

# Pomegranates and Crescent Honey-Cakes: Divine Femininity and Everyday Womanhood in the Work of Dion Fortune

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Dion Fortune was born Violet Mary Firth on December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1890 in Llanudno, Wales. She attended Studley Agricultural College from 1911 until 1913, when she left after suffering a severe mental breakdown. As a result of this experience Fortune grew interested in occultism, and after the First World War ended she became involved with the occultist Theodor Moriarty. In 1919 she was initiated into Alpha et Omega, one of the splinter groups of the original Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. In the early 1920s Fortune established the Fraternity of the Inner Light,<sup>1</sup> originally as an ‘outer court’ of the Golden Dawn, intended to attract new members to the group. In 1925 Fortune’s Society purchased headquarters at 3 Queensborough Terrace in London and Fortune began to publish occult work under the name Dion Fortune. In 1927 Fortune was expelled from Alpha et Omega, ostensibly because “certain symbols had not appeared in my aura – a perfectly unanswerable charge.”<sup>2</sup> In the same year she married Dr. Penry Evans (1892-1956), who was both a practicing physician and a member of her Society. Throughout the 1930s Fortune saw to the development of her Society and its work. She delivered public lectures, initiated new members and published an array of occult essays, books and novels.<sup>3</sup> During the Second World War Fortune suspended her publishing and led her Society in an attempt to assist the war effort through group meditation. Fortune died of Leukemia on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 1946, and was buried at Glastonbury.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The name was later changed to the more egalitarian Society of the Inner Light.

<sup>2</sup> Dion Fortune, “Ceremonial Magic Unveiled,” *The Occult Review*, January 1933, reproduced in Gareth Knight, *Rites of Isis and of Pan* (Cheltenham: Skylight Press, 2013), 91.

<sup>3</sup> Of her novels, *The Goat-foot God* (1936) and *The Sea Priestess* (1938) have proven the most enduringly popular; *The Mystical Qabalab* (1935) is widely seen as one of the finest and most accessible occult works of the 20th century, while *Psychic Self-Defense* (1931) is still widely available today; Fortune’s articles in the *Inner Light Journal* have had a narrower readership, however those of 1939-40 have been republished in Knight’s *Circuit of Force* (1998) and offer a fascinating glimpse into the Society’s work.

<sup>4</sup> To this date four bibliographies have been written on Fortune: Knight (2000), Richardson (1991), Chapman (1993) and Fielding and Collins (1985). Selby’s 2008 dissertation also contains plethora of biographical notes, and he claims to have access to texts held exclusively by the Society of the Inner Light. Each of these biographies varies both in dating events in Fortune’s life and in naming

Barely explored in an academic context, Fortune's work is hugely important because it represents the first (modern, western) attempt to bring esotericism to women and the middle classes, to make it available in a pragmatic, everyday context. For this alone Fortune can rightfully be considered the grandmother of the New Age, however her books have also been highly influential on the development of the metaphysics, symbolism and popular imagery of a number of New Religious Movements. This chapter will explore the metaphysics of the Divine Feminine as they unfold within Fortune's work. I will consider the way Fortune's concept of the divine feminine developed as her understanding of the Hermetic Qabalah advanced, and the way that this work was underpinned by Fortune's belief in the doctrines of duality and universalism. I will then explore the way this divine femininity interacts with the realities of womanhood in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, examining how Fortune balanced adepthood with the everyday responsibilities that characterised the life of a middle-class woman in interwar Britain.

Because of the lack of academic study of Fortune's work, and of any reliable biographical material pertaining to her life, this article necessarily takes the form of an extended piece of literary criticism; however this should not be seen as a limit, but as an opportunity, for Fortune's corpus offers a vast wealth of sources for this topic. I have chosen to focus this study on Fortune's two most influential books, *The Mystical Qabalah* (1935) and *The Sea Priestess* (1938). *The Sea Priestess*, Fortune's third occult novel, was her most popular, and has been a seminal text for the development of New Age and modern Pagan forms of spirituality. In particular, the form of universalism portrayed within this text, and the connection Fortune draws between the female body, the oceanic tides and the cosmic tides of metaphysical birth and rebirth, have been foundational to the development of goddess-centric spirituality in the 20th and 21st centuries. *The Mystical Qabalah* is one of the most accessible books on the Qabalah and its relationship to esotericism to have come out of the 20th century, and is still widely read today. The Qabalah<sup>5</sup> is a system of mysticism that has grown from the Hebrew symbol *Etz haChayim*, the Tree of Life. The Tree of Life is a composite symbol made from the ten Sephiroth, or spheres, and the 22 paths between them, arranged on three pillars (see Appendix 1). Originally used as a mystical hermeneutic tool, the Qabalah was appropriated by scholars such as Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) and Johann Reuchlin (1455-1522) in the 15th century, who placed the symbols of Christianity upon the tree, assigning the Christ to Tiphareth. These developments became known as the Hermetic Qabalah, a system that was hugely influential on the development of occultism across the 18th and 19th centuries. In the Western Esoteric tradition the secrets of the Qabalah were monopolized by occult brotherhoods, the most famous of which being the

the people she worked with and places she stayed. This state of affairs is due to the scarcity of personal papers that survived the Society's inner power struggle in the years following Fortune's death.  
<sup>5</sup> Modern texts tend to use the spelling Kabbalah for Qabalah, Sefirah for Sephirah, and Sefirot for Sephiroth; however I have chosen to retain Fortune's spellings throughout this article.

Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. However with the arrival of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century this secrecy was to end, as Fortune's *The Mystical Qabalah* was published in the wake of similar texts by Aleister Crowley (1875-1947), whose 777 was published in 1909, and Israel Regardie (1907-1985). In her 1933 review of latter's two books, *The Tree of Life* (1932) and *The Garden of Pomegranates* (1932), in which Regardie claimed to reveal the Golden Dawn's magical system, Fortune explicitly aligned herself with both Regardie and Crowley in this revelatory purpose.

I see from an article in the November number of this magazine that Foyle's are issuing Crowley's *Magick* in a cheap edition... The third person of this unholy trinity of revealers of the Mysteries is my humble self, who have been doing much the same thing as Mr. Regardie in a series of articles on the Cabbala which has been running in my own magazine, *The Inner Light*.<sup>6</sup>

The articles she is referring to were published in *The Inner Light Magazine* between 1931 and 1935, before being collected in a book by Williams and Norgate in 1935 under the name *The Mystical Qabalah*. *The Mystical Qabalah* is a catalogue of correspondences that places the cosmological systems of ancient Greece, modern Christianity and Hinduism onto the glyph of the tree. According to Fortune this book revealed to the public, if in a less iconoclastic manner than Regardie's work, many pieces of occult knowledge that had previously been the reserve of initiatic societies. With this text Fortune aimed to catalyze initiation in her readers, an aim shared by her occult novels.<sup>7</sup>

### The Law of Polarity

Polarity is one of the most distinct and original ideas that Fortune developed. "Polarity means the function of flow and return of force;"<sup>8</sup> nobody and nothing can operate in a vacuum, for any force expended necessitates some form of return. In any given relationship, one aspect will be active, and one passive. The two aspects act as "the positive and negative poles of a battery, generating current,"<sup>9</sup> and force will flow between them according to this polarization. As long as the balance is maintained the force will be part of a circuit, and the relationship will be reciprocal. On the Tree of Life, the pillar of Mercy and that of Severity are held in balance in the central pillar, but this balance is not inert.

<sup>6</sup> "Ceremonial Magic Unveiled," 86.

<sup>7</sup> Initiation is central both to the Golden Dawn system and to Fortune's thought, however Fortune's approach to initiation is innovative and egalitarian; she argues that it can take place in the mind of the individual through the stimulation of the emotions and imagination, rendering the exclusivity of the Golden Dawn ritual structure obsolete.

<sup>8</sup> "Inner Plane Teaching on Polarity," a trance address given via Fortune to the senior members of the Society of the Inner Light, December 16<sup>th</sup> 1940, reproduced in *Rites of Isis and of Pan*, 130.

<sup>9</sup> Dion Fortune, *The Winged Bull* (Np: Aziloth Books, 2014), 41.

Fortune argued, “The weakness of Christianity lies in the fact that it ignores rhythm... its dualisms are antagonistic instead of equilibrating,”<sup>10</sup> for polarity is the function of a dynamic duality. According to the Hermetic tradition, and crucial to understanding Fortune’s use of the Tree, that which applies to the macrocosm applies also to the microcosm;<sup>11</sup> thus Fortune believed the law of Polarity operated on every level of existence. Polarity was a physical fact, an interpersonal rule, a spiritual truth, and a cosmic law.

The most logical place to begin an exploration of Fortune’s cosmology is with her vision of creation. Replacing the traditional, patriarchal analogy of creation, in which the phallus thrusts forth into the abyss, creating life,<sup>12</sup> Fortune proposes that the kteis seduces, inspires and fecundates the phallus, drawing it forth into her abyss in order to create the world of form. It is the “outer space” of the kteis that “oversets the balance,” so that “the All-Father pours forth to satisfy the hunger of space.”<sup>13</sup> It is to the kteis of space that Fortune assigns the hunger and desire usually associated with the phallus. In *The Sea Priestess* Fortune describes this process through the Ancient Egyptian myth of Isis and Osiris. Isis calls to her brother and lover, Osiris. “She draws him from the place of the dead... and he comes to her in his boat called Millions of Years, and the earth grows green with the springing rain. For the desire of Osiris answereth unto the call of Isis.”<sup>14</sup> Fortune argues (for she often deliberately blurs the line between history and mythology)<sup>15</sup> that ancient peoples “adored the Bird of Space that laid the Primordial Egg long before they worshipped the Sun as the Fecundator.”<sup>16</sup> Fortune’s mythologized history aims to emphasize the power of the fecundating, creative nous of the divine feminine in its stimulating, seductive passivity. She explains that it is “because of the inertia of space ere movement arose as a tide” that the divine feminine “is called by the wise the passive principle in nature, and is thought of as cosmic water, or space that flows.” She thus aligns traditional feminine passivity with cosmic forces that often appear passive, but are deceptively powerful. Fortune’s cosmology disguises a radical new understanding of traditional gender roles, one that finds the ultimate power in passivity. In her system

Golden Aphrodite cometh not as the virgin, the victim, but as the Awakener, the Desirous One. As outer space she calls, and the All-father commences the courtship. She awakeneth Him to desire and the worlds are created. Lo,

<sup>10</sup> Dion Fortune, *The Mystical Qabalah* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1935). 180.

<sup>11</sup> The dictum “that which is below is like that which is above and that which is above is like that which is below,” often summarised to “as above, so below,” is attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, and has been hugely influential in the development of esotericism in the West.

<sup>12</sup> This idea underpins both orthodox Christianity and Judaism. For further discussion of the evolution of creation analogies, see Thompson’s 1981 classic *The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light*.

<sup>13</sup> *The Sea Priestess* (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1978), 291.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>15</sup> This blurring is found throughout *The Sea Priestess*, but the best example of this ‘imaginative history’ can be found in *Avalon of the Heart* (1934).

<sup>16</sup> *The Sea Priestess* 176.

she is the Awakener. How powerful she is, golden Aphrodite, the awakener of manhood!<sup>17</sup>

In passages such as these it is easy to see the influence Fortune has had on the development of neo-Paganism, and Gaia spirituality in particular, across the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Fortune refigures the traditional power relation, attributing creative impetus to the feminine, which seduces and draws forth the desire of the masculine. It is she who has the true power, for without this stimulation the world would remain “fixed in inertia.”

Fortune believed it to be self-evident that “in all magical work... nobody can work alone, and according to the work you want to do you will work in polarity, or triangle, or circle;”<sup>18</sup> however “the most important work is done by the pair.”<sup>19</sup> The action of the stimulating force upon the potential is most effective when the two partners take the form of the two natural poles of humanity, man and woman, for the tensions of sexuality that exist between them will make the forces in the circuit particularly potent. The subconscious and archetypal images associated with the masculine and feminine poles, in which woman is man’s “anima, his underworld contact, his link with most ancient earth,”<sup>20</sup> provide potent stimulus to the imagination, particularly when the emotions have already been worked up to a fever pitch by costumes, incense and music. The importance of gender in the magical pair is particularly significant in Fortune’s occult novels, where each of her hero/heroine pairs must join forces in order to perform successful magic or ritual. Even Fortune’s great adept Morgan Le Fay, the heroine of *The Sea Priestess* and its sequel, *Moon Magic*, cannot work magic alone, and must wait until her priest appears, for it takes “two to bring through the power – Shakta and Shakti, as the Hindus call them.”<sup>21</sup> Fortune’s cosmology thus disguises a radical new understanding of traditional gender roles. Powerful passivity is personified by Le Fay, seductress par excellence. Although an adept, and far advanced along the occult path, alone Le Fay is almost powerless. Her power lies in seduction, awakening, in stimulation; “she was negative, passive; she did not make magic herself, but was an instrument in the hands of the priests, and however perfect an instrument she might be, there was no use in her if there were no one to use her.”<sup>22</sup> Within Fortune’s system duality is essential to magical work and spiritual power. An adept of either sex can work alone for a hundred years (which in *The Sea Priestess* Le Fay claims to have done), but never succeed at their task until they find a suitable magical partner.

For Fortune polarity is the key to everyday relationships, practical magical work and theology. Fortune’s metaphysical system is irreducibly dualistic, a testament to

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

<sup>18</sup> “Inner Plane Teaching on Polarity,” 130.

<sup>19</sup> *The Winged Bull*, 94.

<sup>20</sup> *Moon Magic* (London: The Aquarian Press, 1956), 156.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>22</sup> *The Sea Priestess*, 150.

the far-reaching influence of the Gnostic tradition on modern Esotericism. The Divine feminine is both creator and destroyer, but she only has power in polarity with the male force, which she draws forth; this duality is so essential to Fortune that she believes “a Goddessless religion is half-way to atheism.”<sup>23</sup> It is goddesslessness, she argues, that has led Christianity into its current stagnation. Fortune’s readers often miss this innovative theological development, and in neo-Paganism and New Age forms of spirituality the goddess has largely replaced the male god. Although these developments were inspired by Fortune’s work, they are not true to their source; for Fortune’s intention was not to replace the single male deity with a female one, but to replace monotheism with a dualistic system based around the relationship between male and female gods and forces, accompanied by a cosmology that finds this duality on every level of existence.

### The Faces of the Divine Feminine

Although less influential than the Law of Polarity, Fortune’s belief in religious universalism was also hugely important to her cosmological vision. This aspect of Fortune’s work shows the potent influence of her time in the Theosophical Society, of which she was an active member throughout the 1920s; Fortune was appointed head of the Theosophical Society’s Christian Mystic Lodge in 1926, before breaking with the Society because of its advocacy of India in the face of increasing turmoil in Colonial relations. In *The Sea Priestess* Le Fay asks her magical partner Wilfred, “Do you not know the Mystery saying that all the gods are one god, and all the goddesses are one goddess, and there is one initiator?”<sup>24</sup> Fortune believed that the great worldwide pantheon could ultimately be reduced a single divine duality – although this duality itself is irreducible. Thus Isis, whether she appears veiled or unveiled, represents “all goddesses that men’s hearts have worshipped, for they are not many things, but one thing under many forms.”<sup>25</sup> This form of universalism has fallen out of fashion today because of its colonial and appropriative undertones; however the influence of this idea has had an incomparable influence on the development of New Ages spirituality.<sup>26</sup>

Developing this Universalist standpoint, Fortune believed that the deities of any given religious system can be seen to correspond to those of every other, for all are ultimately aspects of the single divine duality. Further, each of the deities in the worldwide pantheon can be seen to correspond with the Sephiroth on the Tree through their traditional astrological symbolism, for “the symbolism of

<sup>23</sup> *The Mystical Qabalah*, 152.

<sup>24</sup> *The Sea Priestess*, 172.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>26</sup> This phenomenon has been explored in detail by scholars of religion; see, for example, David Waldron and Janice Newton, “Rethinking Appropriation of the Indigenous – a Critique of the Romanticist Approach,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 16.2 (2012).

the Tree... supplies the essential ground-plan of classification to which all other systems can be related.” In *The Mystical Qabalah* Fortune explains to the reader how they can begin to trace these correspondences; the acolyte is to meditate at length upon a given Sephirah, allowing its symbolism to unfold from the unconscious. By immersing themselves in a Sephirah in this way, the acolyte can initiate himself into a given esoteric grade<sup>27</sup> and can work with the manifestation of the force of that aspect of the Godhead... in whatever system he may select.”<sup>28</sup> Thus if the acolyte achieves the grade corresponding with Netzach, he will possess the powers of the Sphere of Venus in whatever traditional system he may be using; “in the Greek system, Aphrodite; in the Nordic, Freya; in the Druidic, Keridwen.”<sup>29</sup>

### *Binah*

The first feminine manifestation upon the Tree of Life is Binah, the third Sephirah, who is also called Isis Unveiled, or the heavenly Isis. She is the mother of gods and it is this primal goddess-power Le Fay summons with her hymn in *The Sea Priestess*, with its refrain “Ea, Binah, Ge!”<sup>30</sup> These figures are manifestations of an idea of divine femininity that Fortune believes to be both archetypal and symbolic, and a genuine force, active across the spiritual and etheric planes. With Binah the cosmic energy first manifest in Kether crystallises into force, however, with form comes the necessary eventuality of the dissolution of form. It is for this reason, Fortune argues, that “any god who has an analogy with Saturn will be referred to Binah;”<sup>31</sup> for Binah contains the ideas of life and birth, and their necessary concurrents time, finitude, and death. “Saturn-Satan is an easy transition; and so is Time-Death-Devil.”<sup>32</sup> Saturn is traditionally portrayed as a masculine force, as indeed is the devil, revealing that although Fortune assigns certain Sephirah as falling under the control of masculine or feminine force, each sphere is in fact bi-sexual, holding within it both masculine and feminine properties.<sup>33</sup> Thus she argues that although Binah is the supernal mother, “she is also Saturn, the solidifier, who connects through his sickle with Death with

<sup>27</sup> The use of grades is another testament to Fortune’s years within the Golden Dawn, however as we saw above with initiation, Fortune’s claim that a given grade can be achieved outside of the traditional ritual structure carries a powerful message of egalitarianism.

<sup>28</sup> *The Mystical Qabalah*, 11-12.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>30</sup> Ea is the Mesopotamian earth goddess, and Gea, also known as Reah, the Ancient Greek mother of the gods.

<sup>31</sup> *The Mystical Qabalah*, 90.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>33</sup> Fortune also believed this bisexuality to operate at the level of individual consciousness, asking in *The Mystical Qabalah* “How many people realize that their own souls are literally bi-sexual within themselves, and that the different levels of consciousness act as male and female towards each other?” (154).

his scythe, and Time with his hour-glass.”<sup>34</sup> For Fortune Binah “is two-aspected, and these aspects are distinguished as Ama, the Dark Sterile Mother, and Alma, the Bright Fertile Mother.”<sup>35</sup> This duality can be witnessed in “any goddess who might be termed the primordial mother”<sup>36</sup> and it is for this reason the feminine is mythically associated with evil and death, for “implicit in the ascetic religions such as Christianity and Buddhism is the idea that woman is the root of all evil, because she is the influence which holds men to a life of form by their desires.”<sup>37</sup>

### *Yesod*

The duality of Isis Unveiled and Veiled, of Binah and Malkuth, is central to the action of the divine in *The Sea Priestess*, and I will explore this dichotomy further below. Yesod, the moon, completes this divine trinity. As Ronald Hutton explores in *The Triumph of the Moon*, Fortune was loyal to Christianity throughout her life;<sup>38</sup> however at the same time she saw Christianity as being but another example of her universalised schema, albeit the one most suitable for the typical Western temperament. She assigns the Christ to Tiphareth, the sphere of the sun, and the Virgin Mary to Binah, noting that it is from Binah’s assignation Marah, meaning “the Bitter One, Our Lady of Sorrows”<sup>39</sup> that Mary’s name comes. Fortune assigns the Holy Spirit to Yesod, a deeply unorthodox assignation, for Yesod is the sphere of sexuality, vision and imagination. Fortune was thus making an implicit argument for the importance of sexuality within Christian mysticism.

Fortune argues that the moon is a predominantly female force, and that “if the symbolism of the luna crescent be traced through the various pantheons it will be found that the deities associated with it are predominantly female.” She believes this applies to the Holy Spirit as much as any other deity (an idea with a long history within esotericism),<sup>40</sup> and Fortune supports this assignation with a quote from MacGregor Mathers,<sup>41</sup> who argues

We are usually told that the Holy Spirit is masculine. But the word Ruach, Spirit, is feminine, as appears from the following passage of the Sepher Yetzirah, “Achath (feminine, not Achad, masculine), ruach elohim chum: One is *sbe*, the Spirit of the Elohim of Life.”<sup>42</sup>

<sup>34</sup> *The Mystical Qabalah*, 83.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 144

<sup>38</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 184.

<sup>39</sup> *The Sea Priestess*, 227.

<sup>40</sup> For a detailed discussion of the development of this idea in English occultism, see Arthur Versluis, *Wisdom’s Children*, New York: State University of New York Press (1999).

<sup>41</sup> Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers (1854 – 1918) was one of the founders of the Golden Dawn.

<sup>42</sup> *The Mystical Qabalah*, 50.

Fortune claims “to Yesod are assigned all the deities that have the moon in the symbolism: Luna herself; Hecate, with her dominion over evil magic; and Diana, with her presidency over child-birth.”<sup>43</sup> This final correspondence is a crucial one, for “the physical moon, Yesod in Assiah, as the Qabalists would say, with its twenty-eight day cycle, correlates with the reproductive cycle of the human female.”<sup>44</sup> Fortune believes that a special relationship exists between women and the moon, a relationship operating across the archetypal, spiritual and physical planes. Further, she finds in Yesod the potential to reconcile these three realms of being:

I heard, faint and far off, the lowing of a calving cow. And in some odd way it was not inappropriate, for Luna is also Isis, who is also Hathor under another form, and the horns upon her brow are interchangeable with the crescent moon.<sup>45</sup>

Linking the figure of the calving cow with the lunar goddess, and in turn reminding the reader that all goddesses are one, Fortune mythologizes and spiritualizes female sexuality. As with her above comment on the female menstrual cycle, Fortune thus seeks to re-enchant female sexuality, discovering sacred structures and correspondences within even the most mundane and fleshly aspects of experience. According to her schema procreation, periods and marital strife are all mirrored on the cosmic planes; however Fortune’s goddesses do not suffer human emotions and indignities of the residents of Olympus. Further, although she emphasizes the sacredness of birth, Fortune has little time for mother goddesses, and in multiple places argues that a female acolyte cannot have a child and progress to adepthood. Instead Fortune focuses on the goddess as lover, replacing the great sacrifice of birth with the sacrificial castration of the male; it is the latter idea that runs like a red thread throughout her fictional work.

*Malkuth, Queen of the Microcosm*

In *The Mystical Qabalah*, Fortune states Binah is the “Superior Eve,” the highest form of the divine feminine.<sup>46</sup> Binah’s foil is Malkuth, “the Inferior Eve, the Bride of Microprosopos.”<sup>47</sup> Malkuth is the final Sephirah on the tree. “All the corn goddesses refer to Malkuth,”<sup>48</sup> for she is goddess of fertility and the physical realm, the divine aspect in nature. Understanding sexuality to be a key aspect of the etheric and spiritual planes, Fortune set out to unfold the complex psychology and symbolism behind each of the Sephiroth in novel form. Each of her occult novels thus coincides with a given sphere, and explores the relationship

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *The Sea Priestess*, 212.

<sup>46</sup> *The Mystical Qabalah*, 90.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

between spirituality and sexuality within that sphere. In *The Goat-Foot God*, Fortune's third occult novel and a written meditation on Malkuth, earthly sexuality is portrayed as the rampant, rapacious lust of the goat; however by the time she wrote *The Sea Priestess*, which explores Yesod, Fortune exhibits a newfound respect for Malkuth. During the course of *The Sea Priestess* Le Fay performs great, evolution-advancing acts of magic in aid of the group soul, which are done in Binah's name and through her grace. Le Fay also performs smaller, more selfish workings, such as healing Wilfred or increasing her own magnetism through the personification of goddess-power. These latter works are done in the name of Isis Veiled, whose power Le Fay assumes by filing her "scarlet whore's claws"<sup>49</sup> to a point and painting them blood red.<sup>50</sup> When operating in the sphere of the Earth Le Fay makes use of all the traditional ephemera of seduction, and is frank about this both to the reader and Wilfred. It is Isis Veiled who saves Wilfred, teaching him to see the spiritual within the natural; however this lesser work proceeds only with the blessing of Isis Unveiled, who recognizes Wilfred and Le Fay's work as a step forward in the spiritual evolution of mankind. Malkuth and Binah are thus an irreducible duality, microcosm and macrocosm unfolding in unison, each revealing new aspects of the other.

The secret to Le Fay's healing work in *The Sea Priestess* is the archetypal narrative of the willing sacrificial victim and his subsequent return, and it is for this reason that Persephone is such a central image of divine femininity within the novel. Persephone is Malkuth in her negative aspect; fecundity and seduction gone awry, she is the Dark Queen of the Microcosm and "ruler of the kingdoms of sleep and death."<sup>51</sup> The Ama/Alma duality is found at all layers of divinity, but is most visible on the terrestrial plane, where Ceres the corn goddess is mirrored by Persephone, goddess of winter, whose name summons images of carnal knowledge, sacrifice, death and rebirth. Persephone's story is a mythologization of the annual death and rebirth of the earth as it progresses through the seasons. Fortune had been heavily influenced by Sir James Fraser's pseudo-anthropology in *The Golden Bough* (1890), and believed that sacrifice done to encourage the natural cycle of the forces of nature was the most ancient of religious practices. Fortune's use of the Persephone myth in *The Sea Priestess* emphasizes the continuity between this prehistoric worship and the imagined rites of Atlantis, in which strong young men are sacrificed to the sea to stem the rising tides. Further, Fortune connects these archetypal ritual structures to the magical work that takes place between a pair, emphasizing the acolyte's connection with these primordial deities in order to persuade her reader of the necessity and joy of ritual sacrifice.<sup>52</sup> Between 1914 and 1916 Fortune had worked as a lay psychoanalyst

<sup>49</sup> *The Sea Priestess*, 98.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

at a clinic in London,<sup>53</sup> and the influence of her time here can be traced across her work. Fortune's belief in the importance of sacrifice, whether symbolic or actual, as a way to catalyze catharsis and help to heal the wounded British psyche is a particular testament to this period in her development. It is also interesting to note that Fortune's sacrificial formula was gender specific. "Why fear ye the Dark Queen, o men? She is the Renewer. From sleep we arise refreshed; from death we arise reborn; by the embraces of Persephone are men made powerful."<sup>54</sup> Fortune believed women to be the undisputable rulers of the spiritual plane, and that through the realization of their inner goddess-power they could be healed of modern malaise. The sacrificial process was thus aimed at men; she believed that through sacrifice to the female god-force, reconciled in the body of the female adept, new life could be breathed into old men. "For that which has form must die, outworn, in order that it may be born again to fuller life."<sup>55</sup>

### Everyday Esotericism

As I have elaborated on elsewhere,<sup>56</sup> Fortune's work is defined throughout by a focus on the social context of esotericism and the social responsibilities of the practitioner. From the practical moralizing of *The Problem of Purity* to the Qabalistic meditations of *Moon Magic*, Fortune remained unerringly conscious of every-day practicalities and of her responsibilities as a spiritual teacher. Throughout all her complex and often confusing sexual metaphysics she never forgot that people are animals. The bull may have wings and a human head, but he remains a bull nonetheless. Although to modern eyes Fortune's insistence on purity and her desire to make of sex a spiritual thing may appear as a form of escapism from physical facts, she is ardent in her disapproval of ascetics. Man is an animal, and this does not only mean that he has sexual needs, but other physical needs such as food and warmth as well. In *The Winged Bull* (1935) Ursula notices that Murchison, in his ceremonial loin-cloth, must be cold, and shares her blanket; in *The Goat-Foot God* Hugh seas Mona shivering and buys her a coat. *The Goat-Foot God* is filled with references to sausages, bacon and eggs cooked in Jelkes' ubiquitous frying-pan; while in *Moon Magic*, each passage of spiritual lyricism is followed by a break for tea and scones. Such moments give the reader much-needed respite from the emotional intensities Fortune has been evoking, and the complex doctrine she has been attempting to convey. By having her characters take a break, she reassures the reader that it is okay to be exhausted by these things; that even adepts are only human.

<sup>53</sup> Gareth Knight, *Dion Fortune & the Inner Light* (Leicestershire: Thoth, 2000), 31.

<sup>54</sup> *The Sea Priestess*, 222.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>56</sup> Van Raalte, "Tea, Scones and Socially Responsible Sex Magic."

This attention to practicalities has an important social dimension. The only time in any Fortune's novels someone is underfed is when the responsibility for feeding is left to a man. In *The Goat-Foot God* cooking is left to the Jelkes, and neither the elderly adept nor the upper class hero Hugh realize that the destitute heroine Mona is starving. It takes her collapse and the arrival of another woman to tell them so. In Britain in this era the responsibilities for cooking, cleaning and related human practicalities fell to women; thus, Fortune's inclusion of these things in occult novels had particular significance for her female audience. One can hardly imagine MacGregor Mathers or Aleister Crowley engaging in menial household chores in the midst of their Great Work, however Fortune was expected to care for her Society's spiritual welfare and the establishment of their work on the spiritual planes, the organization of the Society on the physical plane, the giving of lectures, *and* the day-to-day chores of the household, from which the male members of the Society were exempt. Knight notes that an appeal was made by Fortune in the May 1927 edition of the "Transactions of the Christian Mystic Lodge" for people to volunteer to make cakes and cut flowers for the lodge, as "the group is busy and needs domestic help."<sup>57</sup> This same engagement with the everyday work of running a household and keeping people fed fill the pages of Fortune's novels. Even Le Fay, who in so many ways is detached, empowered, and barely seems to exist on the physical plane, is expected by Rupert to provide refreshments at the end of each magical session. Aware of the difficulties of juggling the physical and spiritual planes, Fortune illustrated to women who had worldly commitments that they could engage in occultism while fulfilling these; she made occultism accessible to women who would have to make their husband's supper after the ritual was over.

It is not that Fortune believed the occult should not be taken seriously, but rather that one does not have to devote one's entire life to it. One may, of course, and this is the path of adept; however this is not an option for everyone, whether because of financial or familial considerations. Fortune created an esotericism you can fit in on a Saturday afternoon, esotericism for 20<sup>th</sup> century London, and an esotericism for women; one designed so that even those who could not afford to leave the world in pursuit of the spirit could bring the spiritual into their world. Fortune thought that egalitarianism and social responsibility were the key to successful occultism, and her development of this line of thought is one of Fortune's most important contributions to the occult world. The idiosyncratic idioms that follow her grand descriptions of ritual and fantasy in the novels – the breaks for tea and scones, the concern that one might be too cold in their ritual dress – are the practicalities which bring the esoteric back to earth, showing that Fortune is aware of the realities of day to day life, and that occultism can have its place there too. After all, as many of her characters express, you cannot do occultism on an empty stomach.

<sup>57</sup> *Dion Fortune & the Inner Light*, 142-143.

### "Moon-food"

Fortune's work is filled with moments of bathos, as divine femininity is reconciled with the everyday practicalities of 20th century womanhood. Bathic humour relieves the pressure, and reconciles the two disparate aspects of femininity, however this comes at the cost of dispelling the sense of awe and holiness that should rightfully accompany meditation on the divine feminine. The Priestess, newly filled with the Godhead, must prepare her partner's tea, and we the readers cannot help but laugh. But, particularly in *The Sea Priestess*, Fortune's descriptions of cooking and eating reveal that she also believed that these domesticities could be a way to bring the Godhead back down to the everyday. She shapes Le Fay's cooking as a ritual, evoking the macrocosmic symbol of goddess as sustainer. Not unlike the priest washing the feet of his flock, it is a conscious act of servitude, an embracing of the sacredness of caring for another on a physical level.

We went into the dining-room and had the first of the marvelous chafing-dish suppers that she used to make for me.... She never looked domesticated as she stood up there at the end of the long table in her medieval dresses with a silver ladle in her hand, but rather like a priestess at an altar; and the dully gleaming copper over the blue flames looked like a witches' cauldron...<sup>58</sup>

Cooking and feeding have a special significance in this book. La Fey is expected to cook, as the female characters are in all her other books. However, her cookery is not mundane, but sacramental, a performance, a ritual; Wilfred calls her table an altar. Her food serves a symbolic function. Thus, before their final ritual together, Morgan offers Wilfred

A very odd supper. There was almond-curd such as the Chinese make; and scallops in their shells; and little crescent honey-cakes like marzipan for dessert – all white things. And this curious pallid dinner-table was relieved by a great pile of pomegranates in an earthenware dish in the centre.

"It is moon-food," said Morgan, smiling.

"And if you eat the pomegranates," I said, "you never come back," and I took one.<sup>59</sup>

This passage describes a meal that is both symbolic and sacramental, the "great pile of pomegranates" evoking the Edenic forbidden fruit and the myth of Persephone, and bringing to the reader's mind forbidden sexual knowledge, and the irreversibility of the sacramental act. This ritualized feeding further serves to emphasize the continuity of the roles women play across a man's life; as Wilfred (a self-described 'mother's boy') and Le Fay feast on white food, the reader sees the connection between mother and lover. As noted above, Fortune cared deeply

<sup>58</sup> *The Sea Priestess*, 112.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

about the state of the British psyche. Through *The Sea Priestess* Fortune aimed to heal women by helping them to connect with the Goddess within. Simultaneously, she aimed to heal men by reconciling them with their passivity, with the sacrifice from which all power comes. In order to do this latter task, Fortune delves into motherhood attachment issues and castration complexes, in the hopes that imaginative engagement with these ideas can lead to a healing catharsis.

## Conclusion

Fortune's staunchly binary concept of gender (which extends across the whole of her dualistic cosmology) and her universalist understanding of god-forms have alienated her from modern audiences; I have heard first-hand both occult practitioners and scholars of esotericism claim that Fortune's work is irrelevant, outdated and unforgivably appropriative. However, it was precisely those doctrines of dualism and universalism that were the key to Fortune's egalitarian occultism. Compared to the work of some of her more infamous contemporary occultists, such as Aleister Crowley or Austin Osman Spare (1886-1956), Fortune's work may appear overly sanitized and domesticated to modern audiences; however both Crowley and Spare were dogged by scandal throughout their careers (Crowley in particular left a trail of disgraced women in his wake), a fact which Fortune was keenly aware of. What appears 'vanilla' today was simply safe and respectable in the first half of the 20th century, and was Fortune's attempt to make occultism a feasible alternative to Christianity for normal, middle-class women.

Fortune's doctrine of polarity opened up the binary gender paradigm that was all-encompassing in the interwar period, giving women the chance to find new ways of understanding their selves, their path and their place in the world without having to reject conventional society and relationships. Fortune offered a theory and a practice for finding power within passivity, an inestimably important thing in an age when marital rape was legal, and domestic abuse was commonplace. For Fortune duality defined every layer of existence. Her conception of the divine feminine encompassed activity and passivity, light and dark, creation and destruction, good and evil, thus offering something more than the Theosophical Society's universal Isis. In *The Sea Priestess* in particular Fortune showed her female readers how to incorporate their anger, their evil, their destructiveness and their activeness into their spiritual development. She taught that passivity and 'goodness' on the worldly plane did not come by ignoring or repressing destructive tendencies, but by embracing them on the etheric planes.

Fortune's was a new vision of creation with women firmly at the centre. She may have been an ardent Christian for most of her life, but she was not a conventional one. For Fortune Mary, who is associated with Binah, is the central sphere of divinity. Although she recognizes the importance of Tiphareth, the Christ-centre, for her male protagonist-victims, her novels reveal that it is the Binah/

## Pomegranates and Crescent Honey-Cakes

Malkuth duality that is the most important for female acolytes. She reclaimed the holy spirit as female, and assigned her to Yesod, thus arguing for the inextricable nature of spirituality and sexuality, and emphasizing the relationship these things have with the imagination on the one hand, and the mundane world on the other. Yesod is the sphere of the moon, and within *The Sea Priestess* Fortune explicitly discusses the relationship between women's menstrual cycles, childbirth, the moon and the tides of spiritual power. She has little time for the Augustinian formula of the sinful women's body – for Fortune, women's monthly 'curse' was the key to their power, and the underlying secret of the Christian trinity.

Appendix 1

Diagram of “the Tree of Life and the Thirty-Two Paths,” taken from Dion Fortune’s *The Mystical Qabalah*, (London: Williams & Norgate, 1935).

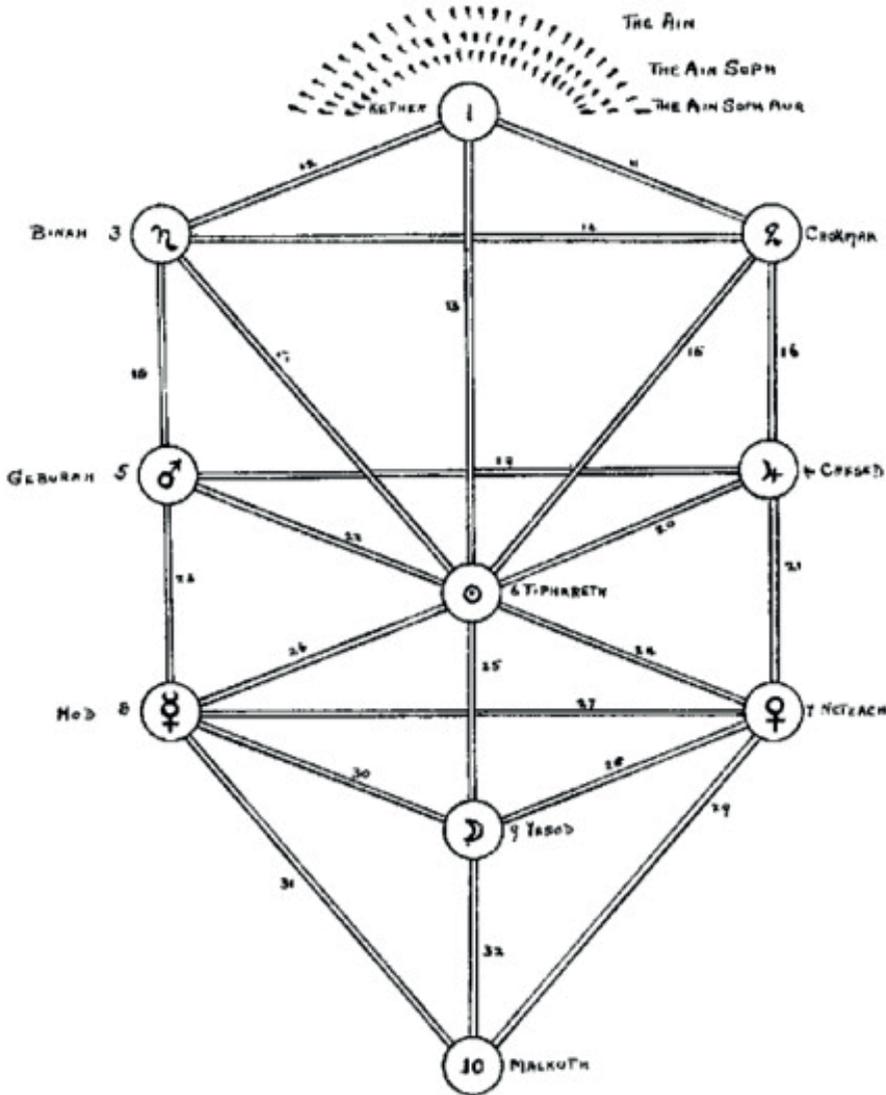


DIAGRAM III  
THE TREE OF LIFE AND THE THIRTY-TWO PATHS

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