy, nor do I demand aught in sacrifice."

Leviter Veslis - Gerald Gardner, 1949

Hear ye the words of the Star Goddess.

I love you: I yearn for you: pale or purple, veiled or voluptuous. I who am all pleasure, and purple and drunkenness of the innermost senses, desire you. Put on the wings, arouse the coiled splendor within you. 'Come unto me.' For I am the flame that burns in the heart of every man, and the core of every Star. Let it be your inmost divine self who art lost in the constant rapture of infinite joy. Let the rituals be rightly performed with joy and beauty. Remember that all acts of love and pleasure are my rituals. So let there be beauty and strength, leaping laughter, force and fire within you.

And if thou sayest, 'I have journeyed unto thee, and it availed me not,' Rather shalt thou say, 'I called upon thee, and I waited patiently, and Lo, Thou wast with me from the beginning,' for they that ever desired me shall ever attain me, even to the end of all desire. (Kelly 1991)

Witchcraft Today - Gerald Gardner, 1954

Before initiation a charge is read beginning: 'Listen to the words of the Great Mother, who of old was also called among men Artemis, Astarte, Dione, Melusine, Aphrodite and many other names. At mine altars the youth of Lacedaemon made due sacrifice. Once in the month, and better it be when the moon is full, meet in some secret place and adore me, who am queen of all the magics . . .

For I am a gracious goddess, I give joy on earth, certainty, not faith, while in life; and upon death, peace unutterable, rest and the ecstasy of the goddess. Nor do I demand aught in sacrifice... I am forbidden to give any more... (Gardner 1954)

Rhyming Charge - Doreen Valiente, ca. 1957

Mother, darksome and divine,
Mine the scourge and mine the kiss
Five-point star of love and bliss
Here I charge ye in this sign.

Bow before my spirit bright
Aphrodite, Arianrhod,
Lover of the Horned God,
Queen of Witchery and night.

Diana, Brigid, Melusine
Am I named of old by men,
Artemis and Cerridwen,
Hell's dark mistress, Heaven's Queen.

Ye who ask of me a boon,
Meet ye in some hidden shade.
Learn my dance in greenwood glade,
by the light of the full moon.

Dance about mine altar stone.

Work my holy Magistry,
Ye who are fain of sorcery,
I bring ye secrets yet unknown.

No more shall ye know slavery
Who tread my round on Sabbat night.
Come ye all naked to the rite,
In sign that ye are truly free.

Keep ye my mysteries in mirth
Heart joined to heart, and lip to lip.
Five are the points of fellowship
That bring ye ecstasy on Earth.

No other law but love I know,
By naught but love I may be known,
And all that liveth is mine own
From me they come, to me they go.
(Valiente 1989)

Prose Charge - Doreen Valiente, ca. 1957

Listen to the words of the Great Mother, she who of old was also called among men Artemis, Astarte, Athene, Dione, Melusine, Aphrodite, Cerridwen, Dana, Arianrhod, Isis, Bride, and by many other names:

Whenever you have need of any thing, **once in the month, and better it be when the moon is full, then shall ye assemble in some secret place** and adore the spirit of Me, who am queen of all witches. There shall ye assemble, ye who are fain to learn all sorcery, yet have not won its deepest secrets; to these will I teach things that are yet unknown. And ye shall be free from slavery; and **as a sign that ye be really free, ye shall be naked in your rites; and ye shall dance, sing, feast, make music and love, all in my praise.** For mine is the ecstasy of the spirit, and mine also is joy on earth; for my law is love unto all beings. Keep pure your highest ideal; strive ever towards it; let naught stop you or turn you aside. For mine is **the secret door which opens upon the Land of Youth, and mine is the cup of the wine of life, and the Cauldron of Cerridwen, which is the Holy Grail of Immortality.** I am the gracious Goddess, who gives the gift of joy unto **the heart** of man. Upon earth, I give the knowledge of the spirit eternal; and beyond death, I give peace, and freedom, and reunion with those who have gone before. Nor do I demand sacrifice; for behold, I am the Mother of all living, and my love is poured out upon the earth.

Prose Charge - Doreen Valiente, ca. 1957

Hear ye the words of the Star Goddess, she in the dust of whose feet are the hosts of heaven, and whose body encircles the universe:

I who am the beauty of the green earth, and the white Moon among the stars, and the mystery of the waters, and the desire of the heart of man, call unto thy soul. Arise, and come unto me. For I am the soul of nature, who gives life to the universe. From me all things proceed, and unto me all things must return; and before my face, beloved of gods and men, let thine innermost divine self be enfolded in the rapture of the infinite. Let my worship be within the heart that rejoiceth; for behold, all acts of love and pleasure are my rituals. And therefore let there be beauty and strength, power and compassion, honor and humility, mirth and reverence within you. And thou who thinkest to seek for me, know thy seeking and yearning will avail thee not unless thou knowest the mystery; that if that which thou seekest thou findest not within thee, thou wilt never find it without thee. For behold, I have been with thee from the beginning; and I am that which is attained at the end of desire. (Farrar/Farrar 1996)

The Spiral Dance - Starhawk, 1979

Listen to the words of the Great Mother, Who of old was called Artemis, Astarte, Dione, Melusine, Aphrodite, Cerridwen, Diana, Arionrhod, Brigid, and by many other names:

Whenever you have need of anything, **once a month, and better it be when the moon is full, you shall assemble in some secret place** and adore the spirit of Me Who is Queen of all the Wise.

You shall be free from slavery, and **as a sign that you be free you shall be naked in your rites.**

Sing, feast, dance, make music and love, all in My Presence, for Mine is the ecstasy of the spirit and Mine also is joy on earth.

For My law is love unto all beings. Mine is **the secret that opens the door of youth,** and Mine is **the cup of wine of life that is the cauldron of Cerridwen,** **that is the holy grail of immortality.**

I give the knowledge of the spirit eternal, and beyond death I give peace and freedom and reunion with those that have gone before.

Nor do I demand aught of sacrifice, for behold, I am the Mother of all things and My love is poured out upon the earth.

The Spiral Dance - Starhawk, 1979

Hear the words of the Star Goddess, the dust of Whose feet are the hosts of Heaven, whose body encircles the universe:

I Who am the beauty of the green earth and the white moon among the stars and the mysteries of the waters,

I call upon your soul to arise and come unto me.

For I am the soul of nature that gives life to the universe.

From Me all things proceed and unto Me they must return.

Let My worship be in the heart that rejoices, for behold, all acts of love and pleasure are My rituals.

Let there be beauty and strength, power and compassion, honor and humility, mirth and reverence within you.

And you who seek to know Me, know that the seeking and yearning will avail you not, unless you know the Mystery: for if that which you seek, you find not within yourself, you will never find it without.

For behold, I have been with you from the beginning, and I am That which is attained at the end of desire. (Starhawk 1979)

Consistent themes

- Witches are directed to meet in groups, never as solitary practitioners.
- The full moon is present in all versions, marking the monthly timing of rituals, and gathering bodies together in spaces.
- All versions of the Charge call for ritual nudity symbolizing freedom.
- All versions call for a supper or feast.

Evolving themes

- The disappearance of references to scourging, whether veiled or specific, significantly influenced Wiccan religiosity.
- The sense of place in the Charge develops over time, moving from a “desert[ed] place” or “in a forest” to “some secret place”, “in hidden shade...greenwood glade”, to “some secret place” again.
- The disappearance of outdoor surroundings from the Charge shaped and reflected the primarily indoor private practice of Wicca.
- Sacred body parts vary over time. The most prominent body part is the heart.

Conclusions

- Over the course of eighty years, the Charge of the Goddess played a leading role in shaping and defining the religiosity of Wicca and Paganism.
- Aradia established its basic form
- Gardner added material from Crowley's Law of Liberty.
- Valiente removed Crowley's language and further defined the Wiccan sensorium.
- Starhawk's version communicated eco-feminism to a new and wider audience.
- In the 21st century, Wicca is mostly solitary, with group work in decline.

Religious matter-reality generates, reflects, and shapes ideas and belief; perhaps this means the Charge of the Goddess itself is in decline as a foundational document of Wicca?

Thank you!

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