

The Cauldron

OF CIRCLES & CIRCLING

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Martin Duffy

Within folklore, circling rites abound, such as bawning the thorn, clipping the church, Maypole dances, beating the bounds and approaching sacred wells. Furthermore, circling is frequently associated with raising ghosts, conjuring spirits, calling up spectral hounds, summoning the Devil and making congress with the Fair Folk. The objects circled are many and varied, including man made monuments (tombs, mounds, rocks, wells and trees) each having its own strata of belief. Before discussing this it is apposite to first consider some pertinent aspects of the circle itself. The sign of the circle has ancient antecedents, being an abiding symbol of eternity. Many conceive of time as being linear in nature, consisting of beginnings and endings, births and deaths, thus relegating the notion of continuance to the arena of superstition. However, the wise have long realised that such is an illusion, things do not burst into being and simply gutter out, rather the end of one thing becomes the cause of another, revealing time as an endless dance. The traditional witch and past magister of the Clan of Tubal Cain, Robert Cochrane, illustrated this with the image of a hound chasing a pussy (hare): 'It is the pussy and hound. When the pussy is pursued by the hound it twists and turns, and turns until eventually it creates a great circle and crosses it's own path. Therefore, pussy pursues the hound at one point, and not the hound pussy. Symbolically the pussy then becomes the hound, and the hound the pussy – therefore they are but one thing . . . one thing becomes the other, as also life becomes death, and death life.' [1]

The French occultist and magician Eliphas Levi expressed similar sentiments remarking how 'The serpent's jaw attracts the serpent's tail, & in turning upon himself, he, at the same time, pursues himself' [2]. In uniting beginnings and ends the illusion of dualistic thinking is obliterated and replaced with a model of Unity. Time is accordingly revealed as a constant state of flux, cause feeding upon effect & vice-versa ad infinitum, this being akin to the ever-seething cauldron. Truly can it be said that there is no such thing as past, present or future, as Madame Helena Blavatsky affirms when relating how 'nothing on earth has real duration, for nothing remains without change' [3]. Accordingly has the Circle been termed the Ring of Time or Movement, thereby evoking the ebbing and flowing tides of nature's many cycles.

When the circle is depicted as twin pillars or serpents curving towards each other we find allusion to the continuous struggle betwixt these opposing yet complimentary forces. All movement requires friction, with one force trying to overcome the other in a procreative struggle, this being the momentum that drives evolution and turns the wheel. Thus do we encounter the image of the crone at her spinning wheel as an image of Fate, spinning out a yarn from the woollen bundle, this being the creation of ordered matter and the thread of time from chaos. Often-times the Spinner at the Wheel of Time becomes as Three Weavers, akin to the triune Norns at the base of the World Tree spinning, allotting and cutting the threads of Fate, the wheel replaced by a distaff. In Norse star-lore the three stars of Orion's Belt are known as Frigga's Distaff, Frigga being, amongst other things, a goddess of spinning and weaving. Herein we find correlation betwixt the whirling of the stellar seasonal signposts and the craft of spinning itself.

In some witch traditions the thread spun from the distaff is represented by the fetish of the cord. Outstretched this becomes representative of one's thread of fate, which like linear time appears as though a path stretching from one end to the other. However, when the tassel, representing beginnings, is passed through the noose, representing endings, the linear thread becomes circular; beginnings and endings are

bound as one in the shape of the ouroboros and the Child is delivered back to its Mother. Similarly, the boundary of the witch circle is often delineated by virtue of the cord, thereby identifying it with the Ring of Time and the Serpent winding about the Worlds.

Herein the Serpent is revealed as Lord of the World and it is noteworthy that the circumference of the circle has long been recognised as a symbol of the hidden deity [3], which some have identified as Lucifer and others as the Serpent who delivered the secret wisdom to mankind through the Circle's gate.

In Norse cosmology the World Serpent was so big it encircled the Earth in the great ocean around Midgard, grasping its tail within its mouth. Within its constricting embrace the material world is confined, and it is noteworthy that some signify the soul of the world in the form of a serpent. However, if we are to identify the world within as that which is internal and within the sphere of our influence, then by corollary there must be a world without that is both external and outside our sphere of influence; the Serpent becomes the dweller on the threshold. By virtue of the fact that his order-conditioned mind is inside looking out, man has called this outer realm Chaos.

The serpent-bound Midgard is likened by some to a giant millstone revolving about a central axis, representing cyclical nature, this being evoked in the witches' dance that works to grind out the stars and material bounty. Amongst the many individual expressions of this great turning wheel are the solar, lunar, stellar and tellurian cycles, and it is not surprising that man upon observing these cycles based his spiritual expressions and magic upon the motif of the circle. This friction propelled movement results in evolution, of body and spirit alike, which Robert Cochrane considered part of the feminine mysteries, i.e. those that deal with the evolution and shaping of the world soul, and on a coven level, the group soul.

The gaping mouth of the Cauldron is analogous to the Circle, both containing all things within, all past, present and future; they are as if mirrors or gateways delivering things into and out of our world. Andrew D. Chumbley, past magister of the Cultus Sabbati, affirms when he says, 'Look no further than the Circle for the origination of the way . . . the circle is the Gate which opens into the earth & allows ingress through the power of the Land' [4]. That is to say it is through the Circle's gate that we reach into the Otherworlds and learn forgotten arts, hear whisperings of secret knowledge and draw upon arcane powers; it is the witch ring as Cauldron of Inspiration.

Thus did witches of the 'Old Persuasion' dance about tree, stone, dew-pond, mound and hag track, for such rites summon the indwelling daemons who reveal hidden lore, lend aid and mediate power. Others still encircled the omphalus, often reified as Mound, Pillar or Castle, an earthly reflection of the Pole Star about which the heavens spin. Intriguingly, the constellation that once wrapped itself about the Earth's axis was Draco, (Dragon), hanging as though a serpent upon the boughs of the Tree, or as a cord coiled about the stang.

These circular dances work to loosen the spirit by exhausting and disorientating the physical body, thereby enabling it to fly free, to climb the Hill of Vision. Often-times this is combined with breath control or chanting. Short fast rhythmic breathing (over-oxygenation) especially weakens the body and increases the internal fire, inducing euphoria and visionary experiences, although excessive use causes loss of consciousness. Attainment of trance state is marked by a sensation being at the very centre of the worlds, all creation spinning about one's axis; it is then that illusion becomes reality or 'truth'. Similarly does the dervish embark on a journey of spiritual ascent via his whirling dance, culminating in a religious trance wherein the spirit arrives at 'Perfect Truth', the realm wherein Godhead can be comprehended. Such is necessary because 'Although the first principle of Godhead is present at all levels & in all things at all times . . . otal perception is not present . . . therefore ritual basically becomes a matter of increasing perception until something of Godhead is finally revealed' [5]; we go to the gods, they do not come to us.

When the spirit is freed it is said to have crossed the River that bounds creation, separating man from the realm of the Gods, thereby engendering gnosis. In traversing the divide we are no longer subject to Time's laws, we enter a numinous realm of timelessness & eternity, symbolised by the circle. Within the

witch rites this is symbolised by the crossing of the circle bounds, and inside its precincts time often runs at its own pace, an experience described by Chumbley as ‘Eternity chanced in a second . . . time passing as in dreams’ [6]. One of the hallmarks of genuine Otherworldly experiences is incongruence between time experienced and actual time passed, this being borne out in folklore accounts of those whisked to ‘Fairyland’.

Consciousness changes aside, circling also helps ‘feed’ an entity into palpable manifestation. The Qabalistic magician W.G. Gray noted that: ‘The circle dance produces a distinct flow of current in the dancers . . . the step which produces maximum effect is the deliberate shuffle or the lame step . . . the faster the dance the greater the current’ [7], the fixed mind directing the gathering forces to the focal point.’

Many consider the direction of the circling to have an effect upon the rite. A deosil or ‘rightways’ movement corresponds to the apparent movement of the Sun in the northern hemisphere, evoking virtues of Life, celebration and luck, hence the counsel to only ever coil rope, stir tea, lay tables and mix ingredients in a clockwise fashion. Many modern day ‘witches’ even go as far as to claim this is the only direction a circular dance should be worked because one must only work with nature & her cycles, and that to move widdershins or ‘leftways’ is to work ‘against the natural order of things’ for it goes contrary to the sun. Thus do many identify this widdershins movement with the powers of death, popular folklore associating it with bad luck, raising the Devil and malefic magic. However, more enlightened occultists are aware that denoting either Power as ‘good’ or ‘evil’ is a gross oversimplification.

This widdershins dance, being a reversal of the norm, is the means by which the Gate to the Otherworlds is thrown open, hence its association with trance, rites of possession and the summoning of various patron spirits and gods. Traditional witch and magician Nigel Jackson describes it as a ‘backwards’ movement, ‘an infinite regression to the primal source behind creation’, to be identified with interstitial times where the Old Goat God rules as Lord of Misrule [8]. Traditionally, the averse movement, called by some ‘moonwise’, is used in rites of magic, which some suggest is simply because working against the earthly axis generates ‘friction’ power, but a fuller reason is to be found in a detail from Cochrane’s letters, which proposes ‘the power flows from heaven to earth, or earth to heaven according to which way the ring is being turned’ [1]. This is to say that a deosil dance sends power ‘upwards’ in worship whereas a widdershins dance draws power to earth in order to work magic. Similarly, the dervish delivers the Godhead’s blessings to earth by reaching the right hand to the heavens and the left to the earth whilst whirling anti-clockwise about a central point, the Heart, the axis of every turn.

Ritual circling is especially associated in the folklore record with the calling up of fairies, those eldritch beings that folk belief reveals as the ‘Fallen Angels’ who became bound to matter by taking residence within earthen mounds, rocks, trees and bodies of water. In communing with these Beings of Light the stary wisdom of the Watchers is revealed, the recovery of this lore being a prime activity of the spirit led witch. Accordingly have the Wise sought to commune with them by circling stones, processing about sacred pools and wells, whirling about trees and standing upon the hills wherein they dwell; this congress betwixt man and fairy being at the heart of many traditional witchcraft and cunning folk traditions.

Here in Sussex custom holds that the voices and music of the pharisees (a Sussex dialect term for fairies) can be heard rising from the earth below by running nine times clockwise about a fairy ring on the first night of the full moon, but going widdershins brings the person under their spell. Sussex folk call these rings ‘hag tracks’, because they are said to be made by the dancing of fairies and the witches who are in allegiance with them. One old Sussex inhabitant (1854) explains that: ‘They joined hands and formed a circle, and danced upon it till the grass came three times as green there as it was anywhere else. That’s how these here rings come upon the hills’. Elsewhere fairy rings are said to grow above the subterranean haunts of fairies, who are summoned by dancing within their bounds. Circling them under the light of the full moon whilst making wishes will also make one’s desire a reality, bringing the desire from the realm of dreams and potential into the world of manifestation. Such ‘quaint customs’ work the principle of the

Circle being a Gate into the Earth, through which we may commune with the Fair Folk.

One Fairie custom instructs the would-be visitant to Elphame (Fairyland) to run about a fairy tree or mound until the body collapses with exhaustion, which combines the dream inducing effect of the dance with its ability to open a Gate into the Otherworld, thus is the released spirit whisked away. Tradition records many a child going missing, never to return, whilst sleeping under such trees, which has some similarity with the Anglo-Saxon practice of 'mound-sitting'.

Chief of the Fallen Ones is the Devil and Sussex custom furnishes several examples of summoning him by circling, such as going seven times about the Devil's Humps (four tumuli), but the most infamous concerns Chanctonbury Ring, reputed home of a pre-Gardnerian robed coven [9]. The theme underlying the various versions is that perambulating this large ring widdershins on a dark moonless night, or Midsummer/May Day Eve, summons the Devil, who comes bearing a bowl of soup, milk or porridge. Drinking from this bowl grants one's desires, at the price of being taken as the Devil's own. Some consider this a distant echo of an initiating rite whereby consuming the cauldron's sacrament bound the candidate to his God(s), witches being 'Children of the Devil'. Intriguingly, to circle the Ring three times, a number sacred to the moon and the Fates, results not in a vision of the Devil, but a 'lady upon a white horse', an image familiar to many of the witch cult.

The Devil is also raised in Sussex by twelve backward circumambulations around the Miller's Tomb (Highdown Hill) at midnight of the full moon, yet seven clockwise perambulations conjures the ghost of the miller himself. Similar Sussex lore says running backwards seven times about 'Mad Jack' Fuller's pyramidal tomb summons either the Devil or Mad Jack's ghost. This necromantic practice, common across the British Isles, is rather similar to other grave-circling rites and the childhood 'game' of placing a penny on a gravestone and going round it thrice to raise the incumbent ghost, who reaches up & takes the coin. It is also akin to the witch practice of circling skulls as a means of establishing contact with the indwelling spirit. There are similar methods to conjure or see the 'ghost' of one's future love, one calling for a peat stack to be circumambulated on a besom, and another for a stack of oats or barley to be circled three times against the sun.

What is intriguing about these undoubtedly pre-Christian methods of opening gateways is that the spirit is summoned within the circle trodden, this being in direct contrast to ceremonial methods wherein spirits are evoked outside the magical circle to be brow-beaten or bribed into servitude. In this congress the witch and the summoned become One, whether spirit, fairy, angel or Devil, this being a sharing of knowledge, wisdom and power. This has antecedent in traditional witch practices, where demons and familiar spirits are raised within the circle, either through manifestation or 'possession' of the witch, this does Guazzo note (*Compendium Maiejarum*, 1626), 'The witches swear allegiance to the Devil within a circle marked out upon the ground, possibly to indicate that the Devil wants them to believe he is Lord of Heaven & Earth, or possibly because the circle is the symbol of divinity & the earth the footstool of the Lord.'

Related to this are those methods where the Devil is raised at the crossroads, the four roads being as gates upon the circle's horizon, or stations upon the ring of time. One method from Holmesfield involves rattling a frying-pan and key together where 'four-lanes-end' at dusk, whilst saying 'I raised the Devil, and the Devil raised me, I never shall forget when the Devil raised me', although he would only appear to the eyes of the summoner. Another method, recorded in 1912, had a man placing his hat upon crossed sticks on the ground and walking about this seven times whilst repeating the Lord's Prayer backwards; the Devil being laid by reversing the proceedings. Within the witch rites the same is sometimes achieved by placing an upright stave at the crossroad's heart as a fetish-altar, representative of the World Tree and spinal axis, this then being danced about.

Evan John Jones describes this point where 'four-roads-meet' as 'The symbolic source of all power . . . the spot where the world of the natural meets the supernatural, thus becoming the gate through which the power flows' [5] harking back to rites wherein the centre is circumambulated to access power. The

centre of the crossroads is identified with the Cauldron at the Castle's heart, this being akin to the Grail envisioned above the centre of the celestial and earthly Round Table. Accordingly some have come to posit the Point as the Infinite and the diameter that proceeds from it as the manifestation of the Godhead and its works. Jones goes on to identify this Point with the Unnamed Goddess as pro-genetrix of all creation, the spinner of order from chaos. Through her gate all figures and bodies imaginable are delivered to the revealed world, this being the Cauldron of creation and dissolution, yet many others consider the Supreme Deity as a sexless and incomprehensible principle. Within Rosicrucian lodges the centre of the lodge is known as the 'Heart of the Soul of the Temple', marked by a triangle representing the Shekinah, (the female aspect of God) 'the presence of God in our Midst, it is the point within the inner circle' .

The Point as the first creation of the Circle is often identified as the first manifesting One; the consciousness of the Supreme Deity concentrated into the singular centre, which is then called 'God' or 'Spirit'; it is the Seed containing all potential within. Man's consciousness is similarly concentrated at the core of his being, this motionless axis being the Heavenly Fire of the Gods given to man by the Lightbearer. At this Point is Self, Universe and God made as One. This mystery is represented in the witch rites by the fire at the circle's centre, this being the Fire fallen to earth and the (divine) Spark in the clay vessel of man. Residing within Heart of Man and Hearth of Compass is the Fiery Spirit at the core of Matter, and when made as one the Seed is passed into man's Heart, marking him out as one of the Witchblood. Some regard this Fire as the source of the witch power, the Forge where form is wrought via force, and by standing at the centre of the circle the witch becomes identified with its Master, the First Sorcerer (Cain). Also from this hub are the Old Gods and Goddesses delivered into our world, these patrons of the witch arts being the intermediaries through which the unfathomable Godhead is approached. Andrew D.Chumbley describes the Point of Beginning as the source from which the Seven Stars (Rays) issue forth [10], and thus do Qabalists depict the delivery of force into form in the shape of a Circle. Thus do witches directly access arcane knowledge and powers at the circle's hub, recalling hereditary witch E.W. Liddell's comment that induction into the Craft 'opens oneself up to guidance and tutelage by the Bright Powers . . . then we need no human coven contacts' [11]. Similarly did Chumbley state that within the circle 'You are at the very instant of the tradition's beginning; you stand there at one, through the power of lineage, with the first-born of Witchblood,' this being the pact preserving the lineage and 'the course of the Tradition amongst the race of men.' [4].

The circle's bounds are made in diverse ways, whether scratched into earth, marked by sticks & stones or traced with powders, the structure of the ring numinously influencing the arena within. Flour, chalk or salt, for example, fashion a 'white' circle evoking the powers of the moon. Babylonian sorcerers called their magic circle 'zisurru', meaning "flour which makes a boundary" [4]. Similarly, soot or ash collected from the hearth-fire form a 'black' circle, a tradition well known in Sussex but also in Yezidic tradition [10], wherein Hayyat translates both as 'snake' & 'enclosure'. Such ash/soot circles evoke the powers of the Undying Fire of Craft, Will, Intellect and Sorcery, brought to earth by the Fallen One.

Traditionally, the circle's horizon is cast thrice, recalling the three alchemical essences, faces of the moon and so forth in recognition of Hecate, the triune goddess of life, death and wisdom to whom the triple crossroads is sacred, and whose Castle is entered in treading the widdershins ring. These three 'elements' of the Witch Queen are sometimes thought of as land/earth, sea/water and sky/air, which are enlivened by the fourth element given to man, i.e. fire/spirit. In occult tradition the triple rings are 'exorcisms' by salt, ash and water, described by Eliphas Levi as the 'Salt of Wisdom' preserving from corruption, the ash remains as earth raising the tree anew (Alpha and Omega) and the water as the fount of life and the 'living God's mirror' [2]. Some Old Craft traditions simply cast the bounds thrice with 'Witch Fire', binding the fallen celestial and risen chthonic fires within the mirror-like surface of the earthen circle, that is to say all directions become bound in the Heart of the circle where the Hearth-Fire burns, this being the Fire of the One Spirit [6]. This association betwixt circling, enclosures and witchcraft is also one found in etymology

[4], with the act of encircling binding various powers within, these becoming subject to the Will/Desire/Belief of the witch [10]. This also evokes those perambulatory rites wherein bounds are walked whilst declaring rulership over that thereby enclosed.

Other examples of circling in the witch arts include encircling wounds with fasting spittle or unguents in a decreasing spiral to diminish them, this being a stock feature of many cunning folk's healing charms. There is also an old act of wishing magic worked by circling a hagstone with the thumb whilst muttering one's enchantment. Another use relates to the cauldron, not just in dancing about its mouth as a method of birthing one's desires into the world, but the use of the ladle by the Maid to stir the pot whilst dancing widdershins [1]. W.G. Gray notes that this would generate a 'etheric current', surmising that 'witches of old must have felt this instinctively when they took to ladle whirling' [7].

It might thus be seen that the circle is intrinsic to the witch arts, whether to summon gods, spirits and phantom hounds, to open the gates to the Otherworlds, or even to deliver those things of the illusionary world into the realm of waking. To paraphrase Andrew D. Chumbley, it is within the circle's bounds that we can trace our heritage, right back to the first-born of all witches.

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Biography: The author lives in Sussex, England and writes on the subjects of folk magic, mythology and the occult arts; in particular the manner in which they relate to traditional witch-lore and practices. He has most recently composed a series of articles treating foci and mysteries pertinent to the witch-cult. These works have appeared in the pages of *The Cauldron* and *Clavis* Journal. He also contributed an essay to an anthology published by Llewellyn, concerning the manner in which occult philosophy informs and permeates the working of practical folk-magic. Mr. Duffy's first title for Three Hands Press is *The Devil's Raiments*, treating the subject of traditional ritual vestments and attire, and their symbolism. His latest book, concerning image magic, is *Effigy: Of Graven Image and Holy Idol*.