

# The Green Man: Rewilding Religion

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The Green Man is a powerful manifestation of our oneness with Nature, of benign growth, renewal and rebirth. He is the result of the recognition of the loss of this connection in the industrial age, the search for an alternative, and the burgeoning Green movement, as the 20th century progressed. He is a radical re-interpretation of Medieval images (the foliate heads), ancient and Medieval wild men and Lords of Animals, noble savages and recent folk pageants, relevant to today's needs. He merges imperceptibly into Robin Hood, Herne the Hunter and the Pagan Horned God and Lord of the Wild, to create a figurehead of reconnection with broad recognition. It is, however, also instructive to look more closely at the various images and legends He has subsumed, not only to chart the development, but also to find the power they too bring to disrupt conventional thinking and rewild religion.

The Green Man is a modern fusion of antiquarian and occult desires for a natural golden age, of which mythology and folklore are surviving fragments, and the environmental awareness that grew through the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the Green Man was a natural figurehead for the Green Movement.

Sir James Frazer set the mood, but the idea of the Green Man as a Lord of the Wild, not just a description of various green- or leaf-clad figures in pageantry and on inn signs, seems to appear first in 1906, in an article in *Folk-Lore* by A.B. Cook, and was picked up by Dion Fortune in her 1936 novel, *The Goat-Foot God*. The name is first applied formally to foliate heads in 1937, an appellation by Lady Raglan, although she was in discussion with the recorder of foliate heads, C.J.P. Cave, who had already connected them to tree spirits and the Jack-in-the-Green (Hutton, 2022; Judge, 2000; Raglan, 1939).

## The Strands Woven into the Green Man

### 1 Spirits of Vegetation

There are many tree spirits and nymphs throughout mythology. Then there are elves and the Fair Folk, including Trickster figures like Robin Goodfellow. However, these can be male or female and the Fae frequently appear *en masse* rather than alone. Bacchus/Dionysus may fit this category, but he is also in the next.

### 2 Gods & Heroes of Cultivation

These may be bringers of bountiful harvests (e.g. Bacchus), tillers of the soil (Green/Saint George) or dying and rising grain gods (like Osiris or Jesus). It is no accident that bringers of agriculture are often also associated with war or at least defence (e.g. Mars, Thor or St. George).

### 3 Lords of the Wild or of Animals

These can be fearsome wildmen or enviable 'primitives' – from Enkidu (in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*), through Tacitus' *Germania*, to the 'Noble Savage'. They may be scary figures

who protect forests and animals, not necessarily friendly to humans, like the Wild Herdsman in Chretien de Troyes' *Yvain* or the Black Man in the *Mabinogion* tale of *Owein*.

They may also be (male or female) spirits or guardians of animals who can be propitiated or worked with by shamans, to allow people to hunt. They may also be spirits of the hunt and hunting, of whom the most recent example seems to be Herne the Hunter, quite possibly created in His modern, antlered form by Shakespeare (Harte, 1996). 'Herne' actually means 'heron', a different kind of hunter.

The next step is the semi-wild patron of semi-domesticated animals, who merges into the shepherd, patron of domestic herding. Here is Pan, perhaps.

Cultivation and herding may come together in (male and female) figures holding cornucopiae, whether Fortuna or the Gallic representations often labelled 'Cernunnos', but the story of Cain (farmer) and Abel (herder) records the conflict between agriculture and herding and/or hunting.

#### **4 Foresters and Robin Hood**

The protection of woods and of the quarry of hunters come together in the figure of the forester, a frequent origin of 'Green Man' inn signs. However, Norman 'forests' were hunting grounds rather than necessarily wooded areas.

From the forester, or usurping him, comes the figure of Robin Hood, who in turn subsumes other 'Noble Outlaws', such as Hereward, Eustace the Monk, Friar Tuck and Little John. In origin pitted against unjust authority and rapacious wealth, Robin becomes a symbol of Socialism (robbing from the rich to give to the poor in Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*), before becoming Pagan in the late 20th century. His portrayal in the 1980s TV series, *Robin of Sherwood*, has inspired many Pagans. He is the challenger from the Wasteland and represents a Rebellion of the Heart (to use Val Thomas' words).

#### **5 Leaf-clad and Green Figures in Pageantry**

Robin Hood featured in English May Games in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, where the outlaw merged with a French pastoral Robin (who brought Marian with him; Robin Hood had not previously had a love interest, but had been devoted to the Virgin Mary, an association frowned upon come the Reformation). The sprite, Robin Goodfellow, seems to have become part of the mix too, as the Robin of the Spring festivities becomes both a Summer King and a feel-good Lord of Misrule.

Other green figures in English pageantry are later, particularly the Jack-in-the-Green, who appears in chimney sweeps' May Day processions in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps merging earlier milkmaids' processional mannequins (not leafy) with the hawthorn bushes pulled up chimneys to clean them.

#### **6 Head Display**

The display of heads can be a show of power (as on coins), a warning to malefactors (as with the heads of decapitated foes or criminals stuck on poles) or apotropaic (warding off ill fortune and evil). Stone heads stared out from ancient British strongholds and Roman fortresses alike (the latter sometimes of the Mr Chad type). The Classical Greek and Roman *Gorgoneion* is the head of Medusa worn by Athene/Minerva on Her *aegis* or Her shield, and

used apotropaically on buildings (especially temples) and chariots. This form of representation – a head in circle – also seems to have been a standard form for the portrayal of imperial status in the Roman empire (Cousin, 2016). The form was also used for solar deities and gods of sea and rivers, such as the seaweed-bearded face of Oceanus on the Mildenhall Great Dish. Perhaps the best known, if least understood, example of this motif is the so-called Gorgon on the pediment of the Temple to Sulis Minerva in Bath, which may well embody all of these purposes. Dionysus was also depicted with vine leaves around or making up his face, as Lord of the Grape, and some of these carvings do seem to have been reused in churches.

## 7 Foliate Heads in Churches

Where early churches reused non-Christian carvings, the exact reasoning is lost to us, except that we may safely assume they were interpreted in a manner appropriate to Christian teachings. Heads of Dionysus clad in vine leaves would have been seen as representations or prefigurings of Christ, “the true vine” (according to the *Gospel of St. John*).

The leaf-clad head was not seen again, however, until it appeared in illustrations in monastic books from the 10<sup>th</sup> century, seemingly inspired by interlace patterns. It was from these pictures that the architectural foliate head was taken. It is also important to remember that the decoration of churches was not at the whim of the craftsmen, but closely controlled by those who commissioned the buildings, whether clerics or wealthy patrons. As Richard Hayman (2010, p. 17) puts it, “Green men appeared in churches because they were part of the developing tastes of the people who paid for the churches to be built.”

There seem to be four main styles of foliate head (developed from Hicks, 2000, and Hayman, 2010).

1. The face is formed of vegetation. This is the ancient form and appears again in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.
2. The face is a mask set amongst vegetation.
3. The face sprouts vegetation in a benign fashion, suggestive of new life.
4. Vegetation grows through the face and its orifices, or the face *disgorges* vegetation, suggestive of death and dissolution.

Similarly, the face, if not mask-like, can be variously benign, showing blank incomprehension, scared, cadaverous or taunting – although the tongue sticking out could represent death by hanging as much as mockery.

The meaning of foliate heads is clearly dependent on the style and does seem to vary from place to place (Hayman, 2010).

1. They *can* be purely decorative (especially in modern use). Perhaps this is why Medieval examples seem to have suffered less than other church carvings during the depredations of iconoclasts in the 17<sup>th</sup> century?
2. Commonly, they are *memento mori*, a reminder that we all die.
3. They can be warnings against worldly fixations and becoming lost in the woods of sin, where robbers lurk. The tanglewood is the snare of the Devil, ready to catch those who stray from the straight and narrow path. Sometimes the faces (and even full figures) in

the vegetation are sinners; sometimes they are they are demons. To some believers, there might not have been a great distinction between those two categories anyway!

4. Similarly, after death, the soul travels through a fearful forest as it begins its journey to the afterlife, as depicted in the 15<sup>th</sup>-century roof bosses in the East walk of the cloister of Norwich Cathedral. The gilded foliate head, close to the Dark Entry, where corpses were kept awaiting their funeral, can be interpreted as the light at the end of tunnel, but whether this is Christ or a leering demon is unclear, because this is the point at which the battle for the soul between angels and demons becomes most intense (Mittuch, 2007).
5. A more positive motif is of new life through Christ. Tree imagery was used to show the Tree of Jesse, i.e. the line of David down to Jesus (Hayman, 2010). A more developed story comes from the Medieval *Legend of the Rood*, where Adam becomes a Green Man, as the root of the True Cross (Baert, 2017).

## Adam as Green Man

The *Legend of the Rood* merges the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, in the Garden of Eden, into one Tree. Adam lies on his death bed and beseeches his son, Seth, to go to Paradise and ask for the fruit of the Tree of Life to heal him.

On reaching the gate to Eden, Seth is told to look twice into the Garden. The first time he sees what he assumes is the Tree from which Adam and Eve ate the apple that led to their expulsion, dead and leafless. He looks again and sees the same Tree full of life, with the Christ Child exalted in its branches, presaging the renewal promised as a result of Christ's coming and sacrifice. Adam's salvation will come at the same time as everyone else's, with the coming of Christ.

The angel guarding the gate gives Seth seeds from the Tree, which are placed in Adam's mouth before he is buried and germinate thereafter. The Tree of Life grows up through Adam and (to cut a longer story short) is eventually used to make the Cross on which Christ performs his sacrificial role, which reforges the link to Paradise. Interestingly, this image runs counter to that of Nature as sin! Rather, Adam and Eve could be seen as sinning *against Nature* by eating the Forbidden Fruit.

The promise of renewal comes through planting the seeds with Adam. Adam in his death becomes the Tree of Paradise and the means by which Christ reconnects humanity to Paradise. Christ suffers on the dead version of the Tree (as in Seth's first vision) in order to change the paradigm, restoring the Tree to vibrant life (Seth's second vision) and with it allowing humanity to resume its rightful place in Paradise. So, Adam's death prefigures that of Christ, the two together allowing a restored paradisaal life to flourish. Nature is not the cause of the Fall; Nature is Paradise. By acquiescing to God's will at the last, Adam redeems himself and feeds the new growth of the Tree of Life – directly as his body decays. That makes both Adam and Christ (and, in a Gnostic sense, every person) very much 'Green Men', if not quite what Lady Raglan supposed!

It is interesting also to note that Medieval and later outdoor stone 'High Crosses', often entwined with interlace imagery, have traditionally been very visceral embodiments of the unity of Rood, Christ and Paradise, designed so that rain gives the appearance of Christ's tears or blood flowing down on those below, whether other figures on the cross or the worshipper at the base (Pullian, 2013).

## Other Hybrid Images

Not all foliate heads are male, or even human. There are also foliate figures as well as heads, derived more directly from early-Medieval interlace carvings and illustrations. People (and animals) emerge from vegetation or disappear into it. Legs turn into tendrils ... or serpents or fishtails. Where the lines between human-plant hybrids and merfolk and serpent-folk are drawn is an inexact science. Some of these may be warnings and representations of the tanglewood, as described above, but perhaps there is a more Gnostic, boundary-transcending level of meaning to be discerned in these images as well, at least in a modern sense?

## The Modern Image

The modern archetype of the Green Man draws together all of these elements: Nature, wise cultivation and husbandry, the ambivalence of hunter and conservator, and a Gnostic – or magical – recognition of ourselves as the Tree of Life, both material and divine.

However, He is less prominent in the Green movement than he was at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In part this is due to the movement's general tendency to be nervous of religion, except as a very personal affair, and the establishment of environmental awareness as a more mainstream perspective. It is also surely to do with the way that the image of the Green Man has been commercialised in popular heritage and New Age self-satisfaction. On the other hand, this popularisation has spread His image more broadly, and He is an archetype that is found across society, at any rate in the English-speaking world. As such, He is a force that has the ability to disrupt conventional thinking and promote genuine rewilding – especially perhaps of religion.

## Rewilding Religion

Can the Green Man act as a nexus for inter-faith co-operation towards a better relationship with Nature? Pagans may see Him as akin to the Horned God, or a variety of gods, from Bacchus to Cernunnos. Christians *may* see Him as an image of Adam or even Christ, or perhaps Saints like Walstan or Francis of Assisi, smiling out from the branches of the forest that is the origin of church architecture. For Muslims, He *could* be aligned with al-Khiḍr, the 'Green One', enigmatic culture-hero saint, linked to Green George and Elijah. Through His associations with modern interpretations of figures such as the antlered being on the Gundestrup Cauldron, he may be seen as Śiva (Hindu) or Mahavir (Jain). The Green Man can mean similar things to different people without compromising their own beliefs, yet also carry the inspiration to seek deeper within one's own tradition. Just as there are places, like Walsingham, that have sacred meaning to several faiths, every faith has a relationship with the natural world. Perhaps the Green Man can help us share that experience without betraying the divine forms of individual faiths and traditions?

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