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Introduction

Religions with indefensible histories and dogmas cling to them tenaciously. The Craft avoided this through the realization, often unconscious, that its real sources lie in the mind, in art, in creative work. Once people become comfortable with the Craft the old lies begin to dissolve.¹

-Margot Adler

Neopaganism has been one of the fastest growing religious phenomena in North America in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.² This figure can perhaps be explained by the breadth of religious phenomena included under the moniker 'neopagan'. In her germinal work on the subject, *Drawing Down the Moon*, Margot Adler characterises paganism in the United States as "the pre-Christian nature religions of the West and [their own] attempts to revive them or recreate them in new forms".³ This description is helpful as a catchall for neopagan practice, but is too broad to adequately explain the beliefs and practices of those whom it purports to describe. Many who, by this definition, qualify as 'neopagans' do not self-identify as such, but instead identify with the sub-group into which their beliefs fit.

criticism for focusing too directly on Wicca, and applying the beliefs of this sub-group to the

as Starhawk has pointed out, the historical narratives of traditional Western religions such as Judaism and Christianity are not subjected to this same scrutiny.¹² More importantly, she argues, regardless of the factual validity of the matriarchal narrative, it remains meaningful to the religion's adherents.¹³ This paper will not pursue the historical accuracy of this narrative; it will instead focus on how one's stance in reference to its accuracy is relevant to the perceived authenticity of religious practice and to the ability of Witchcraft to adapt to changing feminist discourses.

Some scholarly attention still focuses on historical validity, but there is a more distinct trend towards understanding the motivations behind conversion to neopagan religions. This research is primarily ethnographical and is conducted in the field of anthropology. Some notable scholars include Sarah Pike, who has done significant work on the makeup of neopagan ritual and the importance of neopagan festivals to community building and knowledge-sharing. Additionally, scholars such as Helen Berger and Sabina Magliocco have contributed to the discussion of neopagan¹⁴ worldviews and the function of magic in neopagan groups. With the advent of the internet, scholars such as Douglas E. Cowan, and James R. Lewis have focused on how knowledge of neopagan traditions is spreading across the web, and how the advent of virtual covens and magick schools is changing the structure of the tradition itself. There is room for significantly more research to be done on the influence of the internet and social media on the neopagan community, but it is beyond the scope of this paper. The internet will be assessed in relation to modern consumer culture, and how the commodification of neopagan symbols is

¹² Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess 20th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999): 4.

¹³ Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, 183. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, 4. Urban, "Wicca and Neopaganism", 165.

¹⁴ I am using the term 'neopagan' here because these scholars research looks at additional groups who have different belief systems which are not addressed in this paper.

contributing to the process of identity formation in Craft communities, with a

responsible for directing the movement towards serving their political goals.²⁰ Many neopagan practitioners participate in circles²¹ that are either led by these figures or based on their teachings.²² However, the individualistic nature of neopagan belief and worship means that many others, particularly solitary practitioners, have created their own practices based on a ‘pick and choose’ method where elements of these and other neopagan traditions are combined into a system best suited to its members.²³

The neopagan movement prides itself on its inclusivity as well as its capacity for change.²⁴ With these features in mind, I will assess whether the worldview is indeed able to accommodate changing understandings of gender and sexuality while maintaining its desire to avoid hierarchy and the institutionalisation of belief. Adaptation to current feminist discourses is essential if Neopagan Witchcraft is to maintain its relevance as a feminist religiosity. My approach to questions of sexuality and gender will be from a non-essentialist perspective which holds gender to be a social construction not based in biological difference. Through an examination of the movement’s origin myths, I will illustrate how the gendered conception of the universe central to neopagan Witchcraft is discursively constructed in these key texts. This will be supplemented with a study of the narrative of matriarchal prehistory because I consider one’s stance in relation to this integral in the process of constructing the authenticity of one’s religious practice. If it is held to be true, then the authenticity of the religion is partially anchored in the

²⁰ Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999): 344-5. <https://hdl-handle-net.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/2027/heh.30841>. Urban, “Wicca and Neopaganism”, 160.

²¹ ‘Circle’ has a multitude of meanings within Witchcraft. It may refer to the physical space in which a ritual is conducted, the ritual itself, or be used as an alternative name for a coven. One may participate in a circle without necessarily belonging to the coven or tradition with which it is associated.

²² Berger, “Witchcraft”, 37.

²³ Judy Harrow, “The Contemporary Neo-Pagan Revival” in *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft* ed James R. Lewis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996): 12.

²⁴ Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, 6.

Despite their differences, Sabina Magliocco identifies certain attitudes shared by the majority of American neopagans.²⁹ She identifies these as a reverential attitude towards nature, a belief in interconnectedness, the idea that there is a feminine component to divinity, and the moral precept along the lines of “do as you will, but harm none.”³⁰ This sole ethical principle, commonly called ‘The Wiccan Rede’, represents the only shared ‘doctrine’ within Witchcraft traditions.³¹ My findings are consistent with Magliocco’s, but I would add a focus on experience as a central determinant of religious truth, and an emphasis on the importance of sexuality both in worship and in understandings of the universe.

Critical to the worldview espoused by these groups is the embrace of a philosophy of non-dualism. Magliocco locates the origin of this belief in the neoplatonic concept of ‘the one’.³² This theory posits that there is one divine force throughout the universe which is fundamentally unknowable by humans. The embrace of this philosophy has allowed Witches to create a religion that is ‘polytheistic’ in that it accepts all deities as manifestations of ‘the one’, while in effect remaining monistic.³³ It also allows for increased tolerance towards other religions and worldviews, since their beliefs and practices are still held to be pathways to the one.³⁴ Religious tolerance has been a theme within Neopagan Witchcraft since Gardner’s publication of *Witchcraft Today*. Gardner devotes this work to tracing the history of witchcraft, and in so doing defines its relationship to other religions. In reference to Christianity, he states that one of the “most common charges against witches is that they denied or repudiated Christian religion... I and my friends have never seen or heard of such denial or repudiation.”³⁵ For Gardner, a Witch

²⁹ Magliocco, *Witching Culture*, 69.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Budapest, *The Holy Book*, 214.

³² Magliocco, *Witching Culture*, 27.

³³ Ibid, 27.

³⁴ Magliocco, *Witching Culture*, 28.

³⁵ Gerald B. Gardner, *Witchcraft Today*, (2) (2) (a) *Tingpudiation*

cannot refute another's religious belief without also refuting their own because all Gods and

status than at present, and society was structured along matriarchal lines. Patriarchy, and the female oppression that accompanied it, are said to be the result of the invasion of violent Indo-European nations.⁴⁴ In Greece, Starhawk sees the Goddess as being integrated into the male pantheon through marriage to other deities, while in Britain her worship was adopted by the Druids.⁴⁵ Her narrative depicts a slow erosion of Goddess spirituality, which was hastened by the coming of Christianity and the transfer of the Goddess's attributes to the Virgin Mary.⁴⁶ Z. Budapest's rhetoric is much stronger in its condemnation of patriarchal religion. She accepts that the Goddess was integrated into the Greek pantheon, but sees this as the result of "a full scale religious war" that subverted the Goddess's power by forcing her to share it with her accompanying male deities.⁴⁷ Indeed, Budapest considers the "patriarchal hordes responsible for the invention of rape and subjugation of women."⁴⁸ Though she holds the ancient Greeks responsible for the initial destruction of Goddess worship, she holds the Christian faith responsible for the continuation of this in the West.⁴⁹ This belief is reflected in the anti-Christian rhetoric employed in her work, and demonstrates the fallibility of Witchcraft's supposed religious tolerance. The scholars who originally presented the theory of matriarchal prehistory, such as Margaret Murray, were not Witches.⁵⁰ However, it was adopted first by Gardner, and then by later neopagan writers to authenticate the religion by locating its origins in the antique past.⁵¹ Both Adler and Starhawk have acknowledged that the factual validity of this narrative is

⁴⁴ Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*. TT2 1 T4aeninnis atT2 9c D it02 (a(a)r)02 (ni)2 (02 y)"(a#/,w 7.5i)2 (i3o)10 028l w2rThehe# / aew -2C(t

highly disputable. However, they continue to support the narrative because they believe it still has value as feminist concept.⁵²

For Budapest, embracing Goddess religion is explicitly connected to politics, because one's beliefs and worldview directly influence their actions.⁵³ She considers mythology to be the basis upon which the ruling powers build their desired society.⁵⁴ The goddess-worshipping matriarchy of whom she considers herself the continuation thus creates an opportunity for women to build a society based upon a mythology which benefits them. It is interesting here that she considers the matriarchy to be a 'mythology', as this implies uncertainty as to its historical accuracy, something which she otherwise does not address. Budapest's *Holy Book of Women's Mysteries* provides the most in-depth description of the practices characterizing this matriarchy provided by any of these individuals. She details practices which ensured the separation of women from men, and fertility traditions that ensured the biological father of children was uncertain and thus unimportant.⁵⁵

Starhawk's tradition is the most outspokenly political, and her embrace of neopagan religiosity displays her need to find a religious tradition that supported her political goals. Environmental advocacy, feminism, and the liberation of oppressed peoples are central to Reclaiming.⁵⁶ Indeed Reclaiming initiates are required to take vows which ensure their future political action.⁵⁷ The principle of interconnectedness inherent in the Witches' worldview is highly conducive to envireir future

things are believed to hold an innate life force, and all things are connected. Harm inflicted on one feature of the natural world is thus harm inflicted on the whole.⁵⁹ For Starhawk, this makes witchcraft a belief system uniquely suited to contemporary issues as it advocates environmental preservation and respect for all beings.⁶⁰ Belief in reincarnation is also widespread within the neopagan community.⁶¹ Many may not believe in direct reincarnation, but the understanding of energy as an omnipresent facet of the universe implies that the 'energy' composing each being will continue indefinitely in some form. This adds an element of self-preservation to political and environmental concerns, as it is advantageous to resist actions may be detrimental to one's future incarnations.

Equally central to neopagan Witchcraft, and central to the difficulties in categorizing it, is its embrace of individualism. Witchcraft is not dogmatic: there is no leader, no doctrine, and - besides the Wiccan Rede- no rules.⁶² One may be involved in multiple traditions at a time, or may be simultaneously Jewish or Christian.⁶³ Both Adler and Starhawk consider the lack of a doctrinal element to be a distinct strength of the movement as it differentiates it from more 'traditional' institutionalised religions.⁶⁴ Gardner's, originally British, tradition does not advocate individualism, but is instead characterised by an elaborate hierarchical system with different religious practices only being revealed as one ascends through the initiatory system.⁶⁵ The addition of a doctrine of individualism to Witchcraft, appears to reflect the broader shifts towards inclusivity that characterised the counter-cultural movement in North American society

at the time of Witchcraft's introduction.⁶⁶ This is furthered by North America's status as a settler and immigrant society, which has provided it with a wealth of ethnicities whose beliefs have been incorporated into neopaganism.⁶⁷ The Craft thus varies regionally, both across America and Canada, following the ethnic makeup of the region.⁶⁸ This diversity, and the individualism that accompanies it, is a source of pride for many Witches.⁶⁹ By encouraging diversity, Witches stimulate innovation and creativity, qualities which can play a crucial role in creating meaningful ritual experience.⁷⁰ The ethnic makeup of North America is thus conducive to the transformation of neopagan practice.⁷¹

In Magliocco's study of neopagan identity, she focuses on its performative nature, pointing to how it changes depending on the context the individual is in. While in a festival context, Witches may wear ritual robes or symbols such as the ankh or pentacle. In everyday life they are more likely to select symbols identifiable by other 'group' members, but not by outsiders.⁷² In capitalist society, this performative aspect of identity is embodied through consumption.⁷³ This aspect of Witchcraft is of recent origin, for as Gardner stated in 1954, "there are no witch's supply stores" and "the average witch does not have a full battery of tools."⁷⁴

⁶⁶ Cusack, "The Return", 346.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 70.

⁶⁸ Berger, "Witchcraft", 28. Magliocco, *Witching Culture*, 76.

⁶⁹ Magliocco, *Witching Culture*, 60.

⁷⁰ Berger, "Witchcraft", 39.

⁷¹ Though I consider cultural appropriation too nuanced an issue to be adequately addressed in this paper I feel it is necessary to acknowledge that it is a problem within neopagan groups and belief systems. What I consider to be the core issue leading to cultural appropriation in these traditions is the embrace of a Darwinian approach to religion which assumes that religions 'evolve' along similar lines. As such, the prehistoric religions of Europe can be assumed to resemble other 'pagan' or Indigenous spiritualities still in practice today. This, when accompanied with the supposed historical basis of these traditions, has caused some to engage in cultural appropriation to supplement or embellish insufficient historical knowledge. I noticed this within the works of Adler, Starhawk, and Gardner, all of whom draw parallels between neopagan practice and those of various 'indigenous' groups. There is room for significantly more research to be done on the subject. However, it is important to note that there is also a growing awareness towards cultural appropriation within neopagan groups and many endeavour to avoid it.

⁷² Magliocco, *Witching Culture*, 62.

⁷³ Ibid, 63.

⁷⁴ Gardner, *Witchcraft Today*, 150.

While many covens may share ritual tools, the advent of magazines, websites, and stores selling ritual tools certainly increases their availability for the solitary witch.⁷⁵ Ritual objects are commodified, and may be decorated with neopagan symbols even when this is not necessary for ritual purposes.⁷⁶ From Gardner's perspective, these tools are undesirable because they lack the power built up in old tools, reducing their efficacy in magical workings.⁷⁷ Display of these objects either on one's person or in their home allows Witches to actualize their identity, confirming their adherence to what for most is a new belief system.⁷⁸

Chapter 2: 'Feminism' and the Patriarchy in Gardnerian Witchcraft

From its initial appearance with Gerald Gardner, Witchcraft was seen as a religion particularly welcoming to women because of its conception of the divine feminine.⁷⁹ Gardner claimed to have been initiated into a secret Wiccan coven by a Witch he referred to 1 (er)-12 (t)-2 (y,)JTJ0.002 T

women, distinctly oppressive. Particularly problematic is Gardner's emphasis on female beauty, which he considers an integral precursor to women holding power in Gardnerian covens.⁸³ The story he provides in both *Witchcraft Today* and *The Gardnerian Book of Shadows*, concerning the source of the Goddess's power is contradictory in its positioning of the Goddess as the most important deity for Witches while simultaneously asserting the source of her power is the God.⁸⁴

Gardner's theology held that the world was composed of masculine and feminine energies.⁸⁵ These energies were represented by the Goddess and God and embodied in the physical world by men and women. At the most basic level, this was displayed in Gardner's assertion that a circle must be composed of six hetero-sexual couples: six men, six women, and a High Priestess as leader.⁸⁶ To the Witches who taught Gardner, this number was apparently tradition, and was convenient because more people would both make the ritual too long and difficult to fit within a nine foot circle.⁸⁷ Gardner himself asserts that thirteen was likely chosen because "it is a lucky number and there are thirteen moons in a year".⁸⁸ Berger argues that the number was meant to ensure the balance of masculine and feminine energies.⁸⁹ This reasoning is never explicitly stated in *Witchcraft Today*, but is supported by Gardner's assertion that to perform magic "male and female intelligences are necessary in couples".⁹⁰

Regardless of its origin, this number became the standard for Gardnerian covens. Gardner did acknowledge that the desired ratio of couples was not always achievable and in such cases individuals who failed to meet the standards could be supplemented to reach thirteen.⁹¹ If we

⁸³ Gerald Gardner, *The Gardnerian Book of Shadows* (USA: Andesite Press, 2015): 79-80.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 79.

⁸⁵ Kraemer, "Gender and Sexuality", 391.

⁸⁶ Berger, "Witchcraft", 31.

⁸⁷ Gardner, *Witchcraft Today*, 115.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 114.

⁸⁹ Berger, "Witchcraft", 31.

⁹⁰ Gardner, *Witchcraft Today*, 29.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 115.

accept the argument that this number was meant to balance male and female energies, we are still left with the discrepancy of the high priestess. The priestess is meant to embody the Goddess during ritual work, her presence thus making the quantity of female energies greater than that of the male.⁹² There are several ways to interpret this discrepancy: the simplest would be to state that the High Priestess was hierarchically above the rest of the circle and her energies were thus not counted. Another would be to state that male energies are more powerful than female, and thus though there are fewer male members, the energy provided remained equivalent. A third would be that while male energies are required to balance the female, since they are ranked lower it is not necessary to have an equal amount. None of these interpretations represents ‘equality’, and Gardner’s explanation for the numerical makeup fails to address these faults.

It is of equal import that while Gardner held that the circle must be led by a woman, he also required that she be young and beautiful, so as best to represent the Goddess.⁹³ When she grew older, and her beauty began to fade, she was expected to step down as “the greatest virtue of a High Priestess is that she recognizes that youth is necessary to the representative of the Goddess...she will return to pride of place in another life, with greater power and beauty”.⁹⁴ There were no regulations on attractiveness for the other members of the circle, whether male or female. This regulation explicitly connects a woman’s capacity to lead to her attractiveness and desirability. It further suggests that a woman’s closeness to the Goddess, and thus her innate divinity and ability to work magic is determined by her perceived attractiveness. This issue has been recognized as a problematic element of Gardner’s belief system since its origin. Doreen

⁹² Gardner, *The Gardnerian Book of Shadows*, 11.

⁹³ Berger, “Witchcraft”, 32.

⁹⁴ Gardner, *The Gardnerian Book of Shadows*, 79-80. Berger, “Witchcraft”, 31.

Valiente, one of Gardner's earliest supporters and a high priestess of his coven, considered it so critical that she broke with him over it.⁹⁵

An aspect that seems often neglected in scholarly discourse on Gardner's feminism is the Goddess origin story he provides. This myth supports the conception that the God is responsible for death and rebirth, and indeed even supports Gardner's insistence that High Priestesses be beautiful so as to best represent the Goddess.⁹⁶ In this myth, the Goddess, who is an incredibly beautiful woman, journeys to the underworld, where she meets Death. Death is transfixed by her beauty and asks her to remain with him in his realm, which she refuses to do because she does not love him and blames him for causing all the things she loves to die. Death explains that "Age causes all things to wither; but when men die at the end of time I give them rest and peace and strength so that they may return".⁹⁷ Following this explanation are several key events which play a central role in Gardnerian ritual practice: scourging, magic, and mysteries. Gardner relates these as follows:

Death scourged her and she cried "I know the pangs of love." And Death said: "Blessed be," and gave her the fivefold kiss, saying: "Thus only may you attain to joy and knowledge". And he taught her all the mysteries, and they loved and were one; and he taught her all the magics. For there are three great events in the life of man - love, death, and resurrection in the new body- and magic controls them all.⁹⁸

Gardner claims that this myth was related to him and suggests that it may have been created to provide an explanation for existing rituals and practice. Regardless of its

⁹⁵ Berger, "Witchcraft", ,

origins, he states that it is the myth upon which Witches base their actions and beliefs.⁹⁹ What is interesting about this myth is that it does not place the Goddess as the most powerful or even the original divine force in the universe. Instead, “the Priestess should ever mind that all power comes from him. It is only lent.”¹⁰⁰ This statement has received shockingly little attention despite being a direct inversion of the power relations which seem to at first dominate Witchcraft. Gardner is stating here that while Witches worship the Goddess, she is effectively a representative of the God and not a powerful deity in her own right. Her power is a gift, and as such can be taken away if her actions are not desirable to the male authority from which they arise.¹⁰¹

This myth “explain(s) why the wiser, older and more powerful god should give his power over magic to the goddess”. If this is to be taken as an explanation, one can

authority to be the actions necessary for her to gain power in her own

¹⁰² Indeed,

forgotten practically all about

¹⁰³ Considered in the context of unequal power balance in C

¹⁰⁴ However,

Ibid.

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comes from the God, the Priestesses power is masculine and as such Gardnerian circles are weighted in favour of the male.

Chapter 3: The Feminist Turn

Were we not better off as a species practicing the life-affirming religion, acting out life-oriented rituals, regarding each of us as children of the Goddess? Enfolded in a celestial motherlove, would we not spin healthier dreams, societies, relationships, lives? Is the male principle of the universe not death without the tempering inclusive force of the Goddess?¹⁰⁵

- Z. Budapest

The success of the neopagan movement can in part be credited to its adoption by some

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use of a myth-history which situates the beginning of Witchcraft in a period of female supremacy, regardless of its factual validity, is presented as a valuable tool in allowing women to envision themselves in a society where they do not suffer from gender oppression.¹¹³ Starhawk, Budapest, and scholars such as Ronald Hutton and Margot Adler have asserted the importance of ‘witch’ as an image. As Hutton sees it, witches are the only example of powerful women existing in European historical consciousness.¹¹⁴ For Adler, witches are proud and independent and exist outside the realm of traditionally acceptable female behaviour.¹¹⁵ While Budapest acknowledges that Christian and pop-culture conceptions of witches have given them negative connotations, she sees the rehabilitation of the term as way for women to reclaim their power and dignity.¹¹⁶

Budapest’s first Susan B. Anthony coven was founded in 1971 in an effort to add a religious dimension to the feminist movement in the United States.¹¹⁷ While her theology holds many similarities to Gardner’s in ritual structure, she worships only the Goddess, and membership in Dianic¹¹⁸ covens is only open to women.¹¹⁹ While Budapest has admitted that there may one day be room for men within Goddess spirituality, she believes that in order for women to unlearn and overcome ingrained patriarchy, they must first be able to live and worship in a female-only space.¹²⁰ Budapest asserts that she is a hereditary witch from a Hungarian tradition whose family has been practicing for eight hundred years.¹²¹ This effectively removes Gardner as the founder of modern Witchcraft, severing the link between her practice and that of

¹¹³ Budapest, *The Holy Book*, xi. Urban, “Wicca and Neopaganism”, 173.

¹¹⁴ Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, 341.

¹¹⁵ Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, 178.

¹¹⁶ Budapest, *The Holy Book*, xvii.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, xii.

¹¹⁸ A term for feminist witchcraft focused on Goddess worship. Budapest’s teachings are important within this tradition but there are Dianic covens who do not equate themselves with her specific brand of feminism.

¹¹⁹ Berger, “Witchcraft”, 38.

¹²⁰ Budapest, *The Holy Book*, 3. Ruether, *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine*, 279.

¹²¹ Budapest, *The Holy Book*, 270.

the patriarchal Gardnerian craft.¹²² Budapest claims to have been taught witchcraft by her mother, Masika, whose birth was the result of immaculate conception.¹²³ While Budapest does not assert that she herself is the result of an immaculate conception, the positioning of her mother as being conceived, and raised, without the taint of a male influence decreases the presence of male authority figures within her hereditary tradition and provides a messianic influence to her teachings.

The Goddess takes on a more central

but acknowledges that there is a role for men to play in pursuing feminist goals.¹³⁶ Budapest's writings place males in a position where they are dependent on females, because it is only females who possess the capacity to give birth, as "there are only two types of people in the world: mothers and their children".¹³⁷ This is exemplified in her origin story where the God, who she refers to as Pan, is the Goddess's son.¹³⁸ Pan is an example of Budapest's quest for what

influenced her creation of a tradition that focuses on combatting both social inequalities and environmental destruction.¹⁴⁵

saw by her own light her radiant reflection and fell in love with it. She drew it forth by the power that was in Her and made love to Herself... Their ecstasy burst forth in the single song of all that is, was, or ever shall be... The Goddess became filled with love, swollen with love, and she gave birth to a rain of bright spirits that filled the worlds and became all beings.¹⁵²

This narrative ensures the Goddess is female by asserting that she gave birth to the universe and its inhabitants.¹⁵³ It thus provided women with a reason to celebrate themselves as unique and meaningful in their ability to give birth, to create life just as the Goddess did. The assertion that it was the Goddess menstrual blood that rained down and brought life at the time of creation, further allowed females to celebrate an aspect of their biology that many religions and cultures considered ‘dirty’.¹⁵⁴ However, this narrative has received criticism for these same qualities which some see as promoting traditional maternal qualities as natural and universal.¹⁵⁵ Furthermore, this narrative links a woman’s importance to her childbearing capacity, potentially reinforcing binary constructions of gender.

Chapter 4: Fertility and Gender Essentialism

The Sabbats are the eight points at which we connect the inner and the outer cycles: the interstices where the seasonal, the celestial, the communal, the creative, and the personal all meet. As we enact each drama in its time, we transform ourselves. We are renewed; we are reborn even as we decay and die.

¹⁵² Ibid, 41.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 50. Jone Salomonsen, *Enchanted Feminism: The Reclaiming Witches of San Francisco* 1st edition (London: Routledge, 2002): 227. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.4324/9780203160282>.

¹⁵⁵ Kathryn Rountree, “The Politics of the Goddess: Feminist Spirituality and the Essentialism Debate” *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology* 43, no. 2 (July 1999): 138. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23166525>.

We are not separate from each other, from the broader world around us; we are one with the Goddess, with the God.¹⁵⁶

- Starhawk

The Witchcraft traditions presented by Gardner, Starhawk, and Budapest all share a belief that there is a correlation between human fertility and agricultural fertility. This belief has been present since the publication of *Witchcraft Today* but has been most fully capitalised on and embellished by feminist Witchcraft. Gardner's text both asserts that Witches had the capacity to influence agricultural fertility through ritual, and that the Gods gain some of their power through human intervention.¹⁵⁷ Adding to this is the centrality of birth, development, death, and regeneration to the Craft's belief system.¹⁵⁸ This process is ritualized through the succession of yearly sabbats and esbats which form the basis of Witchcraft's ritual year.¹⁵⁹ It is further embodied by the Goddess' and God's respective traits. The Goddess brings life, and in her manifestation as the 'Triple Goddess' embodies the fertility cycle. The God is responsible for death and decay.¹⁶⁰ Starhawk is careful to note that within her ideology, death and decay are not negative but are simply a necessary process in the cycle of life and rebirth.¹⁶¹ The centrality of sexuality and fertility as embodied in the cycle of the seasons and relationship between the God and Goddess lends itself to a hetero- and cis-normative viewpoint that supports an essentialised view of gender. The dichotomy of masculine-feminine polarity is acted out in ritual as sexed and gendered objects are manipulated by those of the corresponding sex.¹⁶² The previous chapter

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began the discussion of how the process of gendering in Witchcraft has received criticism for its binary understandings and lack of intersectionality. Here, this discussion will be furthered through an examination of how the gendered and sexed language utilised in origin stories and the matriarchal myth-history is actualized through ritual.

An often-cited example of the role sexed objects play in ritual is Gardner's Cakes and Wine ceremony, also known as the Great Rite. For Gardner this ritual is ideally performed by a married heterosexual couple.¹⁶³ These two individuals embody the Goddess and God, and engage in a symbolic, and sometimes liteteroWdeteroWdet Gardner-omet (eroWd)u.u2 (et)-16 (a)4 (ngua)4 ((l)

divine hierarchy and allows the participants to celebrate themselves as the physical manifestations of this gendered divine order.¹⁶⁹

Budapest discusses the Great Rite in the context of feminist witchcraft, while acknowledging that it receives less attention than in other traditions.¹⁷⁰ According to the history she provides, the Rite once took place in all cultures and was a method for achieving social cohesion and stability.¹⁷¹ As performed at this time, the Rite consisted of witches engaging in sex acts with multiple men and women and in so doing bringing themselves closer to oneness with nature and the Goddess.¹⁷² In her modern tradition, it is of course practised only by women, since men are not permitted to participate in ritual.¹⁷³ She considers it important because “the Goddess is intimately connected with religious sexual practices”.¹⁷⁴ Women’s

Divine.”¹⁸⁰ This belief is shared by many Witches, particularly those devoted to a feminist Craft.¹⁸¹ Discourses on trans and cis- identities were not prominent when Budapest was writing in the 1970s; however, the failure to treat these criticisms presents a weakness as these issues come to the fore of feminist discourses.¹⁸²

The continuous referral throughout Budapest and Starhawk’s works to the Goddess as ‘Mother Earth’, ‘Mother Nature’ or the ‘Great Mother’ discursively affixes her status to the earth, making her both ‘motherhood’ and ‘nature’ embodied. Starhawk’s depiction of the Goddess ‘giving birth’ to the universe furthers this by making the Goddess ‘mother’ of the a

mother, crone' triad.¹⁸⁶ This triad separates women's lives into stages based upon their fertility: one is a maiden when they begin to menstruate, they become a mother after childbirth, and a crone post-menopause.¹⁸⁷ In addition to these, Budapest adds rituals created for events which may occur in women's lives but are not guaranteed. These typically equate with events which are either traumatic or meaningful and affect a woman's physical body; such as the birth of a child or the removal of a reproductive organ post-illness.¹⁸⁸ The choice of rituals included in *The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries* illustrates what Budapest considered to be the core issues facing women at the time of its writing and what practices she considered valuable in overcoming these barriers. Budapest explicitly states that the most important duty of feminist witchcraft is to aid women in overcoming internalised aspects of the patriarchy.¹⁸⁹

Though there are significantly fewer rituals for men in Budapest's tradition, their position within the religious and gender hierarchy is

position as protectors in Budapest's tradition: they must act to protect women and children from older men who exemplify patriarchal manhood and wish to inflict harm on the mother's child.¹⁹⁴

The emphasis on women as mothers is less overt in Starhawk's theology, but she still places importance on women's fertility cycles. While part of a Reclaiming coven in San Francisco, Jone Salomonsen participated in one such ritual which celebrated the 'first blood' of a coven member's daughter.¹⁹⁵ The purpose behind this ritual was to help remove some of the negative connotations given to menstruation in Western societies.¹⁹⁶ This process is part of the removal of the oppressive idea that female bodies are in some way 'unclean'.¹⁹⁷ Salomonsen argues that in Western cultures today menstruation is not so much associated with uncleanness, but is considered a physical handicap which females but not males must endure.¹⁹⁸ This idea of 'female suffering' is influenced

traditional gender norms.²⁰¹ The rituals base women's value in their capacity as child-bearers, while limiting men to a role as protector of mother's and their children. The overt sexuality of the Great Rite, in its Gardnerian and Dianic interpretations, focuses intensely on sexual relations between men and women.²⁰² In Gardnerian Witchcraft, this creates a hetero- and cis-normative ritual which serves to reify the equation between one's sex and gender that is in turn reflective of their position within the divine hierarchy.²⁰³ These same tendencies are present in Budapest's presentation of the Rite, though she removes the centrality of heterosexuality. Instead, for her, the Great Rite becomes a method through which women may gain power in society by removing men's association with and connection to their children.

Chapter 5: Sexuality and LGBTQ+ Community

In a world in which power and status are awarded according to gender, we necessarily identify with our gender in a primary way. In a world in which sexual preference is a grounds for either privilege or oppression, we necessarily identify with our sexual orientation. But to take one form of sexual union as the model for the whole is to limit ourselves unfairly.²⁰⁴

- Starhawk

The presence of gender essentialism within these three Craft traditions presents an enigma for LGBTQ+ folks

‘witches’ and witchy paraphernalia is utilised by queer individuals to aid in their acceptance and display of their gender and sexual identity.²¹²

Of the traditions discussed in this paper, Reclaiming is the most willing to adapt to accommodate changing understandings of gender and sexuality. Starhawk acknowledges that since writing *The Spiral Dance* her understandings of feminism and of the LGBTQ+ community have changed.²¹³ She addresses her changing attitudes to her writings in the introductions to the tenth and twentieth anniversary editions and in the appendixes affixed to each. The changes in her ideology in relation to queer folks come directly from criticisms she received from the queer community in San Francis

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of gender in her teachings, Starhawk has maintained an emphasis on binary sexual difference.²¹⁸ This fails to account for developing understandings of biological sex as a spectrum rather than a binary. As she sees it, binary sexual difference is a certainty because it is what ensures reproduction.²¹⁹ In effect, what Starhawk has done is move the binary from gender to sex.²²⁰ I have not found significant criticism of this process from either the neopagan or scholarly communities. However, as understandings of sexual difference and intersex people grows it may become a source of dispute.

Unlike Starhawk, Budapest has not adjusted her teachings to be more inclusive of the LGBTQ+ community. She is accepting of lesbian, gay, and bisexualities, but excludes trans and asexual individuals. Her tradition is dedicated to those who are biologically female, and the discursive reinforcement of traditional gender norms in her rituals and religious narratives creates an equation between biological sex and gender. Though Budapest's tradition represents a minority within the broader Craft community, it is a subset that is explicitly trans-exclusionary. For many in this tradition, the attempted pa77 -2.ht2 Tw [((bi)-2 (ol)-2 (ogi8fi)4 (te1)-2 9es

events.²³⁰ These are considered safe spaces, separated from their normal lives, where people may experiment with their sexual and gender identities.²³¹ The individuals engaging in these practices are not necessarily queer or transgender, but in the liminal space created at neopagan festivals are still free to experiment with their sexuality and gender expression.²³² In normalizing this practice it becomes safe for individuals who do identify as transgender or queer to experiment with and construct their identity. As these identities are developed, the increase in neopagan paraphernalia which can be bought either at festivals or at neopagan stores allows for queer people to actualise their identity: both as queer and as a member of the Witchcraft community.²³³ Just as another Witch may purchase itelt(idtom)-21munity4EMC hase21.31 -2.3 0 Tdt9(e)6 (r)5 (-3 ()]TJ-0t)4 (e)4 (s)-1.pies at

altered this hierarchy. By anchoring female worth in their child-bearing capacity, making them, as 'life-givers', closer to the Goddess and therefore more important than their male counterparts.²³⁷ Combined with the equation between gender and sex, this resulted in an inverted

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Appendix:

Athame: a short black-handled, often magnetized, knife used in ritual.

Chalice: a wine glass or cup used in ritual.

Circle: an alternative name for a coven. Also the name for ritual space.

Coven: a ritual group, usually composed of thirteen members who share a common belief system.

Dianic Witchcraft: a feminist tradition focused on worship of the Goddess. Zsuzsanna Budapest is a key figure in this tradition.

Esbat: