



Critical Introduction

The Pagan Review: Introduction to Volume 1 **(August 1892)**

By the time the Saturday Review printed a commentary on the premier issue of *The Pagan Review* in September 1892, the magazine's creator, William Sharp, had already decided to cease publication. In the article, the Saturday Review's critic denigrates the stories, poems, and other writing in the magazine for everything from split infinitives to "laying on adjectives with a palette knife" (269). Targeting the principal purpose of the publication, the reviewer declares that its "conductors probably don't know what paganism was" (269). The critic was probably well aware that Sharp was not attempting to recreate the "real paganism" of the age of Aristophanes (269). Rather, his hope was to present a range of historical, mythological, and spiritual perspectives of paganism as a living, global phenomenon. In the foreword, Sharp, under the editorial pseudonym of W.H. Brooks, describes "the new paganism" (2) as having a broad-based, yet uniquely inward-directed, character.

Sharp was well justified in speaking on behalf of the magazine's collective because, in addition to taking on the role of editor, he also wrote all the contributions to the issue, using seven other pseudonyms in addition to the Brooks persona. He began writing some of the pieces in October 1891, but took a break in January to visit Walt Whitman at his home in Camden, New Jersey, two months before the American's death. Sharp then travelled in Europe, before he and his wife Elizabeth rented a cottage in Buck's Green, Sussex that summer. There, in a matter of four days from June 2 to 5, he wrote three of

the seven contributions that would appear in volume 1. During this time, he referred to it as the *White Review* and dubbed the editor James Marazion (qtd. in E. Sharp 199). However, when the first and only issue appeared on 15 August 1892, it was titled *The Pagan Review*, and credited to the editorship of W. H. Brooks.

Despite volume 1 having only one author, its contents are notably diverse. In addition to a mail-in subscription form and a foreword, the issue includes two short stories, two poems, two short dramas, an essay on the genre of the prose-poem, a review-essay entitled “Contemporary Record” addressing books published in England and France, a closing “Editorial,” and pages of advertising (mostly of forthcoming works by Sharp’s authorial personae). The editorial is particularly tantalizing as it includes a synopsis of future issues, informing readers to expect an essay on “The New Paganism,” further review-essays for the “Contemporary Record” section, and works by various authors, although only pseudonyms found in volume 1 are mentioned by name. Notably, in light of Sharp’s future writing under the name of Fiona Macleod, none of the pieces in volume 1 of *The Pagan Review* or mentioned in the editorial’s description of the planned future issues are presented as having female authors. Sharp also declares that, although some non-English works will be considered, he intends the periodical to be “national, and not a French bastard, or a mixt breed of any kind” (63). This contradicts both the non-English pseudonyms he chose to use and the international subjects of the works themselves, although the declaration does foreshadow the Celtic focus of his later publications as Fiona Macleod.

He concludes his editorial by encouraging potential contributors most forcefully “to understand that this magazine does not aim to be a popular monthly on familiar lines” (64). Indeed, Sharp becomes quite aggressive at this point, rejecting in advance any submissions with titles such as “‘A Study of Robert Elsemere’, ‘The Poetry of Mr Lewis Morris’, ‘Art at the Royal Academy’, et hoc genus omne,” and declaring that “by far the greater part of what is currently submitted to the consideration of magazine-editors is at once unsuitable for and undesired by *The Pagan Review* (64). One begins to wonder whether Sharp wanted any submissions at all.

Perhaps the most curious piece in volume 1 is the one-act play “The Black Madonna” which, at 15 pages, is the longest contribution. This drama is saturated in decadent excess. In one scene, after five maidens have been bound for sacrifice by a group of priests, Sharp provides the following stage direction: “Towards each steppeth, and behind each standeth, a naked priest, each holding a narrow irregular sword of antique fashion” (7). The imagery and the writing style, the exoticism of this and other scenes, and the themes of sacrifice and superstition suggest parallels with *Salomé*, which Oscar Wilde had completed in French less than a year earlier, in December 1891. There is no record that either Sharp or Wilde read the other’s play before writing their own.

The critic from *The Saturday Review* dismissed volume 1 as “gabble” and “allegorical nonsense.” The reviewer for *The Christian Union*, meanwhile, focused primarily on Sharp’s opening foreword and concluded that the creators of the periodical were particularly interested in heterosexual relations and the freeing of women from the confines of tradition and convention. The assessment sustains a mocking tone that affirms the perception of *The Pagan Review* as a juvenile attempt to declare the rise of something its editor is never quite able to define. “No one need lose sleep,” the reviewer assures *The Christian Union*’s readers, “through fear of the harm ‘*The Pagan Review*’ is going to do” (694). Frederic M. Bird, the author of “An Organ and a Reform” for the *American Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*, likewise focuses on the foreword and its discussion of gender relations, asking why this subject leads to a journal being called pagan. A more obvious question would be why much of Sharp’s foreword verges on a pro-suffrage manifesto when the rest of the contributions do in fact focus on paganism, decadence, and sexuality. Bird, however, appears to have had minimal interest in the actual contents of *The Pagan Review*. Devoted chiefly to the issue of “reform” rather than to the new “organ” of paganism it was supposedly reviewing, “An Organ and a Reform” asserts that, in fact, women enjoyed more freedoms than ever before and, as soon as an actual majority of them wanted the vote, they would no doubt get it (251). In the end, it would seem that the few critics who did address volume 1 of *The Pagan Review* did not give it a balanced reading.

Works Cited

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