Caveat Anoynter! : A Study of Flying Ointments and their Plants

Sarah Penicka

> Before they are carried to their meetings, they anoint their Foreheads, and Hand-wrists with an Oyl the Spirit brings them (which smells raw), and then they are carried in a very short time.[1]

The concept of flying ointments (hallucinogens which make the intoxicant believe they can fly) holds a rational appeal for the fabulous myth that witches flew on broomsticks. Yet like many more of the accusations laid by inquisitors against their victims in medieval times, there is a strong case to be made for such ointments being no more real than the Black Sabbath itself. Although it is not my intention to argue for or against the definite existence of flying ointments, consideration of the various arguments surrounding them provide a background for the study to follow: namely: the histories and mythologies of those plants most closely associated with the stereotypical witch. All of these plants have flourished on their somewhat dubious reputations in religion, superstition and in all art and literature which chooses to reference this dank part of European ethnobotany.

The most titillating hypothesis regarding flying ointments suggests they were hallucinogenic compounds applied to the mucous membranes of the vagina with the handle of a broomstick, hence the popular belief that witches flew on broomsticks. While this is an entirely charming proposition, it is difficult to substantiate; most ingredients listed in recipes for flying ointments are harmless.

Only deadly nightshade and possibly hemlock are truly hallucinogenic, and these are also highly toxic – generally more so, one could argue, than their shamanic counterparts in the Americas especially. Aconite is included in recipes but is not hallucinogenic, however, neither henbane, mandrake nor datura were used in flying

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[1] Testimony of Elizabeth Style, taken from the Somerset witch trials, 1664 as found in Margaret Alice Murray, *The Witch Cult In Western Europe*, Clarendon Press (Oxford, 1921) p101.

ointments although all three are hallucinogenic.[1] Datura had not yet arrived from the New World and mandrake's *mythos* had already reached Europe before the herb itself arrived, but there seems to be no good reason why henbane, which came to be associated with witches at a later stage, was not mentioned at this point. As these are the most poisonous plants available throughout Europe it seems a definite possibility that they were recognised in connection with witches not because they were widely regarded as hallucinogenic, but simply because they were deadly. This would also seem to be the primary reason why some of the herbs turned up in flying ointments while other, more effective, possibilities did not.

Those with a more syncretic bent argue that in light of shamanic practice elsewhere in regard to sacred hallucinogens, it seems unlikely that Europe could own several such potent plants and have them remain both unrecognised and unused for this purpose. It does seem entirely possible that pre-Christian religious practices could have utilised the hallucinogenic properties of these plants. However, for the argument that they remained in use throughout the middle ages to be valid, one would have to maintain, following scholars such as Margaret Murray, that there was a continuous witch-cult which preserved pagan practice from the ancient past. This is a theory which most scholars are long past upholding.

The proportion of those transcripts from witch trials that give detailed descriptions of flying ointments is not great, although there are numerous examples of witches applying a flying ointment before departing for the Sabbath. In such cases the ointment, or at least the appropriate recipe, was usually provided by the devil himself. It is the continuous presence of this ointment which gave some credence to the concept of flight which was hotly contested as early as the tenth century CE; and no doubt it is still under examination today only because the possibility of a hallucinogenic ointment somewhat tempers rational disbelief in the subject. The proposal of the *Canon Episcopi* that if witches flew, it was in their imagination, was overruled in the fifteenth century by the *Malleus Maleficarum*, which labelled such

[1] Richard Evans Schultes and Albert Hoffman, *Plants Of The God*, Healing Arts Press (Vermont 1979) p49.

views as 'heretical' and 'altogether false', as it allowed witches to go unpunished.[1]

Reginald Scot's *The Discoverie Of Witchcraft* of 1584 is the most forthcoming text in terms of recipes, much of which Margaret Murray lists in her Witch-Cult In Western Europe as 'hearsay evidence' – in other words, she does not follow up on, or even provide, Scot's sources. Scot in fact quotes from one man, 'cousened by an old witch' known as Johannes Baptista Neapolitanus from whom he learnt that witches

> [take]... the fat of yoong children, and seeth it with water in a brasen vessell, reserving the thickest of that which remaineth boiled in the bottome, which they laie up and keep, untill occasion serveth to use it. They put hereunto eleoselinum, aconitum, frondes populeas, and soote.[2]

Of these ingredients, only 'aconitum' (aconite, or monkshood) could have any noticeable alterative effect, and monkshood is not generally recognised as hallucinogenic. The effect of eleoselinum depends on its definition, commonly thought to be parsley, although a strong case can be made for the aesthetically similar and hallucinogenic hemlock. Poplar and soot are about as likely to be hallucinogenic as baby fat. However, another recipe calls for the mysterious

> [s]ium, acarum vulgare, pentaphyllon, the blood of a flitter mouse, solanum somniferum, & oleum. They stampe all these togither, and then they rubbe all parts of their bodies exceedinglie, till they looke red, and be verie hot, so as the pores may be opened, and their flesh soluble and loose. They joine herewithall either fat, or oile in steed thereof, that the force of the ointment maie the rather pearse inwardly, and so be more effectuall.[3]

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[1] Montague Summers (trans), *The Malleus Maleficarum of Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger,* Dover Publications (New York, 1928) p104.

[2] Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie Of Witchcraft.* John Rodker, (Great Britain, 1584) p105.

[3] *Loc cit.*

In this case the effective ingredient is no doubt solanum somniferum, or Deadly Nightshade. Although not all ingredients are readily identifiable, nothing else seems to be alterative in effect.

> This same Johannes Baptista Neapolitanus also reports the tale most used in support of truly effective hallucinogenic flying ointments. This is the account of a witch falling haplessly into his hands, who promised 'to fetch me an errand out of hand from farre countries', whereupon she undressed, 'froted hir bodie with certeine ointments' and slept soundly (– all this in spite of the fact that Neapolitanus and his accomplices took it upon themselves to 'beate hir exceedinglie' beforehand). Upon awaking, the witch 'spoke manie vaine and doting words', claiming she had flown to distant places, although of course she had been within plain sight of them all along.[1]

Murray of course appends her quotes from the *Discoverie* with the comment 'Scot is, as usual, extraordinarily inaccurate in his statements',[2] and provides adulterated formulae in an appendix. This appendix gives three recipes for flying ointments, presented by Murray as being definitive: (i) Parsley, water of aconite, poplar leaves and soot;[3] (ii) water parsnip, sweet flag, cinquefoil, bat's blood, deadly nightshade, and soot; (iii) baby's fat, juice of water parsnip, aconite, cinquefoil, deadly nightshade and soot).[4]

Murray's colleague A. J. Clark, the composer of this appendix, considers the above compilation to 'show that the society of witches had a very creditable knowledge of the art of poisoning',[5] since aconite and deadly nightshade are two of Europe's three most toxic plants, the third being hemlock, which closely resembles the otherwise innocuous water parsnip. Unfortunately, aconite is not hallucinogenic; in fact, the

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[1] *Loc cit.*

[2] Margaret Alice Murray, *op cit* note to p100.

[3] This list is clearly from Scot, only Murray has omitted the baby fat.

[4] *Ibid* p279 – My translation of the original French presented by Murray: (i) du persil, de l'eau de l'Aconite, des feuilles de Peuple, et de la suye; (ii) de la Berle, de l'Acorum vulgaire, de la Quintefeuille, de Morelle, et de suye; (iii) de graisse d'enfant, de suc d'Ache, d'Aconite, de Quintefeuille, de Morelle, et de suye.

[5] *Loc cit.*

only hallucinogen definitively mentioned here is nightshade. This appears to be a small fly in the ointment to those who would claim that there was free and easy knowledge of hallucinogenic plants in the counter-culture of medieval Europe.

However, it does lend credence to the theory that such herbs were associated with witches more because of their deadly poison than the fact that they were regularly employed as hallucinogens. For by the time of Jonson and Shakespeare, those herbs most freely associated with witchcraft include nightshade, hemlock, henbane and mandrake. Over the last few centuries, *datura stramonium* or thornapple has gradually joined the ranks, coming as it did to Europe from America in the seventeenth century.

Of the several plants in flying ointment recipes which have no known alterative effect, perhaps the greatest surprise is parsley (*petroselium sativum*). The fact that the umbelliferous Hemlock bears some resemblance to parsley may account for this, but it is interesting to note just how widespread the infamy of this kitchen savoury was. It was a herb of death for the Greeks, who decked their tombs with it, and Plutarch describes the flight of an entire army on sighting an ass encumbered with parsley. In Europe a young girl sowing parsley courted sex with the Devil.[1] In Devon, parsley is considered a plant of evil omen, making it unlucky to either plant or transplant, leading one country gentleman as late as 1940 to state that he would not transplant parsley for a hundred pounds.[2] Even a paper on the cultivation of parsley given in 1897 before the Devon and Exeter Gardeners' Association lapsed into folklore, restating the common belief that it is one of the longest seeds to lie in the ground before germinating; it has been said to go to the Devil and back nine times before coming up. And many people have a great objection to planting parsley, saying that if you do so there will be sure to be a death in the family within twelve months.[3]

The number of times parsley goes to the Devil before sprouting seems to vary from province to province; in Notham for example, it only visits him three times. Various countermeasures were put in place

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[1] William A. Emboden, *Bizarre Plants*, Studio Vista (London, 1974) p55.
[2] Anne Marie Lafonte, *Herbal Folklore*, Badger Books (Bideford, 1984) p64.
[3] *Ibid*, p63.

to allow parsley to be planted safely: in Hartland, it could only be sown by a woman; in Newton Abbot and Tavistock only when church bells were ringing, and in Shillingford and Totnes only on Good Friday.[1]

Death and poison go hand in hand with the devil in rural Britain and when it comes to plants whose connection with the darkness is slightly more pronounced, henbane receives the appellation 'Devil's Eye', datura is 'Devil's Apple' (or sometimes 'Devil's Trumpet' in contrast to its more elegant relative brugmansia, the 'Angel's Trumpet') and hemlock 'Devil's Flower'.[2] Even the Devil's genitals are catered for by mandrake fruit as his testicles and phallus impudicus, a kind of foetid fungus, as his penis.[3]

The reputations of the above mentioned 'hexing herbs' as the group domain of witches was well established in Shakespeare's time, with playwright Ben Jonson associating his character Maudlin the Envious, the witch of Popplewick, with

> The venom'd plants
> Wherewith she kills! where the sad mandrake grows,
> Whose groans are deathful! the dead-numming nightshade!
> The stupifying hemlock! adders tongue![4]

These herbs were also frequently used in drama to create an atmosphere of horror or deathliness, as is the case in Jonson's Sad Shepherd, where Aeglamour laments the loss of the fair Earine with an apocalyptic vision made all the more horrific through the use of dark botanic imagery:

> Cold hemlock? yew? the mandrake or the box?
> These may grow still; but what can spring beside?
> Did not the whole earth sicken when she died?[5]

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[1] *Loc cit.*
[2] Lesley Gordon, *Green Magic*, Ebury Press (London, 1977) p51.
[3] Emboden, *op cit*, p59.
[4] Ben Jonson, 'The Sad Shepherd' in Waldron (ed) *Three Centuries Of Drama: English 1751-1800*, Readex Microprint (New York, 1961) p47.
[5] *Loc cit.*

Shakespeare was also a master in the art of these botanical references, as we will see a little further on.

All of these plants remained in the repertoire of Victorian lovers well versed in the complicated language of flowers. Originally, this language arose among the upper classes as an elegant way of passing love letters between wooing couples. Over a hundred and fifty floral dictionaries were published in that time, resulting in a detailed and often contradictory language: a gift of mandrake, for example, signified 'horror';[1] belladonna signified 'silence';[2] datura, (what I have referred to here as 'thornapple') symbolised 'deceitful charms';[3] but the most poisonous message of all comes from hemlock, meaning 'You will be the death of me'.[4]

Perhaps the herb with the greatest proliferation of legend is the mandrake, whose chief claim to fame is the vague resemblance its thick root bears to the human form; indeed, early herbalists distinguished between a male and female species. It is native to the Mediterranean although uncommon, and is nowadays considered endangered. Early references to mandrake favour it as a powerful aphrodisiac and promoter of fertility. The most famous instance of this can be found in Genesis 30:14 where Reuben brings mandrakes to his mother, Leah, which prompts Leah's sister, the barren Rachel, to beg 'Give me, I pray thee, of thy son's mandrakes'. Leah reluctantly strikes a deal with her barren sister, and the childless Rachel does indeed conceive from eating of Reuben's mandrakes.

Such powers were recognised by the Babylonians and the Egyptians, in whose country mandrake has strong ties although it is not a native. Mandrake roots were found in the sixth row of Tut Ankh Amun's floral colarette[5] and Egyptian myth makes good use of the stupefying properties of the mandrake as seen, for example, in the tale of Ra and Mathor. Mathor was sent to earth by an angry Ra in order to

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[1] Kate Greenaway and Jean Marsh, *The Illuminated Language of Flowers*, Macdonald and Jane's (London, 1978) p42.
[2] *Ibid* p22.
[3] *Ibid* p54.
[4] *Ibid* p34.
[5] Gordon, *op cit,* p97.

punish mankind, however the plan backfired when Mathor massacred so many people that Ra eventually forced him to drink the blood of his victims mixed with mandrake root which drugged him so that he slept until he had forgotten his purpose on earth.[1] Both Pliny and Dioscorides record use of mandrake as an anaesthetic for surgery.[2]

Mandrake was known to the Greeks as mandragoras (μανδραγορας, literally: 'hurtful to cattle'), and it, along with deadly nightshade, is one of the candidates for the pig-producing brew of Circe in Homer's Odyssey. It was dedicated to Hecate as Greek goddess of magic and sorcery, as were deadly nightshade and aconite.[3] The Vienna manuscript of Dioscorides includes a macabre drawing which encapsulates the myth of the mandrake neatly. The Goddess of Discovery is seen presenting a fully formed male mandrake root to Dioscorides. Each are smiling pleasantly at their imagined audience while a dog suffers its death agonies in the foreground.[4] The unfortunate canine formed a vital part of the mandrake's elaborate harvest ritual, for the screams of the plant when disturbed were believed to be so piercing as to be fatal. The historian Josephus (37-100CE) in his *Wars Of The Jews* records that mandrake harvesters

> dig all round the root, so that it adheres to the earth only by its extremities. Then they fasten a dog to the root by a string, and the dog, striving to follow his master who calls him away, easily tears up the plant, but then dies on the spot.[5]

The mandrake arrived in England in 1562, first cultivated by the herbalist Turner,[6] although Jonson's and Shakespeare's familiarity with the plant would suggest that its mythos had travelled from the Greeks long before. In Jonson's *The Masque Of Queens* (1609) twelve 'Hagges' meet to discuss their evil-doings:

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[1] Christopher Jakob Trew, *The Herbal of the Count Palatine*, Harrap (London, 1985) p36.
[2] Emboden, *op cit,* p145.
[3] Gordon, *op cit,* p36.
[4] Charles Daubeny, *Lectures On Roman Husbandry,* Oxford University Press (Oxford, 1857) p275.
[5] *Ibid,* p257.
[6] M. Grieve, *A Modern Herbal*, Tiger International Books (Twickenham, 1931) p510.

I, last night; lay all alone,
O' the ground, to heare the Mandrake grone;
And pluckt him up, though he grew full low,
And, as I had done, the Cock did crow.[1]

Jonson's notes to the masque show extensive research, including reference to Pliny, and adding that 'the forcing of it up is so fatallie dangerous, as the Grone kills, and therefore they do it with Doggs'.[2] A further 'Hagge' refers to Hemlock, Henbane and Nightshade, which Jonson explains as 'the most common veneficall ingredients; remembered by Paracelsus, Porta, Agrippa, and others'.[3] Oddly enough, by the time the mandrake was actually being cultivated in England, John Gerard's damning *Grete Herball* of 1526 was already in print. There, Gerard dismisses most of the current knowledge of mandrakes as 'ridiculous tales... of old wives or runnegate surgeons, or phisick mongers'.[4]

Shakespeare also uses the mandrake to provoke horror in his audience in both Henry VI and Romeo And Juliet where, at IV.iii.45-8, Juliet laments her impending incarceration in the Capulet monument:

Alack, alack! Is it not like that I
So early waking, what with loathsome smells,
And shrieks like mandrakes torn out of the earth,
That living mortals, hearing them, run mad...[5]

In sixteenth century Germany, the mandrake reappeared as the *alraun*, a central ingredient in the spells of the forest magicians known as *alyruninae*. This myth appears to have had its origin far further back in Germanic myth.[6] After the Middle Ages, it had become entrenched in

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[1] Ben Jonson 'The Masque of Queenes', Waldron, *op.cit* p5.
[2] *Loc cit.*
[3] *Ibid,* p7.
[4] Grieve, *op cit,* p511.
[5] *The Arden Shakespeare* (third series) used, ed. Brian Gibbons, Routledge (London and New York, 1980), pp205-6.
[6] See Jeannine E. Talley, 'Runes, Mandrakes and Gallows' in G.J. Larson (ed), *Myth in Indo-European Antiquity,* University of California Press (Berkeley, 1974) p161.

the household custom of treating mandrakes as human to the point of keeping them well-clothed, fed and bathed, the bath water being used to protect all within the household. The safe-keeping of an *alraun* led to immortality, wealth, protection and power; to lose one was to court agonising death.[1]

By the seventeenth century it was believed that mandrakes sprang from the drippings of gallows corpses – male mandrakes from men, female plants from women.[2] A connection was made between mandrakes and oaks as companion plants, with mandrakes said to grow under *quercus robur*, the original gallows tree for criminals. This myth claimed oaks used for gallows as the property of the Devil.[3] This conception of oaks seems to have been an attempt to link the mandrake with the gallows, and it is a connection frequently made in mythology but with no clear origin. However, this connection between appears to be a later myth due to the late arrival of mandrake in Europe, thus missing the Middle Ages altogether.[4]

Despite its category of worth and definite hallucinogenic properties, mandrake was not included in flying ointments, no doubt for reasons of accessibility. However, it is clear that it is one of the herbs most commonly associated with witchcraft. For since mandrake's reputation had far preceded it, it was relatively easy for it to slip into European thought not as a great cure or a godly herb, but as a plant belonging to the devil; it had no need to rely on being a flying ointment in order to gain its position or its power.

Atropa belladonna, however, is another story. Both hallucinogenic and lethal, the deadly or 'enchanter's' nightshade received its botanical name from the third of the Fates, Atropos, who cut the thread of life when it was ended.[5] In Chaucer's day it was called 'dwale', a term of troublesome etymology, perhaps coming from the Latin *dolere* (to suffer), or, more probably, from either the French *deuil* (grief) or

[1] Emboden, *op cit*, pp153-4.
[2] Trew, *op cit*, p59.
[3] Emboden, *op cit*, pp61-2.
[4] Talley, *op cit*, p161.
[5] Gordon, *op cit*, p36.

Scandinavian *dool* (delay, sleep).[1] In Germany, it is known as *Tolkraut* and in France, *morelle mortelle*.[2]

Belladonna has had a strong reputation as a poison since antiquity, where it seems to have been the poison of choice for military tactics. Plutarch gives a graphic account of the effects of belladonna on Marcus Antonius' soldiers during the Parthian wars, and in his *History of Scotland* (1582) Buchanan claims that Macbeth's soldiers under Duncan I poisoned an entire Danish army with dwale-tainted liquor under truce. Suffering under the strength of such intoxication, the invaders were easily murdered in their sleep by the Scots.[3] This is paralleled by an earlier tale of Hannibal's victory over African rebels. The Carthaginian soldiers staged a retreat, leaving behind mandrake wine, which stupefied their enemies, thus allowing for easy slaughter.[4]

Tradition holds that belladonna is the devil's weed and he takes especial care of it, trimming it and tending it to while away his leisure hours. A further connection to the supposed evils of witchcraft comes with the suggestion that belladonna gained its name for its occasional ability to transform into a beautiful enchantress who was dangerous to look upon. However, the most likely derivation of its name is from the habit Italian ladies had of dropping a tincture of it into their eyes, as even a small amount is able to dilate the pupils.[5]

Unlike belladonna, seemingly the drug of choice for poisoning en masse, hemlock has, since antiquity, been reserved for disposing of the individual. It was the finest form of capital punishment reserved for the upper classes, with Socrates being one of the most noted figures to die of legally administered hemlock. Hemlock was known to the Greeks as *konium*, derived from the word *konas*, 'to whirl about', for the plant causes vertigo and death. In 1737, Linnaeus restored its name to *conium maculatum*. *Maculatum* meaning 'spotted' was added referring to the purple streaks on the hemlock plant's stem, which old English legend chose to associate with the mark of Cain.[6]

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[1] Grieve, *op cit*, p584.
[2] Lesley Gordon, *op cit*, p100.
[3] Grieve, *op cit*, pp484-5.
[4] Emboden, *op cit*, p152.
[5] Grieve, *op cit*, p585.
[6] *Ibid*, p392.

The chief symptoms of hemlock poisoning are narcosis and paralysis with loss of speech, followed by depression of the respiratory system until death from asphyxia. However, the mind remains clear until point of death. Death has resulted from consuming both the upper parts of the hemlock plant and the highly poisonous root of its cousin cowbane, the water hemlock (*cicuta virosa*).[1] It is this latter plant that may have been meant by the 'water parsnip' in the flying ointments provided by Reginald Scot which I outlined earlier.

Although not a known hallucinogen, aconite (*aconitum napellus* or 'monkshood') was probably mentioned in flying ointments because it is extraordinarily deadly. It has been pointed out, most notably in Murray, that cardiac arhythmia produced by aconite may, when combined with the delirium of belladonna intoxication, produce a sensation of flying. However this may merely be a case of grasping at straws, as it seems more likely to suppose aconite was included in flying ointments simply because of its highly toxic and therefore suspect nature. Although not a native, it was known of in England since at least the tenth century. The Anglo-Saxons in particular recognised it as *thung*, which seems to have been their generic term for any extremely poisonous plant. The name aconite (an anglicisation of its Latin name) followed, but it has also been called wolfsbane, monkshood and helmet-flower. As with hemlock, the mind of one suffering from aconite poisoning remains clear.[2] Aconite's unsavoury reputation includes being created by Hecate from the slobber of Cerberus, and was supposed to have been the poison Medea prepared for Theseus which the old and infirm men of the island of Ceos were condemned to drink when they could no longer contribute to the State.[3] It has little to recommend it for a hallucinogenic preparation and therefore must have found its way into the recipes by some other route; namely: a very poor reputation.

Some researchers have found it necessary to settle debate on the efficacy of flying ointments by trialling a recipe themselves. This was the case in a modern trial conducted by Erich-Will Peuckert at the University of Gottingen. Drawing upon several medieval recipes,

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[1] *Ibid*, pp393-4.
[2] *Ibid*, pp8-9.
[3] *Ibid*, p9.

Peuckert tested on himself and a colleague a flying ointment that contained deadly nightshade, thornapple, henbane, wild celery and parsley in a base of hog's lard.

The ointment caused the two men to fall into a trance-like sleep for twenty hours, during which each had nearly identical dreams of flying through the air to a mountain top and participating in erotic orgies with monsters and demons. Upon awakening, both men had headaches and felt depressed. Peuckert was impressed with the intense realism of the dreams.[1]

Note that the inclusion of thornapple, or *datura*, is not authentic, as this particular herb is not mentioned in connection with flying ointments and only arrived in Europe from the New World in the seventeenth century. *Datura's* connection with witchcraft is far more recent, and its current notoriety is probably due more to the efforts of Carlos Castaneda than the Inquisition.

If flying ointments truly were part of an ancient pagan past, then their legacy in modern witchcraft fares poorly, being chequered at best. Gerald Gardner, the father figure of the modern witchcraft movement, claims that flying ointments are non-existent, insisting that he knows of no twentieth-century witches who have ever used ointments of any kind. To explain the testimonies of mediaeval witches, Gardner offers the staid hypothesis: greasy unguents were to keep naked witches warm during outdoor rites, or even to make them slippery when caught.[2] The fact that Gardner makes no mention of the hallucinogenic nature of several of the plants involved suggests an ignorance of the subject that becomes a recurring theme among modern witches, most of whom acknowledge the power of hallucinogens to alter states of consciousness, but claim they are better able to do so without the help of drugs.

This is well captured in an interview between self-proclaimed 'practising Witch, Rock-Goddess and freelance journalist' Fiona Horne and two members of western Sydney's Eldergrove Coven, the High Priestess Hawthorn and High Priest Lawrence. In response to

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[1] Rosemary Ellen Guiley, *The Encyclopedia of Witches and Witchcraft*, Facts on File (New York,1989) p255.

[2] *Loc cit.*

Horne's enquiry about drugs and coven meetings, Hawthorn makes it clear that drugs play no role whatsoever:

> [t]here are specific ways for altering [one's] state [of consciousness] for rituals – meditation, trancework and raising power alters states. Drugs are not recommended, it is the last method you should turn to and only then under very strict supervision, and never at open meetings.[1]

Similar opinions are expressed by the solitary practitioner. Horne herself dedicates an entire chapter of her *Witch: A Personal Journey* to 'magickal [sic] drugs', suggesting that although it can be constructive in the evolution of the spiritual self to experience the effects of certain drugs in a magickal [sic] environment,[2] she herself does not use hallucinogenic drugs or attend rituals where others use them. Horne ensures that her audience is clear about the fact that no witch is forced to take drugs by fellow covenors, and she stresses the view that drugs are an optional extra rather than an integral part of witchcraft. She warns specifically against using aconite, deadly nightshade and hemlock, insisting that they 'should only be used by experienced and trained Witches' due to their poisonous qualities'.[3]

Despite druidic connections with shamanism and indications that their forefathers indulged in psychedelic activity, modern druids echo the opinions of modern witches in their stance on drugs, as Emma Restall Orr makes clear in her *Principles of Druidry*:

> The use of illegal drugs is not encouraged in any part of modern Druidry, not even the shamanic. It might be acknowledged that hallucinogenic drugs were taken by our ancestors in the tradition in the same way that certain plants are still used today in tribal religions around the world. However, most traditions within Druidry now teach the abilities to break through levels of

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[1] Fiona Horne, *Witch: A Personal Journey*, Random House Publishing (Sydney, 1998) p223.
[2] *Ibid*, p125.
[3] *Ibid*, pp126-7.

> consciousness, reaching trance states and ecstasy, using just the powers of the mind.[1]

The implications contained within this statement, and in the sentiment expressed by Fiona Horne and others, are staggering. For in effect, modern druids and witches claim superiority over their ancestors (albeit perhaps unconsciously) by claiming to be able to perform all rituals necessary to their traditions relying solely on their own unenhanced abilities. Note that Orr is careful to avoid specifying which plants tribal religions still use, and note also that her statement opens with reference to 'illegal drugs'. Either Orr does not want her readership to know which drugs feature in tribal religions, or else she is herself ignorant not only of what these drugs are, but also of the fact that most of them actually are legal. Indeed, modern witchcraft's assertion of the relation between hallucinogens and illegality is quite pronounced, and would suggest a general ignorance of the possibilities contained within the scope of flying ointments.

So it is that after several centuries of flourishing under reputations both dubious and glorious, including a brief blossoming during the witch craze of Western Europe, the hexing herbs are fading into oblivion. Their toxicity, the factor which catapulted them into the limelight of flying ointments and general devilry, is now largely ignored by today's counter-culture, most notably the modern witchcraft movement, who ironically enough, are precisely the ones widely believed to be conversant with mind-altering drugs. The myths alone remain, and these are not myths widely revered or even understood by those who identify themselves as modern witches. Of the plants themselves, the mandrake is endangered; all the other herbs are regarded as weeds, and they have once again returned to the fringes of society.

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[1] Emma Restall Orr, *The Principles of Druidry*, Thorsons (London, 1998) p66.