‘Wisdom is a gift given to the Wise’1: Florence Farr (1860–1917): New Woman, Actress and Pagan Priestess

Muriel Pécastaing-Boissière

▶ **To cite this version:**

Muriel Pécastaing-Boissière. ‘Wisdom is a gift given to the Wise’1: Florence Farr (1860–1917): New Woman, Actress and Pagan Priestess. Cahiers Victoriens et Edouardiens, 2014, 80 Automne, 10.4000/cve.1542 . hal-03913234

HAL Id: hal-03913234
https://hal.science/hal-03913234

Submitted on 26 Dec 2022

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens

80 AUTOMNE | 2014
Paganism in Late Victorian Britain

Neo-paganism: Late Victorian Pagan revivals

'Wisdom is a gift given to the Wise'[1]: Florence Farr (1860–1917): New Woman, Actress and Pagan Priestess

« La Sagesse est un don offert aux sages ». Florence Farr (1860-1917) : New Woman, *actrice et prêtresse païenne*

Muriel Pécastaing-Boissière

https://doi.org/10.4000/cve.1542

Résumé | Index | Plan | Texte | Bibliographie | Notes | Citation | Cité par | Auteur

RÉSUMÉS

FRANÇAIS | ENGLISH

Selon Caroline Wise, auteur de sa notice dans l'*Oxford Dictionary of National Biographies*, en Florence Farr : « les courants mystiques, philosophiques et politiques se mêlaient jusqu'à ne former qu'un, durant une vie active de quête pionnière ». Pourtant, Florence Farr a longtemps été étudiée presque uniquement en tant que « Muse » de George Bernard Shaw ou de William Butler Yeats. Il est vrai que tous deux lui écrivirent de grands rôles, mais ce fut elle qui leur commanda puis monta certaines de leurs toutes premières pièces. De plus, Shaw n'avait que mépris pour les recherches occultes menées par Florence Farr en tant que membre important de la Golden Dawn. Yeats, quant à lui, était aussi un initié, et il collabora avec Florence Farr pendant plus de vingt ans. Ensemble, ils explorèrent la « musique des mots », qu'ils considéraient comme l'art oublié de la psalmodie, dont ils ne cachaient en rien les origines païennes et mystiques. Pour Yeats, Florence Farr était moins actrice et compositrice que prêtresse et barde : sa méthode s'inspirait des rituels de la Golden Dawn, durant lesquels elle mêlait déjà la déclamation poétique et le contrepoint musical, selon la théorie de la convergence harmonique. Néanmoins, l'importance des recherches occultes de Florence Farr pour son travail artistique avec Yeats a constamment été minorée. J'ai donc choisi d'explorer le rôle central de Florence Farr dans le renouveau païen de la fin de l'époque victorienne et de l'époque édouardienne, mais de son point de vue : celui d'une femme affranchie et d'une artiste. Mon but est de démontrer à quel point son féminisme, sa créativité et sa quête spirituelle s'enrichissaient mutuellement et eurent une influence considérable sur tous ceux qui la rencontrèrent.

ENTRÉES D'INDEX

Mots-clés : époque victorienne, Farr (Florence), féminisme, Golden Dawn, musique, paganisme, Yeats (William Butler)

Keywords: Farr (Florence), feminism, Golden Dawn, music, paganism, Victorian times, Yeats (William Butler)

PLAN

A Reluctant 'Muse'
The Golden Dawn
Florence Farr's Pagan Feminism
'All Art is Magick'
'Bards and Rhapsodists'
From Western to Eastern Paganism

TEXTE INTÉGRAL

PDF Freemium

1 A significant number of the Victorian and Edwardian women who fought for women's rights and took part in socialist debates, also converted to alternative and often pagan forms of spirituality, such as Theosophy or the Golden Dawn. Annie Besant probably was the most famous among them, but so was Florence Farr: 'The mystical, the philosophical and the political wove a seamless whole in an active, questing and pioneering life' (Wise xiii). Although Farr was Besant's junior by thirteen years, their lives show extraordinary similarities and intersect at various points. Both separated from their husbands and managed to gain independence; both studied at London University; both were friends with George Bernard Shaw and William Morris, whose political ideas they shared; and both were published writers and journalists. It is also significant for the present study that both reached prominence in the spiritual movements they joined. Farr became Chief Adept in Charge in Anglia of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1897; and Besant presided over the Theosophical Society from 1907. Both eventually embraced Hindu spirituality, and ended their lives in the East: Farr in Ceylon and Besant in India.

1 *Sapientia Sapienti Dono Data*, 'Wisdom is a gift given to the Wise', was Farr's chosen motto when sh (...)

2 If 'paganism' refers to any form of 'non-Christian or pre-Christian religion' (according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*), Besant and Farr clearly converted to pagan forms of spirituality. However, whereas Besant was an intellectual and a scientist, Farr was an artist. As an actress and a musician, Farr grew fascinated by such pagan 'practices' as ceremonial magic and rituals derived from Ancient Egypt and the Celtic tradition. Her researching and staging of pagan ceremonies, whether authentic or re-invented, had a significant impact, both on drama and on the occult revival of the late Victorian and Edwardian era, for they were closely connected, as demonstrated by Dennis Denisoff in this present volume.

A Reluctant 'Muse'

3 Although a pagan priestess, Florence Farr has long been studied almost exclusively as another type of pagan figure: as Shaw's or William Butler Yeats's 'muse'. Hassett still used this gender-biased term in 2010 in *W. B. Yeats and the Muses*, as did Roche, who entitled his 2013 lecture: 'W. B. Yeats and Florence Farr: Poet and Dramatic Muse'. However, in a letter Yeats wrote to Farr around 1906, he said (my emphasis): 'You cannot think what a pleasure it is to be fond of somebody to whom I can talk. To be moved and talkative, unrestrained, one's own self, . . . *because one has found an equal*, this is the best of life' (Bax 44). In the case of Shaw, Farr proved, if anything, a reluctant 'muse'. He was just four years older than her and had not written a single play when they first met in 1888 or 1889. In her 1894 autobiographical novel *The Dancing Faun*, Farr characterised George Travers to satirise Shaw's Pygmalion fantasies and dictatorial demands:

> He would turn on his most favoured fair one the moment she overstepped the bounds with which his vanity entrenched him, saying, 'Am I the stage manager of this theatre or are you, madam?' This outburst would be followed by language unfit for publication, and days of sullen anger, the clouds only departing after the most complete self-humiliation of the offending one. (Farr 1894, 34)

4 Travers is eventually shot to death by the young, unrepentant Geraldine. Nevertheless, even Josephine Johnson, who wrote Farr's only extensive biography back in 1975, felt the need to subtitle it: 'Bernard Shaw's New Woman'.

5 Admittedly, Shaw and Yeats wrote leading parts for Farr, but it was she who commissioned and staged some of their very first plays. It was thanks to her influence with Annie Horniman, another Golden Dawn initiate, that Shaw's *Arms and the Man* and Yeats's *The Land's of Heart Desire* were first produced in 1894, during Farr's season as manager of the Avenue Theatre in London. According to Yeats's widow, his letters to Farr: 'continually reveal how great an influence she had on the shaping and re-writing of the early plays' (Bax 33).

6 Shaw strongly disapproved of Florence Farr's 'shilling's worth of exoteric Egyptology' (Bax 9), as he told her in an 1896 letter, adding in his next letter:

> I hereby warn mankind to beware of women with large eyes, and crescent eyebrows, and a smile, and a love of miracles and moonshees . . . I declare before creation that you are an idiot, and that there never has been, never can be, is not now, nor in any yet to be discovered fourth dimension of time ever shall be, so desperate and irreclaimable an idiot . . . (Bax 10–11)

7 Yeats, for his part, shared Farr's fascination for paganism. He also was a member of the Golden Dawn, and he collaborated with her for over twenty years. Nevertheless, even Johnson plays down the central relevance to their artistic endeavours of Farr's staging of pagan rituals for the Golden Dawn. Johnson was writing in 1975, but still in 2013, three minutes into his forty-five minute lecture, Roche says: 'all the women who inspired [Yeats's] poetry were interested in the Occult. I'm not going into that tonight'. A notable exception among Farr's biographers is Mary K. Greer, but she researched Farr only as one of four *Women of the Golden Dawn*.

8 So my aim is to study Farr's exploration of paganism from her own perspective, i.e. that of a New Woman and an artist, whose feminism, artistic creativity and spiritual quest constantly enriched one another, and left a deep impression on those who met her.

The Golden Dawn

9 Brought up in the Established Church (Hyde), Florence Farr joined the Golden Dawn in July 1890, as its 88th member. She had separated from her husband, the actor Edward Emery, a couple of years earlier, and moved in with her sister Henrietta at Bedford Park in west London, then a bohemian residential district. Henrietta, who also joined the Golden Dawn, was married to the painter and stage-designer Henry Marriott Paget (Johnson 27–34).

10 The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn had been founded in February 1888, by three Freemasons: William Robert Woodman, William Wynn Westcott, and Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers, 'for the purpose of the study of Occult Science, and the further investigation of the Mysteries of Life and Death, and our Environment', as the charter of the Isis-Urania Temple in London read (Tupman 100). By 1896, there were over three hundred members, including a significant number of scientists, thinkers, and artists (Tupman 113). The success of the Golden Dawn should be understood as part of the late Victorian reaction against materialism, and its social, cultural and spiritual consequences. At a time when the Victorian faith in Progress was giving way to doubt, many hoped that the study of pagan and ancient traditions and wisdoms could provide answers to modern scientific and philosophical dilemma. In this context, the Golden Dawn, just like the Theosophical Society, was neither a marginal aberration, nor were its members social outcasts. In fact, many educated middle class men and women shared the Golden Dawn members' interest in 'astrology, tarot divination, and geomancy, . . . ancient Egyptian religion, the Kabbalah, . . . Freemasonry, paganism, theurgy, alchemy, early-modern grimoires, and Enochian magic' (Denisoff 2–4).

11 The Golden Dawn was based on hierarchy and initiation. After being imparted basic occult teachings about astrology, numerology, gematria, alchemy, and the history of ceremonial magic, members of the Outer Order passed a series of examinations and were initiated into the Second or Inner Order. They would then be taught practical magic derived from pagan Mysteries, and 'experience first hand the altered states of consciousness which were generated . . . through a variety of techniques including breath control, visualization, mental "rehearsals" and yogic exercise' (Tupman 107). There was a Third Order, gathering those Mathers called 'the Secret Chiefs': 'The general belief was that the Secret Chiefs were alchemists whose practices were part of an unbroken hermetic tradition going back to ancient Egypt, . . . other people, or spiritual or symbolic entities' (Denisoff 4).

12 On the Winter Solstice in 1891, Farr was initiated into the Second Order, through a pagan ritualising of death and rebirth. After MacGregor Mathers and his wife Moina Bergson—the philosopher's sister—moved to Paris the following year, Farr was elevated to Praemonstratrix of the Order. Part of her duties was to instruct members of the Outer Order: 'In this sense she was also a hierophant, a teacher who "shows forth"' (Wise xiii). As shown by Küntz's 2012 edition of her *Magical Writings*, Farr was a prolific writer on pagan and esoteric subjects. She would spend days in the Reading Room of the British Museum, looking for parallels between Egyptian Magic and Hermeticism, Kabbalah or Alchemy. She closely studied Sir E. Wallis Budge's new translation of *The Book of the Dead*, which she used as an inspiration for ritual invocations and magic symbols. Her list of published books includes her commentary on the 1665 alchemical text by Eugenius Philalethes, *Euphrates or The Waters of The East* (1896), *Egyptian Magic* (1896), and *The Way of Wisdom . . . on the Meaning of the Letters of the Hebrew Alphabet* (1900). Farr also wrote many articles on these topics throughout the 1900s and early 1910s for *The Occult Review*, *The Theosophical Review* and *The New Age*.

Florence Farr's Pagan Feminism

13 In 1888, the first temple of the Golden Dawn was dedicated to the Egyptian goddess Isis, and to the Greek muse of astronomy, Urania. The dedication to Isis linked the Golden Dawn to Madame Blavatsky's Theosophy. Her first esoteric essay, published in 1877, was entitled *Isis Unveiled*, and its success had turned the goddess into a central figure of the Victorian pagan revival. The fact that the cult of Isis had spread to the Greco-roman world and into the first centuries of the Christian era contributed to the fascination she exerted on Victorian researchers into the occult survival of pagan wisdom. This could also explain the choice of Urania: in Books I and VII of *Paradise Lost*, Milton invokes Urania, both as the classical muse and as Christian inspiration, thus bringing together paganism and Christianity. Beyond the choice of syncretic figures, however, there also was a wish to depart from the Victorian Christian patriarchalism: women of the Golden Dawn were initiated and practiced pagan rituals on an equal basis with men.

14 This could not but strongly appeal to Florence Farr. According to Shaw: 'She was in violent reaction against Victorian morals, especially sexual and domestic morals', when he met her (Bax viii). Farr's father, Dr William Farr, had named his youngest daughter after his friend Florence Nightingale, and he was a believer in equal education (Johnson 17). She had attended Queen's College, London, but soon decided that the education provided there was simply another way of passing on Victorian views of femininity, and offered women little real opportunities apart from teaching: 'it took me quite six years to get out of the shell my education had hardened around me' (Farr 1910, 68). When her father died in 1883, he left her a small annuity of £50. She turned to professional acting to escape from teaching, using the stage to denounce the Victorian ideal of womanhood. She was the first English actress to perform in an Ibsen play, as Rebecca West in *Rosmersholm*, in 1891 (Johnson 48).

15 In 1910, Farr expressed her lifelong feminist views in *Modern Woman: Her Intentions*, a collection of articles in which she publicly supported woman's suffrage, equal educational and professional opportunities, and a reform of divorce. *Modern Woman* also reveals Farr's mystical and pagan view of femininity. She calls upon 'women who read this book not to dwell upon the past, but to look forward to the great century that is waiting for their alchemy, to transmute its life by giving it a more intent purpose' (Farr 1910, 92–93). Contrary to Shaw, Farr considered Nietzsche's 'superman' as a state of mind, and she argued in *The New Age* in 1907 that: 'the state of consciousness, now identified by leading modern thinkers as the state called superman, is mystically feminine' (Delap 113). In 'The Rights of Astaroth', an article also published in *The New Age* in 1907, Farr tackled the issue of prostitution from the subversive angle of the sacred pagan prostitute, calling not just for the legalisation of prostitution, but for it to become a sacred office, as it used to be in pagan times: 'ancient Egyptians, ancient Hindus agreed that the vagaries of nature must be obeyed; and certain women, trained as dancers, were dedicated to the gods and their worshippers. In their temples prostitution was a sacred institution'. She added, expressing an already neo-pagan view of womanhood: 'The Hindu, for instance, considers that woman is part of the Immortal Mother of Life herself and to unite with a woman is to clasp the Universe in your arms and taste the ecstasy of Being . . . ' (Farr 1907, 294).

'All Art is Magick'

16 In 1969, the scholar and poet Kathleen Raine compared the late Victorian pagan revival to the Renaissance: '[s]uch moments of impassioned syncretism have . . . often accompanied vital movements of the arts' (Raine 113). According to Aleister Crowley, whom Farr initiated into the Golden Dawn in 1898, 'All Art is Magick'. Tracy Tupman, who researched Crowley's 1910 staging of *The Rites of Eleusys*, said that the Golden Dawn 'was a matching of metaphysical artists and metaphysical artistry' (Tupman 139). Tupman echoes James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, first published in 1890, when she explains 'it is spirituality that gives birth to the drama, rather than spirituality evolving from a performative context' (Tupman iii). Farr already was a professional actress, and a number of initiates, including Yeats, John Todhunter and Horniman, developed close links with the theatre while they belonged to the Golden Dawn. As a result: 'the Order *in toto* can effectively be viewed as a collection of creative works shared across aesthetic movements of the time' (Denisoff 6–7).

17 During the Winter 1901–2, Florence Farr staged two 'Egyptian plays', *The Beloved of Hathor* and *The Shrine of the Golden Hawk*, co-written with Olivia Shakespear. Farr and Shakespear's plays combined scholarship and artistic creativity, as well as a paradoxical desire to promote pagan occult beliefs. Drawing from *The Book of the Dead*, *The Beloved of Hathor* deals with the eternal struggle between human love and spiritual wisdom, and in *The Shrine of the Golden Hawk* a Seeker becomes a living Talisman, so as to receive the gift of Wisdom. *The Beloved of Hathor* was first performed as part of the inaugural meeting of the London Egyptian Society, whose President, Marcus Worsley Blackden, also was a member of the Golden Dawn (Tupman 135–137).

18 The cast chanted the ritual parts, while Farr made first use of her psaltery on stage. The instrument had been made especially for her by the musician and instrument-maker Arnold Dolmetsch (1858–1940) to suit her mezzo voice. It was partly paid for by Yeats, who published his essay 'Speaking to the Psaltery' in 1902. It was made of satinwood and had twenty-six strings: thirteen notes with their octaves in juxtaposition, so as to include all the chromatic intervals within the range of the speaking voice (Schuchard 32).

19 Yeats and Farr's artistic collaboration started in 1890, the year both of them joined the Golden Dawn. Yeats had first met Farr when she acted in Dr John Todhunter's *A Sicilian Idyll*, at the Club Theatre in Bedford Park. Todhunter also was a member of the Golden Dawn and he had cast Farr as Amaryllis, Priestess of Selene. So it was as a pagan priestess that Farr first captivated Yeats's attention (Wise ix). Yeats then wrote in his monthly letter to *The Boston Pilot*: 'I have never heard verse better spoken than by the lady who takes the part of the shepherdess heroine, Amaryllis . . . she is an almost perfect poetic actress' (Bax 33). He asked Farr to read the first draft of his Irish Mystery Play *The Countess Cathleen* as early as 1891 (Schuchard 29); and she commissioned *The Land of Heart's Desire* for her 1894 season at the Avenue Theatre.

'Bards and Rhapsodists'

20 Yeats was fascinated by Farr's 'cantilating' technique, and in 1899 he offered her the part of the bard Aleel in his first production of *The Countess Cathleen* with the Irish Literary Theatre in Dublin, which Farr also directed. They decided to explore further 'this new art, new in modern life I mean', as Yeats defined it in 'Speaking to the Psaltery'. In this essay, he recalls one of Farr's private recitals:

> A friend . . . has sat with a beautiful stringed instrument upon her knee, her fingers passing over the strings, and has spoken to me some verses from Shelley's *Skylark* and . . . out of the *Morte d'Arthur* and some of my own poems. Wherever the rhythm was most delicate, wherever the emotion was most ecstatic, her art was the most beautiful, and yet, although she sometimes spoke to a little tune, it was never singing . . . never anything but speech . . . ; nor was it reciting, for she spoke to a notation as definite as that of song, using the instrument, which murmured sweetly and faintly, under the spoken sounds, to give her the changing notes. (Yeats 1)

21 In 1901, Yeats and Farr planned a series of lectures on this 'music of speech', which she illustrated by setting poetry, including Yeats's, to the tune of her psaltery, and they toured England, Scotland and Ireland again several times in 1905–1907. Farr, however, was not dependant on Yeats: in January 1905, she booked the Albert Hall to combine a psaltery recital with a production of her allegorical 'Masque': *The Mystery of Time* (Greer 307). Two years later, she went to America and Canada on her own, to lecture to University students and to give private recitals to wealthy patrons (Schuchard 33). In between, Farr staged the first English production of Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* at the Bijou Theatre in London, in which she acted as Herodias (Greer 310).

22 Yeats and Farr made no secret of the pagan and mystic roots of their art. Henry Nevinson reported in the *Daily Chronicle* that 'the poet's purpose is really to revive the old chanting of ballads and lyrics as it was done by the bards of Ireland and . . . by the Homeric rhapsodists of Greece . . . Admirable examples of the poet's meaning were given by Miss Florence Farr' (Schuchard 31). There is a thinly veiled allusion to the Golden Dawn in 'Speaking to the Psaltery', when Yeats hopes for the creation of 'some Order naming itself from the Golden Violet of the Troubadours or the like, and having among its members none but well-taught and well-mannered speakers who will keep the new art from disrepute' (Yeats 3).

23 Arnold Dolmetsch was at the origin of the Edwardians' rediscovery of Italian and English baroque music, and Yeats and Farr drew some of their inspiration from the *Nuove Musiche* of Caccini and Monterverdi, especially from Monteverdi's *parlacantando* in *Orfeo*. Farr, by then clearly identified as a revivalist of pagan music and rituals, composed the music for the chorus of Professor Gilbert Murray's translation of *The Hippolytus of Euripides*, produced by Harley Granville Barker at the Lyric in 1903. Yeats wrote in 1904, of '[t]he success of the chorus in the performance of *Hippolytus*', but Shaw said, critically: 'Euripides gives way to Liszt', and he spoke disparagingly of Farr's 'modern fashionable discord' (Bax 21). Shaw alluded to Liszt's last compositions, which paved the way for Schoenberg. Pierre Longuenesse develops the comparison between Farr's 'music of speech' and Schoenberg's *sprechgesang* (Longuenesse 453). Farr, who directed as well as acted in Yeats's plays, decided not to cast professional singers, with Yeats's approval. This controversial choice was emulated by Schoenberg, who composed *Le Pierrot lunaire* in 1912 for an actress instead of a singer. Significantly, Schoenberg was then influenced by Rudolf Steiner's interpretation of Theosophy (Covach 106).

24 In a lecture he gave to the Irish Literary Society in 1899, Yeats claimed: 'our actors must become rhapsodists again' (Schuchard 25). Indeed, Farr did not compose music *to* poetry, she aimed at revealing the 'music of speech' already present *in* the words, defined by Yeats as the 'old, forgotten music' of pagan times (Greer 265). According to Longuenesse: '*Yeats . . . use . . .d'un vocabulaire voisin de celui employé par Mallarmé sur le continent : est dévolue à l'art une mission sacrée de révélation de l'invisible*' (Longuenesse 407). However, Farr aimed at more than just revealing the invisible. Kathleen Raine explains that Golden Dawn initiates swore: 'to prosecute the Great Work: which is to obtain control of the nature and power of my own being' (Raine 117). In *La Musique et l'Ineffable*, Jankélévitch defines the musician as a pagan magician-priest:

> [L]a modulation musicale est un *acte* qui prétend influencer un *être* ; et par influence il faut entendre, comme en astrologie ou en sorcellerie, causalité clandestine, manoeuvres illégales et pratiques noires . . . Orphée l'enchanteur est un mage. (Jankélévitch 8)

25 In 1901, Yeats asserted: 'We who care deeply about the arts find ourselves the priesthood of an almost forgotten faith' (Longuenesse 414). To Yeats, Florence Farr was less an actress and a composer than a bard: 'The two lyrics from *The Countess Cathleen* . . . are not sung but spoken or rather chanted to music, as the old poems were probably chanted by bards and rhapsodists'. Although the critics were divided on the results, Joseph Holloway, for one, was enraptured by the play in 1899: 'a spiritual, half-mystic, visionary sensation crept over my senses . . . as if I were in fairy land' (Schuchard 27).

26 Farr's method was inspired by her Golden Dawn pagan rituals, when she already combined poetry readings and contrapuntal musical selections, according to the theory of harmonic convergence (Tupman 110–111). In 1909, Farr detailed this method in *The Music of Speech*:

> Within the limits of an octave of semitones, I set to work to discover and write down the inherent melody of a number of poems. I reduced everything connected with the art to the simplest possible terms, and used letters to indicate the notes of my scale . . . I then spoke the first line of a poem in the most impressive way that occurred to me, and immediately after sang and wrote down the notes I found I had used as starting points for the spoken word . . . I do not chant . . . or use the singing voice except in refrains . . . I simply speak as I would without music, and having discovered the drift of my voice in the phrase, indicate that on the psaltery. (Farr 1909, 16–17)

27 Her noting down what amounts to intuition is reminiscent of her careful description of her astral travels. Her 'music of speech' seems to originate from the same trance-like state and she presents it as a discovery, not as a creation. Pierre Longuenesse analysed some of Farr's scores, such as the music she composed in 1903 for the song at the end of Yeats's *The King's Threshold*, inspired by occult symbols:

> The four rivers that run there,
> Through well-mown level ground,
> Have come out of a blessed well
> That is all bound and wound
> By the great roots of an apple
> And all the fowls of the air
> Have gathered in the wide branches
> And keep singing there.
> [*La partition est*] *une succession de rondes auxquelles les mots viennent librement s'articuler, formant des cycles qui se répètent en boucle, à la manière, toutes proportions gardées, de ce que ferait un Philip Glass aujourd'hui. De même que les vers progressent au fil des homophonies, comme si un mot en engendrait un autre par le croisement entre un écho vocalique et une variation consonnantique, de même, le chant progresse de façon spiralée, revenant sans cesse sur les mêmes motifs, mais avec de légères variantes, comme s'il explorait, motif après motif, son propre champ vocal.* (Longuenesse 470–471)

From Western to Eastern Paganism

28 Florence Farr left the Golden Dawn over internal disputes in 1902 and joined the Theosophical Society, with whom the Golden Dawn was on friendly terms, many members belonging to both (Raine 116). That year, Farr met the Hindu Tamil Ponnambalam Ramanathan when he came to London to lecture on Eastern philosophy. She also met the mystic poet, composer and 1913 Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore, to whom Yeats was close (Jayawardena 141).

29 Farr's spiritual references had taken a clear Eastern colouring by the time she published *The Music of Speech* in 1909. By then, she had become more of a mystic than a magician. In Hinduism but also Buddhism as interpreted by the Theosophists, Farr discovered pagan beliefs that complemented her studies within the Golden Dawn:

> The Vedantists tell us that sound is the elemental correspondence of etheric spaces, the root of measurable things . . . The mystery of sound is made manifest in words and in music . . . We are overwhelmed by the chatter of those who profane it. (Farr 1909, 21)

30 In 1912, Ramanathan offered Florence Farr the position of Lady Principal of the Girls' College he had just founded in Ceylon. She sold everything she owned to make the move. Farr gave her final solo performance on the psaltery in July 1912 and her last gesture before sailing was to give the instrument to Yeats. At the time, Harold Monro wrote in *The Poetry Review*: 'We can but regret our loss of so fine an artist, . . . rhapsodist rather than exponent, instrument rather than representative' (Schuchard 33–34).

31 Florence Farr learned Tamil and grew fascinated by the Tamil spirituality. In 1913 she wrote to Yeats enthusiastically about musicians who had performed on the College grounds. She described their traditional instruments at length, and soon experimented with the Vina herself: 'the image of man's subtle body', as she was told by Ramanathan. She also sent to Yeats some Tamil songs, as well as her own translations and original creations, saying: 'the thing one wants to know about a great poet is the sort of sounds his verse made' (Johnson 192).

32 Farr's exploration of Tamil spirituality and music was cut short by illness: she died of breast cancer in Colombo, in April 1917, just a few months after she had sent these lines to Yeats, to whom she had written about the Tamil vision of the soul journey:

> Above me is a stone
> Below me is a bone,
> I pass the gate alone —
> I was a toy;
> I am — the world
> (Johnson 198)

33 In 1969, Kathleen Raine asserted, regretfully: 'the First World War swept away, among many other lost illusions, the enchantment out of which had arisen the Order of the Golden Dawn'. However, some more recent studies show that the connection between pagan mysteries and art did not stop with the decline of symbolism and the end of the mystic revival (Lingan, Tupman, Schuchard). Meanwhile, Virginia Crosswhite Hyde concludes her *DNB* entry on Farr with these lines: 'previously undervalued, Farr is beginning to be acknowledged not only as a strong influence upon the great authors she knew, but as a collaborator with Yeats, an original voice in her own right, and a versatile, dedicated social critic and spiritual seeker'.

BIBLIOGRAPHIE

Des DOI (Digital Object Identifier) sont automatiquement ajoutés aux références par Bilbo, l'outil d'annotation bibliographique d'OpenEdition. Les utilisateurs des institutions abonnées à l'un des programmes freemium d'OpenEdition peuvent télécharger les références bibliographiques pour lesquelles Bilbo a trouvé un DOI.

Bax, Clifford, ed. *Florence Farr, Bernard Shaw, and W. B. Yeats: Letters*. Dublin: Cuala, 1941.

Covach, John. 'Schoenberg and the Occult: Some Reflections on the "Musical Idea"'. *Theory and Practice: Journal of the Music Theory Society of New York State* 17 (1992): 103–18.

Delap, Lucy. 'The Superwoman: Theories of Gender and Genius in Edwardian Britain'. *The Historical Journal* 47. 1 (2004): 101–26.

Denisoff, Dennis. 'The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, 1888–1901'. *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*. [accessed 12 Oct. 2013]

Farr, Florence. *The Dancing Faun*. London: E. Mathews, 1894

———. *Commentary by S.S.D.D. on Euphrates Or The Waters of The East by Eugenius Philalethes 1665*. London: Theosophical Society, 1896.

———. *Egyptian Magic: Occult Mysteries in Ancient Egypt*. London: Theosophical Society, 1896.

———. *The Way of Wisdom: Being an Investigation on the Meaning of the Letters of the Hebrew Alphabet Considered as a Remnant of Chaldean Wisdom*. London: J. M. Watkins, 1900

———. *The Mystery of Time: A Masque* in *The Theosophical Review* 36.211 (1905): 9–19.

———. 'The Rites of Astaroth'. *New Age* 1.18 (September 1907): 294–95.

———. *The Music of Speech*. London: E. Mathews, 1909.

———. *Modern Woman: Her Intentions*. London: Frank Palmer, 1910.

———. and Olivia Shakespear. *The Beloved of Hathor* and *The Shrine of the Golden Hawk*. Croyden: Gordon Craig, 1901.

Forster, Roy. F. *W. B. Yeats: A Life. I The Apprentice Mage, 1865–1914*. Oxford: OUP, 1998.

Greer, Mary K. *Women of the Golden Dawn: Rebels and Priestesses*. Rochester: Park Street, 1995.

Hassett, Joseph. *W. B. Yeats and the Muses*. Oxford: OUP, 2010.
DOI : 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199582907.001.0001

Hyde, Virginia Crosswhite, 'Farr, Florence Beatrice (1860–1917)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, OUP, online ed., 2010 [accessed 25 Nov 2013].

Jankelevitch, Vladimir. *La Musique et l'Ineffable* (1961). Paris: Seuil, 1983.

Jayawardena, Kumari. *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia during British Rule*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

Johnson, Josephine. *Florence Farr: Bernard Shaw's New Woman*. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1975.

Küntz, Darcy, ed. *The Magical Writings of Florence Farr*. Austin: Golden Dawn Research Trust, 2012.

Lingan, Edmund B. 'Contemporary Forms of Occult Theatre'. *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 28. 3 (2006) : 23–38.

Longuenesse, Pierre. *'Singing amid Uncertainty': Dramaturgie et pratique de la voix dans le Théâtre de William Butler Yeats.* Thèse de Doctorat, Université Paris IV-Sorbonne, 2008.

Peters, Margot. *Shaw and the Actresses*. New York: Doubleday, 1980.

Raine, Kathleen. 'Yeats, the Tarot, and the Golden Dawn'. *The Sewanee Review*, 77.1 (Winter, 1969): 112–48.

Roche, Tony. 'W. B. Yeats and Florence Farr: Poet and Dramatic Muse'. Lecture delivered on 13th June 2013 at the National Library of Ireland. [Retrieved on YouTube 21 Jan 2014].

Schuchard, Ronald. '*The Countess Cathleen* and the Revival of the Bardic Arts.' *The South Carolina Review*. 32.1 (1999): 24–37.

Tupman, Tracy W. *Theatre Magick: Aleister Crowley and The Rites of Eleusys*. PhD Dissertation. Ohio State University. 2003.

Wise, Caroline. 'Foreword' to KÜNTZ, Darcy, ed. *The Magical Writings of Florence Farr*. (2012): ix-xiv.

Yeats, William Butler. 'Speaking to the Psaltery', *The Monthly Review*, 1902.
http://hermetic.com/yeats/ideas-of-good-and-evil/speaking-to-the-psaltery.html

NOTES

1 *Sapientia Sapienti Dono Data*, 'Wisdom is a gift given to the Wise', was Farr's chosen motto when she was initiated into the Order of the Golden Dawn in 1890.

POUR CITER CET ARTICLE

Référence électronique
Muriel Pécastaing-Boissière, « 'Wisdom is a gift given to the Wise': Florence Farr (1860–1917): New Woman, Actress and Pagan Priestess », *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* [En ligne], 80 Automne | 2014, mis en ligne le 22 janvier 2015, consulté le 26 décembre 2022. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/cve/1542 ; DOI : https://doi.org/10.4000/cve.1542

CET ARTICLE EST CITÉ PAR

Jaffar, Nosheen. Rashid, Aniqa. Asghar, Ijaz. (2021) RELIGIOUS OBLIGATIONS AND MORAL DILEMMAS: A FEMINISTIC PERSPECTIVE OF IBSEN'S PLAY A DOLL'S HOUSE. *Humanities & Social Sciences Reviews*, 9. DOI: 10.18510/hssr.2021.9345

AUTEUR

Muriel Pécastaing-Boissière
Dr Muriel Pécastaing-Boissière is a Senior Lecturer in Victorian Civilisation at the University of Paris-Sorbonne. She is the author of *Les Actrices victoriennes : entre marginalité et conformisme* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004), and she published numerous articles on the social status of Victorian actresses. She is currently doing research on the links between late-Victorian and Edwardian feminism, socialism and spiritual revival, focussing on Annie Besant (1847-1933) and Florence Farr (1860-1917). Her biography *Annie Besant : la lutte et la quête* will be published by Adyar in 2014.

Muriel Pécastaing-Boissière est maître de conférences en civilisation britannique à l'université de Paris-Sorbonne (Paris 4). Elle est l'auteur des Actrices victoriennes : entre marginalité et conformisme *(Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004), et a publié de nombreux articles sur leur statut social. Son domaine de recherche actuel porte sur les liens entre le féminisme, le socialisme et le renouveau spirituel de la fin de l'époque victorienne et de l'époque édouardienne. Elle se concentre principalement sur Annie Besant (1847-1933) et Florence Farr (1860-1917). Sa biographie* Annie Besant : la lutte et la quête *paraîtra chez Adyar en 2014.*

Articles du même auteur

Frédéric Regard, éd., *Féminisme et prostitution dans l'Angleterre du XIXe siècle : la croisade de Josephine Butler* [Texte intégral]
Lyon, ENS éditions, 2013, 311 p., ISBN 978-2-84788-392-3
Paru dans *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*, 81 Printemps | 2015

DROITS D'AUTEUR

Creative Commons - Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International - CC BY-NC-ND 4.0
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/