

CARANTES NEWSLETTER

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Dear Friends,

We hope our 15th newsletter finds you well-rested at the end of a peaceful and energizing summer. As it's been over a year since we started and there are many fresh eyes on these, we would like to remind you that we're always delighted to hear your thoughts and receive questions, whether it be on our discord server or by email. If you have any reactions to the readings we recommend, feel free to communicate them and, with your permission, we'll include them in the following newsletter. Carantes is designed to foster dialogue, and we truly love to hear from anyone who reads us.

LOGISTICS



Our Samhain meeting is coming up! More information forthcoming in our next newsletter, on or around October 15th.



Also, you can join our **discord server**! This link will be active for the next 7 days: <https://discord.gg/ma9AQeTS>

Last month saw the end of the Olympic games and a controversy all of us in the Steering Committee found both upsetting and ridiculous. You certainly heard of it, but we'll summarize what happened briefly, so we're all on the same page: an Algerian cisgender woman who won the gold medal for boxing in her category was accused of being a man intent on harming women by notorious transphobes like J. K. Rowling, Elon Musk and Donald Trump. The sources of these accusations were varied, with some being nothing more than a picture of Khelif boxing where people said she looked like a man (thereby making gender purely a matter of an outsider's perception), and others taking as their proof a so-called "gender test" performed by a discredited boxing authority who works closely with Vladimir Putin, and has consistently refused to make clear what the parameters of the test actually were or publish Khelif's results.

Some news outlets claimed she has elevated levels of testosterone, while others went so far as to claim she has XY chromosomes. **None of these claims were ever substantiated**, and we strongly condemn the lack of journalistic integrity that amplified the ensuing flood of abuse Khelif received. Khelif is and always was a cisgender woman, and the treatment she received was abhorrent. **And it is even more abhorrent that this treatment was considered acceptable by so many who believed her to be trans.**

Why do we bring this up?

We've been circling the topic of gender in our recent readings on paganism and its place relative to both Celtic Studies and fascism. Various pagan groups tend to have either a strong connection to queerness, offering alternative communities that go against mainstream culture's more normative tendencies, while other groups present gender essentialist traits that limit their understanding of gender to more or less strict binaries. Interestingly, **the people who use Celtic material to support their fascist narratives tend to be gender essentialists.** With the general direction our readings have been taking, and the recent storm of abuse that fell on Imane Khelif because she didn't perfectly fit certain powerful people's idea of womanhood, we thought it was time to give ourselves the theoretical tools to understand how gender fits into the broader picture.

READINGS & NOTES FROM OUR DISCUSSION

- Thorn, Abigail. "I Read The Most Misunderstood Philosopher In The World." Youtube. May 17th, 2024. Educational video, 1:15:08. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QVilpxowsUQ>.
- Schnurbein, Stefanie von. "Gender and Sexuality." In *Norse Revival: Transformations of Germanic Neopaganism*, 216–50. Brill, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctt1w76v8x.15>.

To begin with, we have decided to diversify the format of our readings a little bit, and would like to recommend a video essay by Abigail Thorn, who has been posting videos to the YouTube channel PhilosophyTube for the past 11 years. Her catalog is full of very interesting and helpful works, but today we will focus particularly on a recent one, posted 3 months ago and titled "I Read The Most Misunderstood Philosopher In The World." The video walks us through Judith Butler's principal works and ideas in a straightforward, though sometimes dramatized style. **A word of caution:** Abigail is trans and part of the video is a conversation between her present and her past, pre-transition self. This is ostensibly intended to show the audience how she, herself, once engaged with Butler's ideas in a more combative way than at present, but it is also a deeply emotional reflection on her personal experience of gender and transition.

This personal approach allows Thorn to unfold complex ideas one by one, each building on the previous ones in a way that traces the arc of Butler's thought, from the first essays to their most recent book *Who's Afraid Of Gender?* (2024) This gives us a set of very important terms.

The first one is **naturalization**. This is a term we've encountered before, and it describes a deceptively simple process by which certain things become perceived as biological facts when they are not. **A society will hold these ideas to be mere common sense, basic truths of the universe, when they are in fact social constructs.** One example is the idea, once entirely naturalized, that women are too emotional to lead ; although this one is still thrown around in conservative bubbles, it has since been discredited. Similarly, ideas about the inferiority of people of colour were once thought to be a matter of science. It is worth noting that such ideas are naturalized because they uphold unjust systems of power. The economic institution of slavery in the context of triangular trade relied on society believing that people of colour were naturally inferior to white people, in order to justify their enslavement.

Next, we have **performative language**: this is the idea that something is done by being spoken. There are various models for this concept, from Austin's speech act to Benvéniste's performative, but what matters for the present is the **coincidence of word and act**. It is connected to our next term, **abjection**, which describes the idea that something or someone can be rendered abject, or lower than human. This allows people to justify atrocities committed against the victims of abjection, **because the violence is no longer perceived as violence but as a form of cleansing**.

Finally, Thorn explains Butler's take on the **phantasm**, which is the heart of *Who's Afraid of Gender?* It is not their own term specifically, as other philosophers have used it before. Thorn quotes Michael Naas: the phantasm is "a prism that refracts an as-if into an as-so." **This process of coming to believe that an imagined threat is real serves to mask real threats.** For Butler, we are witnessing increased virulence against people who challenge naturalized ideas of gender because the system we live in is becoming increasingly untenable. Faced with the existential threats that late-stage capitalism poses to us all, many people adopt the phantasm of transphobia rather than admit the truth that our system needs urgent, complete overhaul.

The second piece we recommend this month is the chapter ‘Gender and Sexuality’ in Stefanie von Schnurbein’s book *Norse Revival: Transformations of Germanic Neopaganism*. While the book is not directly concerned with Celtic material, this chapter includes some rather significant discussions about several key topics that play into pervasive misunderstandings the status and position of women in early Celtic societies.

The article discusses a point of tension in Norse Neopagan communities regarding gender roles, queer people, and feminism. The article discusses the historiography around the idea that Europe was ruled by a now-lost matriarchal society before the arrival of the Indo-Europeans, and the impact this idea has had on these Neopagan communities. **Johan Jacob Bachofen** in *Das Mutterrecht* (1861) was the first spark of discussion on this front, arguing that society formed in three stages: (1) an early anarchic stage without clear structure and promiscuity, (2) a matriarchal stage, (3) a patriarchal stage. He argued in favor of patriarchy, and held that his third stage naturally conquered and overcame what he believed was an inferior second stage. His work has an interesting reception, as **it was supported by patriarchal scholars** invested in maintaining the inferior status of women through pseudo-scientific claims (the process of naturalization we discussed above), and **also by early socialist thinkers** who considered these matriarchal societies to be the original socialist societies.

The article traces the career of Bachofen’s ideas through the 19th and 20th centuries, through the works of several scholars who supported this theory from different angles, though ultimately all of them incorporated antisemitism. For instance, **Ludwig Klages** believed that the lost matriarchal society was the original Indo-European society that was disrupted by the arrival of Jewish-derived Monotheism. **Alfred Bäumle** instead viewed the lost matriarchal society as a ‘Jewish-Oriental’ tradition that was destroyed with the arrival of an ‘Indo-Germanic’ people. **Jacob Grimm** (amongst others) supported views from Tacitus that women held a high status in early Germanic societies as seers and religious leaders, and that women accused of witchcraft in medieval Europe were secret practitioners of their people’s old faith being prosecuted by a foreign religion ultimately related to Judaism.

What we believe is particularly important about this chapter is von Schnurbein’s discussion of **how these anti-semitic and pseudo-scientific ideas become popularized in public consciousness, and following that, become incorporated in revivalist faiths**. These ideas lead to the development of the theory of a lost Stone Age European Earth Mother Cult in the work of **Herman Wirth** in *Aufgang der Menschheit* (1928), which was rejected in its time, but supported by elements of the 1970s feminist movement which were searching for ancient matriarchal cultures to both explain how patriarchy came to be, and provide a legitimate alternative to it. The ideas of lost ur-religion Mother Cults was widely rejected by academics at the time, including feminist scholars, but it nevertheless survived in the minds of the public. And, as we might expect, the same anti-semitic perspectives that influenced the development of these theories would arise again, with the development of the belief that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam had destroyed matriarchal society and ‘murdered the goddess’ (which, the article very correctly points out, is just a repurposed version of the standard anti-semitic view that casts Jewish people as those to blame for the death of Christ).

This historiographic review concludes with a discussion of **Elizabeth Gould Davies'** book *The First Sex* (1971) which drew on earlier works, such as that of **Marija Gimbutas**, to argue that pre-Indo-European peoples of Europe (which, shockingly, includes the Celts from Davies' perspective) were white-skinned, blue-eyed and red-haired peoples organized in peaceful matriarchal societies that were destroyed by the arrival of patriarchy by the conquest of Indo-European peoples from the steppes (whom Gimbutas calls 'Kurgans'). When her work was roundly rejected by scholars she took a card from the playbook of many modern grifters and immediately **pivoted her work towards the general public while incorporating anti-semitism into her theories** by arguing that the patriarchal Kurgans were closely associated with Semitic peoples and referred to 'Teutonic-Semitic patriarchy'.

While the article goes on to discuss the influence of these theories in Germanic contexts, the historiography of these ideas is what we think is most important for those of us interested in the Celtic aspect. **The ideas that the Celts were naturally more 'in-tune' with nature and either were matriarchal or that women held high- or equal-status with men in their society is something that has been circulating through public consciousness since the 1970s.** Those of us who teach have almost certainly encountered these ideas among our students, and those of us in Celtic Neopagan communities have likely seen these same ideas being incorporated by authors writing on figures such as Danu, Brigid, The Morrigan, and Ceridwen. If any of you care to think all the way back to the inciting incident that caused Carantes to form, these ideas were actually being used by Celtics_Films when they argued that women held high- to equal-status in Celtic society (note the lack of plurality as they believe wrongly that all Celts everywhere and when were a single consistent group) that was destroyed by the arrival of globalist, multiculturalist Judaism-affiliated-Rome.

Knowing where these ideas come from lets all of us, from a range of backgrounds, be we students, scholars, practitioners of faiths, or just interested members of the public, better grapple with these issues and dispute them when we see them appear in our communities.

As you read, we encourage you to think of how the terms Abigail Thorn gave us might describe the dynamics Stefanie von Schnurbein outlines, where they fall short, and more broadly, how gender essentialism intersects with fallacious but pervasive ideas about the Celts.

That is all for us now at the CARANTES steering committee. Please feel free to contact us if you have any reactions, thoughts or concerns, or if you would rather not get any more emails. We'd love to hear from you on the discord server or by email.

Until next time, keep well and safe,
and thanks for doing this work with us,
Your friends at



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