



ELDER- TREE OF CREATION.

We will now continue to explore the mysteries we started with the Blackthorn by connecting deeply with the elder tree who is considered to be the Queen of the herbs and connects us to the old crone or the grandmother archetype in Celtic Lore. She can be known as the Weaver Goddess constantly renewing the threads of all life.

The Weaver Goddess

Chorus: I dreamed of Ochil the dim goddess, who through all, through all,
She weaves the weft, She weaves the weft of eternal beauty.

I dreamed of Orchil the dim Goddess who is under the brown earth in a vast cavern where she weaves at two looms, with one hand she weaves life upward through the green grass and with the other she weaves death downward through the mold.

She has her feet far down among the roots and trees, and stars thickening in her hair as they gather in the vastness and blackness of the sky on a night of frost. Her form fills all the world where wisdom dwells. But she is sorrowful and terrible for the hearts of men know her no more in her ancient loveliness.

She is the washer at the ford, a tall gaunt woman, chanting the death dirge as she washes the shroud of he that sees her. She may grow great and terrible and inhabit darkness.

She loveth loneliness, solitude is her breath. She is Queen of all things on the earth and in the sea and in the white palaces of the stars built on the dark walls of time above the abyss.

The invocation above are words adapted from the works of Fiona MacLeod

The mysteries were thought to be guarded by powerful women such as the baleful Cailleach or death crone who is a hag with only one arm, one leg and an upper tooth long enough to use as a crutch. She is a woman of immense power and as the writing above portrays can fill the entire world. She therefore is a personification of all creation.

She is the keeper of the cauldron of rebirth and re-members the corpse to bring it back to life in the bright otherworld or is the washer at the ford mentioned above who is seen by those about to die as she washes their shroud. This theme continues in Anglo Saxon lore as the Wyrld Sisters spin the fate of us all.

In the Blackthorn essay we mentioned that there is not a creation myth in Celtic mythology that we know of in the extant texts. If there were to be one maybe the story would start with death as the day begins with night in Celtic traditions, which is not such a morbid thought as you may think as all returns to the earth in an unending cycle. Here we have the essence of why there may not be a creation myth as the Celts key symbols were spirals and knot work perhaps believing that time was not linear as the Weaving Goddess spun a continuous web.

The change we seek is bubbling up from the earth's core; a rejuvenation of a new world that calls us to the heart of things.

A downward spiral into the web of life divorced not from the firmament yet reaching down to the dark places where new life begins.

J.Huet

Often Celtic lore is interpreted through what we know of the Classics, and this has been the case from far back in history as Greek and Roman deities are integrated into Celtic deities. It seems the Christian scriptoriums were not the first to try to adapt the Celtic mysteries.

This is why I stress the Celtic twilight as the unique essence of the tradition for there is no evidence of the worship of deities in fixed forms and their names seem to be interchangeable. There may not have been key titular Gods or Goddesses that held more importance, in fact maybe there were not Gods or Goddesses at all in the way we think of them, but instead ancient ancestral beings in the form of spirits residing in the hills, woods and water courses.

The famous springs in Bath, Somerset for instance became a central temple in Roman times to Sulis/Minerva and yet evidence points to the fact this spring was dedicated to a local deity rather than a central one which again points to the fact it is the place where you reside and the spirits of that place that are of utmost importance rather than a singular generic form that all people worship across the lands.

The concept therefore of the Weaving Goddess is not a fixed named form but the spirit of the land experienced and seen in the landscape wherever you are located. The Sidhe mentioned in the Blackthorn essay are the ancestral beings dwelling in the landscape that we share the land with and the otherworld a meeting place of all the ancient races of time to live and learn together.

The land may sometimes be depicted in a male form coming up from the depths as an underworld strength that pulses through the mountains, rocks and trees and as the two concepts of male and female blend together as one they reside in us all.

In the heart of the Celtic tradition therefore when we remove a more classical interpretation there is no hierarchy, gender or concepts of positive and negative, we are not looking to praise a God or a Goddess but to share our lives with the spirit of all creation.

The Celtic stories start with the land, this is viewed as a constant that has and always will exist. It is the relationship that we and all the ancient races of time have with the land which is of paramount importance.

Ancient races of time

Britain is considered to have been the centre of learning in Celtic times, we know this through various references from invaders of these lands such as the writings of Caesar. Evidence suggests it is Ireland that has kept the sources of these traditions alive as it houses the oldest Celtic literature going back to 600AD and its language is probably the oldest form of Celtic speech. Ireland was not invaded by the Romans and maintained a semblance of independence up into the close of the twelve century. As already mentioned, the explorers of this tradition most famously W.B.Yeats discovered the tradition alive in the rural areas of Ireland. He wrote about this in his book *The Celtic Twilight* of 1893 as well as other works he produced.

Due to the facts conveyed above a deeper understanding of creation and our relationship of the land may be sought in the old literature of the extant Irish texts which is likely to reflect Celtica as a whole.

The first of the stories in Irish mythology is the invasion stories and instead of a creation myth we find an exploration of all we have already discussed, the relationship of the ancient races with the land. This story explores five main invasions and how the land responded to them according to the invaders relationship with the land. If the people were in harmony with the land for instance more plains and rivers would be produced. This concept of the land being alive and having its own intelligence is indicated here in old texts long before the scientist James Lovelock spoke of the Concept of Gaia. This concept recognises the planet is self-regulating meaning it has its own intelligence.

Although James Lovelock works were of great importance to bring this idea into more modern times this was the accepted knowledge known to our ancestors. When we consider the five-mass extinctions known of in the history of the planet it may make you wonder at what adjustments she may make next. The concept of the Weaver Goddess and her form covering all the earth puts our own efforts of dominance and destruction into perspective. It seems the ancient people knew they were given life under her guidance and that they needed to remain humble and in-tune with her cycles.

The elder tree reminds us of this through her qualities.

Qualities of Elder

Elder *Sambucus nigra* (Latin) Ruis (Ogham/Gaelic name) Ellaern (Saxon)

Folk names- Elle, Hyldemoer, Lady Ellhorn, Old Lady, Old Sal, Pipe tree and Bole tree.

Ruis is Elder, redness of shame.

Intensest of blushes, it is the reddening of a man's face through the juice of the herb being rubbed on it.

Arduous anger, punishment.

Redness of faces.

Book of Ballymote 1391

The elder tree seems to be loved and hated in equal measure. Elder can be described as an unattractive weed-like shrub that spreads unwanted with smelly flowers that attracts flies. In other traditions elder is feared as in Scandinavia and Denmark where the tree is known as Elle or Hyldemoer and is said to take revenge on all who harm trees.

Stories of elder are plentiful, seeming to depict the tree as a protector of the land, animals and the human mind. The human mind in the old traditions is what transports us to the otherworlds or faerie realms and when we do not return we have quite literally lost our minds. This perhaps is why people can see mental illness as a channel for wisdom and auguries but of course this is not recommended and is a state we should all look to relief not encourage. The idea of elder transporting us to faerie land

enabling us to see the faerie Queen and her entourage is also borne out in the fact that its pith contains a mild sleep-inducing drug.

In the story of Fionn and the phantoms, elder is the fuel the phantoms burn as Fionn is forced to face his past wrong doings.

It is this concept introduced in the story of Fionn which is the essence of the kennings mentioned above. That we must look within and embrace our shadow as well as our responsibility to all of life.

In Britain it is said witches take the form of the tree and cause much harm! Further sinister connotations include stunted growth for a child beaten with an elder rod and even death to the family who bring it inside. However as with the blackthorn the tree also offers protection when hung on doors, windows and stables. These stories demonstrate the two sides of nature and our connection to it.

One of the most famous stories of elder is of how the Rollright stones came into being. It is said a Witch created the stones by turning a Dane King and his army to stone before transforming herself into an Elder tree. It is said the stones will re-awaken and the Dane army are cursed to help England when its most in need.

On Midsummer eve it is a custom to dance amongst the stones wearing a garland of elderflowers. This story indicates that ultimately no matter how sinister you wish to convey the Elder Mother her loyalty is to the land to which she belongs.

The Uses of Elder

A true witch or herbalist would know elder as the mother of all herbs curing all ills with its delicate white flowers and black berries. The flowers can be used to relief hay fever, bronchitis, fevers, rheumatism and gout.

They can be used as an inhalant for head colds and a gargle for hoarseness. A cleanser for conjunctivitis and a compress for chilblains. They can also act as a gentle laxative, a mild astringent and a gentle stimulant. If taken before sleep they can induce a heavy cleansing sweat.

They can also be used as a fixative in cosmetics, creams and lotions with an odour that is said to improve with age. Elder flower water is said to be nature's gift to one's complexion whitening the skin and clearing freckles, soothing sunburn and tired puffy eyes.

The flowers can be fried up as fritters and the buds can be added to a salad. An old Sussex saying suggests to take elder for three days and if you are still not feeling any better then go to the doctor. The flowers are followed by its black berries which are rich in vitamin C and a perfect remedy to keep off the winter chills and bugs when made into delicious syrup.

The berries can also be used for the making of wine and added to soups, puddings, jellies and chutneys and dried to be used as you would currants. Although the elder attracts flies, when its leaves are bruised or infused they can be used to repel flies and other biting insects. The same infusion can be used as an insecticide and fungicide on plants. The roots and the bark of elder should be used with caution as they can act as a purgative, people sometimes also react to the uncooked berries.

Elder in Saxon is known as Ellaern which means hollow tree referring to its very soft pith which can be removed to make whistles, pea shooters, blow pipes and even flutes. Its Latin name 'Sambucus' also may indicate a musical instrument known as the sackbut which is an ancient stringed instrument or the Italian musical pipes known as sampognas. Elder may also be used to make bellows known as pluffs.

The pith itself could be used for floats or dipped in oil and lit to decorate a dish filled with water. Despite its soft pith its wood is actually close grained and hard and was once used for fishing rods, shoemakers pegs, mathematical instruments, combs and toys.

SUMMARIES AND RESOURCES FOR ELDER

Elder is the tree that calls us to take responsibilities for our actions, to ask those difficult questions that push us to know ourselves better.

Have I any unfinished business I need to attend to?

Do I need to contact a friend or family member to make amends?

Can I reflect on those actions where I have been unfair or even cruel to others?

Am I honestly doing all I can to reduce my impact on the natural world?

Deepening your connection to Elder

The elder tree can look untidy, it may be crawling with insects and buzzing with flies, can you still approach the tree in kindness. Her blossoms and fruit are beautiful, and her corky bark and soft pith show her vulnerability.

When one approaches the elder, we do so by putting all judgements aside and connecting with all aspects of nature. We accept whatever form she appears to us as, whether it be dark or terrible or kind and forgiving.

Meditate with elder accepting all the forms and temperaments of Mother Nature.

Practical tasks

Elder is the Mother of all her herbs. You can make an infusion of her flowers by steeping them in hot water for about 7 minutes and adding honey if you wish to sweeten the beverage. This drink is very effective for the conditions mentioned above under the uses of elder.

You can also make a syrup from Elder berries either dried or fresh.

A syrup is made of the berry, water and honey. Simply add your berries to a pan of water and heat gently for about ten minutes, drain and add a good amount of honey. You can use a similar recipe as you would for making jam and honey could be substituted with sugar which will have a longer shelf life.

I prefer to make several batches one after the other with water and honey which will last about 2-3 weeks in the fridge. Drain the berries through a muslin cloth which will also enable you to squeeze as much as the juice out as possible.

With the next tree we will soar to the heights of knowledge and perspective with the Pine tree.