

For *Spellcraft*, Issue # 10.

## **New Light...**

*Alicia Sherwood*

... the rose fingered moon  
exceeds all stars; light  
reaches equally over the brine sea  
and thick flowering fields,

a beautiful dew has poured down,  
roses bloom, tender parsley  
and blossoming honey clover.

*Sappho frag. 96. 8-14 (trans. E. Greene)*

Very early spring heralds the quickening year and, in the spiralling story of the Sacred Feminine, She has stirred from Her winter abode, and the incubation of the wisdoms of the Old Year, now graven in Her very bones. With quick feet, She has ushered in burgeoning colour and warmth, and a ripening passion. In the stories and traditions of long ago, two important aspects of ritual and honouring continue to offer a pathway to deepening the magic of this season for each of us today, aligned with the spiritual philosophies of our modern world. These essences, Purification and Inspiration, may be visioned as two sacred flames, the first as a way of both honouring the past cycle, but also preparing for the way forward. The second flame, that of Inspiration, stirs the fruitful possibilities of what may come. It evokes a sense of wildness, play and joyful exuberance. In the artistic and literary record, there is a rich history of the careful observance of purificatory rites (although their form may differ from our preferred rituals today!). We will explore very briefly some of this evidence below. As for Inspiration, we need look no further than the Muses themselves, and observations by ancient writers of their nature and role in daily life.

## Scary or sacred?

Much of the ancient Greek's perceived need for purification came, naturally enough, from the sense of being 'unclean', that is, 'polluted' and was also concerned with averting '*apotrope*' and sending away '*apopompe*' all manner of evils and ills. As Burkert<sup>i</sup> notes:

the demand for purity draws attention to the boundary which separates the sacred from the profane; the more scrupulously and intensively purification is pursued, the greater the difference in order appears.

The Greek's particular categories of pollution, however, might differ somewhat from our own and were often founded in their fears of the mysterious, or else the wrath of some god. In terms of domestic life, death and birth were intimately connected in what was viewed as a kind of ritual pollution called *miasma*.<sup>ii</sup> This required strict observance of containment and seclusion rituals.<sup>iii</sup> As might be expected, purification of both space and self was carried out, at times using the sulphurous combination of fire and brimstone<sup>iv</sup>, at others spraying with sea water, smearing with earth and sweeping were deemed more appropriate.<sup>v</sup> A winnowing fan (*'liknon'*) employed the air element as a part of agricultural purification rituals.

Purification by water was a common observance, ranging from the washing of hands known as '*chernips*' – (vessels containing water '*perirranteria*' were placed outside sanctuaries for this purpose), especially prior to any dealings with the gods, to ritual bathing. The latter was also an important element in the tendance of the cult image of certain goddesses, Athena, Hera and Aphrodite among them, whose images were either bathed at important times through the year<sup>vi</sup>, or else whose connections to ritual bathing are revealed in the literature. In this way, the virginity and beauty of the divine sacred feminine was renewed:

...and laughter-loving Aphrodite went to Paphos...There the Graces bathed her and anointed her with immortal oil , such as adorns the skin of the gods who are forever.

Homer, *Od.* 8.362<sup>vii</sup>

For worshippers and cult initiates, bathing and the donning of clean robes was often a requirement to ensure one occupied an appropriate state of sacredness, '*hagneia*', the degree of which was dependant on the individual's role or status.<sup>viii</sup>

A more unusual means of purification is found in the employment of a divine, magical fleece, as in the cult of Zeus or, more familiarly, the rites of Demeter in the Eleusinian mysteries.<sup>ix</sup> In addition, a worshipper could become pure, quite beautifully, through the act of making offerings. In a community sense this might be fulfilled through such rites as the offering of 'First- Fruits' <sup>x</sup> or else the pouring of sacred libations by the individual. Perhaps votive offerings of the type seen in Fig. 1 also served as a kind of cleansing of spirit. We can hope that when Pausanias (1.34.2) claims that 'sacrificing to the god is a ceremony of purification' that bloodless offerings, too, were held in such esteem.<sup>xi</sup>



Fig.1 Terracotta figurine of woman holding dove c. 480 BCE, Sth. Italy.

(British Museum GR1905.3-14.1 Photo: author)

## The 'deathless song'...

The Muses, divine songstresses, inspirers of poesy, were carefully and joyfully acknowledged by ancient authors. Hesiod (*Theog.* 53 ff.)<sup>xii</sup> devotes a substantial passage to their description and to the invocation of their favour.

[30]...they plucked a staff...and gave it to me; and they breathed a divine voice into me...but always [I was] to sing of themselves first and last. [39] Their tireless voice flows sweet from their mouths...[61] in their breasts [they] care for song and have a spirit that knows no sorrow...[69] exulting in their beautiful voice, with a deathless song; and around them the black earth resounded as they sang, and from under their feet a lovely din rose up as they travelled...

Homer (*Od.* 1.1), too, speaks first of the Muses in his epic poetry, and there is a 'Homeric' Hymn<sup>xiii</sup> (25) to the Muses and Apollo:

It is because  
of the Muses  
and the archer Apollo  
that there exist on the earth  
people who sing songs  
and play the lyre...  
If the Muses love you  
then you are blessed  
and sweet sound  
flows from your mouth.

Their nature, however often it tends toward gaiety, brightness and whimsy in the literature, could in fact be acknowledged in more solemn tones, as by Solon in his elegy, in which he addresses the Muses and entreats their favour as Goddesses of wisdom.<sup>xiv</sup> This is an example of evidence which may hint at the ancient, pre-Olympian nature of these Goddesses, whose connection with sacred waters and the God Apollo, also infers a prophetic character.

The variability with which the Muse/s are addressed, that is to say at times in the singular, at others in the plural, the exact number of which could also vary, suggests that this spirit of the divine sacred feminine could inhabit a somewhat boundaryless nature. In addition, this mutability, unusual in the strongly personified character of the Olympian pantheon, may originate in earlier cultic practice. The impression of these Goddesses we are left with is one of exuberance and beauty, tempered with wisdom and a strong sense of mystery. Most assuredly, She is a perfect essence to honour and evoke at this time of year!

### **New light, new Self.**

In our busy lives, it can be difficult to acknowledge 'newness' and genuinely feel its stirrings in our body and in our lives, to accept with grace and openness the magic that is the new light and the opportunity for exploring the expression and embodiment of the new self, and eventually its clarification, grounding and maturity. For we are indeed ever-unfolding beings, with the choice to be free of the shackles of the past, though entitled to the wisdom of its experiences. So, I would like to offer a threefold ritual suggestion. The first element actually relates to honouring and thanksgiving, which should always serve as our basic foundation. The second two parts are, naturally, related to purification and inspiration of self. As always, I would recommend you invest as much of your Self, and your creativity, to the formation and enactment of your ritual, thereby ensuring that it is a deeply personal experience.

*Honouring:* If you haven't already done so as a part of your Solstice or Early Spring celebrations, take some time to honour the new light which is entering the world, your being and your life. Expand your senses to consider the various ways in which this new light is experienced. The Sun is certainly increasing Her favours as each day passes, but perhaps you might also like to honour 'New Light' in the form of the Maiden (Crescent) Moon, who is the Young One in the story of the Silver Goddess. Allow that light to fill your being, sparking vitality and change, even as you offer up thanks for the magic that is this time. A votive candle could be burnt in this ceremony, or offerings made such as a clear crystal, spring water, a white feather or silver ribbon. A poem or song would also be most appropriate!

*Purification:* The spring clean of *all* your Being. Remember that purification not only applies to one's physical body, but the mental, emotional, 'energetic' bodies also. This is of course, part of the honouring. When you consciously prepare yourself through purification, you are honouring all that is sacred, and most especially your sacred *Self*. A cleansing of any (healthy) form becomes a ritual, whereby you are releasing the old from your body and being, and preparing for the goodness of the new. The purification can be quite simple, or more rigorous, depending on your preference and what you feel is called for. Dietary and lifestyle changes and enhancements, as well as supportive bodywork are all on the agenda! Of course, consult a health professional before embarking on any major program. Ritually, utilising the magic of the elements through such things as salt and herb baths, smudging, and water and oil anointing is a powerful practice and one which itself allows communion with nature. Visualisation and meditation are also wonderful tools that are easily available to you. Be sure to release with gentle and safe, though powerful, intent!

*Inspiration:* This is the ritual/ journeywork element which demands both your creativity and your careful and honest consideration. Honour the Nymph, the Muses and ask for their blessing in this endeavour... that their magic sparks a bright love and desire for renewal in your being. Who, what is your New Light? Is it being expressed through your body, self, attitude, home, work or new project, or a combination of these? What is the *quality* of that Light which you wish to nourish and see bloom? There are a variety of ways which you can acknowledge and give more 'body' to the expression of this Light. You may wish to paint, sculpt or draw...journal...dance or write an affirmation or piece of prose. All these activities can, and should, be undertaken within a powerful, beautiful, sacred space, thereby making the experience and magic extraordinary....sending your vision winging toward Her radiance.

An oracle's made by the eye that seeks it

*A rune is carved by the blade's intent!*

Present time is a future you spun

*Make sure it's the future that you meant!*

*From the CD 'Ice' by Carolyn Hillyer, Seventh Wave Music.*

The Goddess Association in Australia (G.A.I.A.) is a not for profit, member- driven organization which is committed to bringing women together, united in the timeless wisdom and lore of Goddess. For more information go to [www.goddessassociation.com.au](http://www.goddessassociation.com.au)

Alicia Sherwood M.A. (Ancient History) facilitates programs and workshops for women. For more information, go to [www.moontree.net](http://www.moontree.net)

---

<sup>i</sup> Burkert, W. *Greek Religion*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford (1985: 77).

<sup>ii</sup> This perception of entirely natural processes is indicative of philosophies which would continue to gain popularity among the Greeks. These held that transcendence (particularly through the intellect) over nature was a virtue.

<sup>iii</sup> Stears, K. 'Death Becomes Her', Williamson, M. & Blundell, S. *The Sacred and the Feminine in Ancient Greece*, Routledge, London (1998: 118).

<sup>iv</sup> Eustathius ad *Od.* 22.481 §1934-5 (Harrison 1903: 24).

<sup>v</sup> Burkert (1985: 79). In addition to the more 'elemental' means of purification, the Greeks often used blood sacrifice as a means of purification (the pig of purification is just one example. See Pausanias 9.8.1). I have intentionally refrained from discussing this unsavoury practice for reasons which I hope are obvious!

<sup>vi</sup> Pausanias 2.38.2.

<sup>vii</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, Murray, A.T. (trans.) 1995, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

<sup>viii</sup> Burkert (1985: 79).

<sup>ix</sup> *Hom.Hym.Dem.* 198 ff; Harrison, J.E. *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey (1903: 27).

<sup>x</sup> *IG* I<sup>3</sup> 78.

<sup>xi</sup> Harrison (1903: 86) notes that the sprinkling of grain on the altar, a prerequisite to the blood sacrifice, was also considered part of the sacrifice, and thus the purification of suppliant and placation of the god. Certain plants and incantations were also commonly a part of purificatory ritual. Unfortunately space restricts a full discussion of this topic.

<sup>xii</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, Most, G.W. (trans.) 2006, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

<sup>xiii</sup> *The Homeric Hymns*, Cashford, J. (trans.) 2003, Penguin, London.

<sup>xiv</sup> Allen, A.W. 1949, 'Solon's Prayer to the Muses', *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, 80: 50-65.