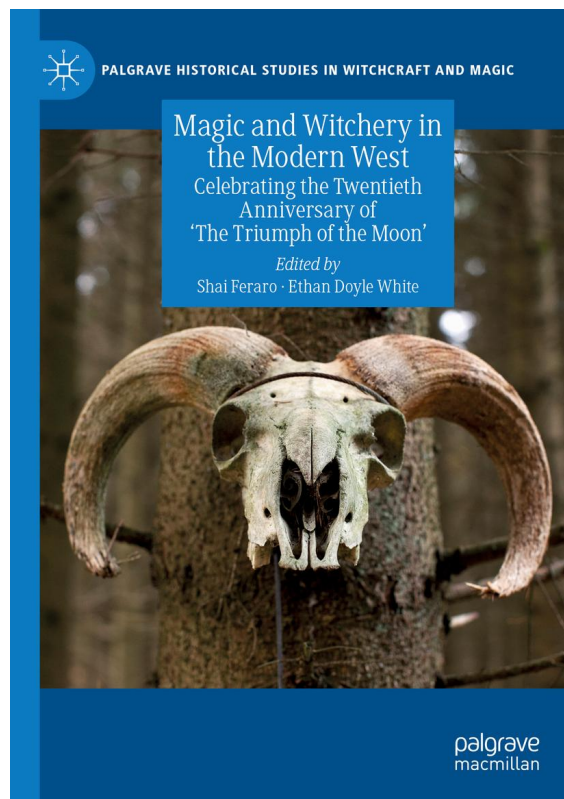


# Magic and Witchery in the Modern West

Celebrating the Twentieth Anniversary of 'The Triumph of the Moon'

Shai Feraro and Ethan Doyle White



2019

# Contents

Synopsis . . . . .	5
Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic . . . . .	5
Title Page . . . . .	5
Copyright . . . . .	5
Dedication . . . . .	6
Contents . . . . .	6
Notes on Contributors . . . . .	7
 <b>1. Twenty Years On: An Introduction</b>	 <b>10</b>
Wicca, Paganism, and Occultism . . . . .	11
The Triumph of the Moon . . . . .	13
Outline of the Chapters . . . . .	18
 <b>2. The Goddess and the Great Rite: Hindu Tantra and the Complex Origins of Modern Wicca</b>	 <b>21</b>
The “Extreme Orient”: Tantra in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century England . . . . .	22
Unleashing the Beast: Tantra and Sexuality in the Works of Theodor Reuss, Aleister Crowley, and Gerald Yorke . . . . .	24
The Great Rite: Gardner’s Ritual Magic and the Birth of Wicca . . . . .	27
“The Path for the Dark Age in Which We Live”: Doreen Valiente on Tantra and Witchcraft . . . . .	30
Conclusions: Gardnerian Wicca as “Occult <i>Bricolage</i> ” and “Tantra for the West” . . . . .	32
 <b>3. Playing <i>The Pipes of PAN</i>: Pagans Against Nukes and the Linking of Wiccan-Derived Paganism with Ecofeminism in Britain, 1980–1990</b>	 <b>34</b>
Contemporary Paganism and Goddess Spirituality . . . . .	34
Ecofeminism and the 1980s British Pagan Scene . . . . .	35
Pagans Against Nukes . . . . .	36
PAN and Starhawk . . . . .	38
PAN and the Greenham Cause . . . . .	38
PAN’s Role in Connecting British Wiccans and Goddess Women . . . . .	39
The Sjöö Versus Pennick Controversy . . . . .	40
Conclusions . . . . .	43
 <b>4. Other Sides of the Moon: Assembling Histories of Witchcraft</b>	 <b>44</b>
The Wise-Women in History and Practice . . . . .	46
Finding Wise-Women in the Museum of Witchcraft . . . . .	47
In the Wise-Woman’s Cottage . . . . .	50
The Wise-Woman and Joan Wytte: Fashioning Heritage . . . . .	51
Reflections on the Wise-Woman, the Traditional Witch, and Making Histories in the Museum of Witchcraft . . . . .	53

<b>5. The Nearest Kin of the Moon: Irish Pagan Witchcraft, Magic(k), and the Celtic Twilight</b>	<b>54</b>
The Irish Historical Context . . . . .	54
Cultural Connections . . . . .	55
Religious Witchcraft in a Catholic Country . . . . .	57
The Craft of the Wise and Hidden Knowledge . . . . .	58
Healers, Hags, and Fairies . . . . .	60
Romantics, Megaliths, and Celtic Wicca . . . . .	62
Concluding Remarks . . . . .	65
<b>6. The Taming of the Fae: Literary and Folkloric Fairies in Modern Paganisms</b>	<b>66</b>
Pagans and Fairies . . . . .	67
Learning About Fairies . . . . .	69
Fairies as Protectors . . . . .	70
Fairies as Childhood Companions . . . . .	71
Fairies as Environmental Guardians . . . . .	74
Feral Fairies . . . . .	77
<b>7. “Wild Nature” and the Lure of the Past: The Legacy of Romanticism Among Young Pagan Environmentalists</b>	<b>80</b>
Environmental Activists’ Implicit Paganism . . . . .	82
Emblems of Enchantment in a War for the Wild . . . . .	86
The Lure of Which Past? . . . . .	90
<b>8. The Blind Moondial Makers: Creativity and Renewal in Wicca</b>	<b>93</b>
Structures in the Wiccan Movement . . . . .	94
The Domain . . . . .	94
The Field . . . . .	96
The Person . . . . .	97
Processes in the Wiccan Enterprise . . . . .	98
Experientiality . . . . .	99
Belongingness . . . . .	100
Appropriation . . . . .	102
Change . . . . .	103
The Nature of Creativity in Wicca . . . . .	103
Intentional Non-intentionality . . . . .	104
Creative Change . . . . .	105
<b>9. “The Eyes of Goats and of Women”: Femininity and the Post-Thelemic Witchcraft of Jack Parsons and Kenneth Grant</b>	<b>106</b>
Background . . . . .	107
Witchcraft in the Writings of Jack Parsons . . . . .	109
Witchcraft in the Writings of Kenneth Grant . . . . .	114
Conclusion . . . . .	117
<b>10. Navigating the Crooked Path: Andrew D. Chumbley and the Sabbatic Craft</b>	<b>119</b>
Early Years: 1967 to 1990 . . . . .	120
The Cultus and the <i>Azoëtia</i> : 1991 to 1992 . . . . .	123
Growing Visibility: 1993 to 1999 . . . . .	127
Chumbley’s Final Years: 2001 to 2004 . . . . .	130

Conclusions . . . . .	132
<b>11. Witches Still Fly: Or Do They? Traditional Witches, Wiccans, and Flying Ointment</b>	<b>133</b>
Who Is “Traditional”? . . . . .	134
A Pipe of Oyntment: Alice Kyteler . . . . .	137
Flying Ointment or Medicine? . . . . .	140
Anthropologists, Ethnobotanists, and Other Entheogenic Explorers . . . . .	143
Conclusion: Flying Ointments and Secretism . . . . .	144
<b>12. Afterword</b>	<b>146</b>
<b>Index</b>	<b>152</b>
A . . . . .	152
B . . . . .	152
C . . . . .	152
D . . . . .	153
E . . . . .	153
F . . . . .	153
G . . . . .	153
H . . . . .	153
J . . . . .	154
K . . . . .	154
L . . . . .	154
M . . . . .	154
N . . . . .	155
O . . . . .	155
P . . . . .	155
Q . . . . .	155
R . . . . .	155
S . . . . .	155
T . . . . .	156
V . . . . .	156
W . . . . .	156
Y . . . . .	156
Z . . . . .	156

This book marks twenty years since the publication of Professor Ronald Hutton's *The Triumph of the Moon*, a major contribution to the historical study of Wicca. Building on and celebrating Hutton's pioneering work, the chapters in this volume explore a range of modern magical, occult, and Pagan groups active in Western nations. Each contributor is a specialist in the study of modern Paganism and occultism, although differ in their embrace of historical, anthropological, and psychological perspectives. Chapters examine not only the history of Wicca, the largest and best-known form of modern Paganism, but also modern Pagan environmentalist and anti-nuclear activism, the Pagan interpretation of fairy folklore, and the contemporary 'Traditional Witchcraft' phenomenon.

## Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic

### Series Editors

Jonathan Barry

*Department of History, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK*

Willem de Blécourt

*Meertens Institute, Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

Owen Davies

*School of Humanities, University of Hertfordshire, UK*

The history of European witchcraft and magic continues to fascinate and challenge students and scholars. There is certainly no shortage of books on the subject. Several general surveys of the witch trials and numerous regional and micro studies have been published for an English-speaking readership. While the quality of publications on witchcraft has been high, some regions and topics have received less attention over the years. The aim of this series is to help illuminate these lesser known or little studied aspects of the history of witchcraft and magic. It will also encourage the development of a broader corpus of work in other related areas of magic and the supernatural, such as angels, devils, spirits, ghosts, folk healing and divination. To help further our understanding and interest in this wider history of beliefs and practices, the series will include research that looks beyond the usual focus on Western Europe and that also explores their relevance and influence from the medieval to the modern period.

'A valuable series.' - *Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft*

More information about this series at <http://www.palgrave.com/gp/series/14693>

### Editors

Shai Feraro and Ethan Doyle White

### **Magic and Witchery in the Modern West**

Celebrating the Twentieth Anniversary of 'The Triumph of the Moon'

### Editors

Shai Feraro

*Oranim College of Education, Kiryat Tiv'on, Israel*

Ethan Doyle White

*University College London, London, UK*

# palgrave macmillan

Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic

ISBN 978-3-030-15548-3e-ISBN 978-3-030-15549-0

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15549-0>

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2019

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, express or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Cover illustration: Benne Ochs

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

For Ronald. Thank you for paving the way.

## Contents

1 Twenty Years On: An Introduction

- Ethan Doyle White and Shai Feraro  
 2 The Goddess and the Great Rite: Hindu Tantra and the Complex Origins of Modern Wicca  
 Hugh B. Urban  
 3 Playing *The Pipes of PAN* : Pagans Against Nukes and the Linking of Wiccan-Derived Paganism  
 with Ecofeminism in Britain, 1980–1990  
 Shai Feraro  
 4 Other Sides of the Moon: Assembling Histories of Witchcraft  
 Helen Cornish  
 5 The Nearest Kin of the Moon: Irish Pagan Witchcraft, Magic(k), and the Celtic Twilight  
 Jenny Butler  
 6 The Taming of the Fae: Literary and Folkloric Fairies in Modern Paganisms  
 Sabina Magliocco  
 7 “Wild Nature” and the Lure of the Past: The Legacy of Romanticism Among Young Pagan Environmentalists  
 Sarah M. Pike  
 8 The Blind Moondial Makers: Creativity and Renewal in Wicca  
 Léon A. van Gulik  
 9 “The Eyes of Goats and of Women”: Femininity and the Post-Thelemic Witchcraft of Jack Parsons  
 and Kenneth Grant  
 Manon Hedenborg White  
 10 Navigating the Crooked Path: Andrew D. Chumbley and the Sabbatic Craft  
 Ethan Doyle White  
 11 Witches Still Fly: Or Do They? Traditional Witches, Wiccans, and Flying Ointment  
 Chas S. Clifton  
 12 Afterword  
 Ronald Hutton  
 Index

## Notes on Contributors

### Jenny Butler PhD

is a faculty member in the Study of Religions Department at University College Cork (UCC), Ireland, where she teaches on contemporary religions in Ireland, Western esotericism, and new religious movements. She conducted the first ever ethnographic study of Irish contemporary Paganism and her book on this topic, *21st Century Irish Paganism: Worldview, Ritual, Identity*, is forthcoming. She holds a PhD in Folklore and Ethnology from UCC and is a specialist on Irish folk religion. She is working on a comparative ethnographic project on non-ordinary (supernatural) beings and landscapes, which explores the interconnections of worldviews, customs, and sense of place as intangible cultural heritage. Her research has been supported by the Irish Research Council, the Royal Irish Academy, the Ireland Canada University Foundation, the Ireland Newfoundland Partnership (Department of the Taoiseach), and the UCC College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences Research Support Fund. Butler has been a Government of Ireland Research Scholar (2001–2004), a Dobbin Scholar (2010), and a Charlemont Scholar (2017). She is the secretary of the Irish Society for the Academic Study of Religions (ISASR) and a formal collaborator of the Marginalised and Endangered Worldviews Study Centre (MEWSC), University College Cork. She is the founder of the Irish Network for the Study of Esotericism and Paganism (INSEP), which is affiliated with the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE).

### Chas S. Clifton

has been at the centre of Pagan studies in the United States since the late 1990s, when he co-founded the Nature Religion Scholars Network, which later became the Contemporary Pagan Studies Group, a permanent program unit within the American Academy of Religion. He is the author of numerous articles and encyclopaedia entries. Since 2002, he has edited the peer-reviewed journal *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies*. His books include *The Paganism Reader* (co-edited with Graham Harvey, 2004) and *Her Hidden Children: The Rise of Wicca and Paganism in America* (2006). He formerly taught at Colorado State University–Pueblo, Pueblo, but now is a full-time writer and editor, at present researching historical witches’ flying ointments.

**Helen Cornish PhD**

is a lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at Goldsmiths, University of London, UK, and is interested in anthropological approaches to history. Her doctoral thesis (2005) examined strategies deployed by contemporary British witches as they revised their claims to the past, and evaluated what counted as historical evidence amid wider senses of historicity. Her fieldwork took place in southern Britain, where the central site was the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic in Boscastle, Cornwall. She is preparing a monograph entitled *Weaving Witchcraft and the Past: An Anthropology of History*.

**Ethan Doyle White**

is a doctoral researcher in Medieval Studies at University College London, UK, where he is examining both historical and archaeological evidence for “popular religion” at water-places in Anglo-Saxon England. Independently, he has been involved in the scholarly study of modern Paganism, Wicca, and the contemporary “Traditional Witchcraft” milieu since 2010. His research interests include the creation and development of such new religious movements and how they appropriate and utilise archaeological and historical material to legitimate their contemporary practices. His work on these subjects has been published in over ten academic journals. He is the author of *Wicca: History, Belief, and Community in Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (2016). He is on the editorial board of the American Academy of Religion’s *Reading Religion* website.

**Shai Feraro PhD**

is an adjunct lecturer at the Oranim College of Education, Israel. His scholarly interests lie in the connection between new religions and gender issues, and he specializes in the study of contemporary Paganism in North America, Britain, and Israel. His dissertation (completed at Tel Aviv University’s School of Historical Studies) dealt with women and gender issues in British magical and Pagan groups, c.1888–c.1988. For the past six years, he has also studied the Israeli Pagan community, utilizing research methods from the social sciences such as participant observation, interviews, and an online survey. Feraro is the secretary of the Israeli Association for the Study of Religions, and is the co-editor of *Contemporary Alternative Spiritualities in Israel* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). He is also an editorial board member for the *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review*. His forthcoming postdoctoral project will focus on occult and New Age spirituality bookshops as sites for the production and exchange of rejected knowledge in the UK, c.1893–c.1993.

**Manon Hedenborg White**

holds a PhD in the History of Religions from Uppsala University, Sweden. Her doctoral dissertation, “The Eloquent Blood: The Goddess Babalon and the Construction of Femininity in Western Esotericism,” analysed constructions of femininity and feminine sexuality in modern occultism, with a specific focus on Aleister Crowley’s religion, Thelema, and its development in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. She has published articles and spoken on a range of subjects pertaining to Crowley, Thelema, gender, and sexuality in modern Western esotericism. Hedenborg White is employed as a postdoctoral researcher at Södertörn University, with funding from the Swedish Research Council. She is also a visiting scholar at the Center for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents at the University of Amsterdam for the period 2018–2020.

**Ronald Hutton DPhil**

is Professor of History at Bristol University, UK. His research interests include early modern Britain, seasonal festivals in the British Isles, and the history of witchcraft. He is the author of over 15 books on



*these and related topics. Among his published work are* The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400–1700 (1994), The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain (1996), The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft (1999), Shamans: Siberian Spirituality and the Western Imagination (2001), Witches, Druids and King Arthur (2003), Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain (2009), and Pagan Britain (2013). His most recent monograph is The Witch: A History of Fear, from Ancient Times to the Present (2017).

**Sabina Magliocco PhD**

is Professor of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. A recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, National Endowment for the Humanities, Fulbright Program, and Hewlett Foundation, and an honorary fellow of the American Folklore Society, she has published articles on religion, folklore, foodways, festival, and witchcraft in Europe and the United States, and is a leading authority on the modern Pagan movement. She is the author of numerous books and articles, including *The Two Madonnas: The Politics of Festival in a Sardinian Community* (1993, 2005), *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art and Altars: Making Things Whole* (2001), and *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America* (2004). With filmmaker John M. Bishop, she has produced the documentary film series *Oss Tales*, on a May Day custom in Cornwall and its reclamation by American Pagans. At present her research is on nature and animals in the spiritual imagination.

**Sarah M. Pike PhD**

is Professor of Comparative Religion and Chair of the Department of Comparative Religion and Humanities at California State University, Chico, USA. She is the author of *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community* (2001) and *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America* (2004). She has written numerous articles and book chapters on contemporary Paganism, ritual, the New Age movement, the primitive skills movement, the Burning Man festival, spiritual dance, environmentalism, and youth culture. Her research interests include ritual practices expressing and constructing relationships to nonhuman nature and encounters between young people and the more-than-human world, especially in the context of contemporary Paganism and being “spiritual but not religious.” Her most recent book is *For the Wild: Ritual and Commitment in Radical Eco-Activism* (2017), an ethnographic study of radical environmental and animal rights activism, ritual, and youth culture.

**Hugh B. Urban PhD**

is Professor of Religion at Ohio State University, USA, and is interested in the study of secrecy in religion, particularly in relation to questions of knowledge and power. He is the author of *The Church of Scientology: A History of a New Religion* (2011), *Magia Sexualis: Sex, Magic, and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism* (2006), *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion* (2003), and *The Economics of Ecstasy: Tantra, Secrecy and Power in Colonial Bengal* (2001).

**Léon A. van Gulik PhD**

is a Dutch cultural psychologist and scholar of religion. He holds a PhD from Tilburg University (as an external candidate) on the subject of religious creativity in Wicca. His academic interests range from ecological and environmental psychology, mysticism, consciousness, magical thinking, cultural transmission, to meaning-making, and aesthetics. A sought-after freelance lecturer, van Gulik has taught various subjects in the social sciences and religious studies at the universities of Nijmegen, Amsterdam, Leiden, and Groningen. In addition, he co-authored the latest edition of a leading textbook on professional communication. Acting as an independent researcher, van Gulik is working on the issues of self-legitimation in Wicca and is developing his theory of atmospheres. Van Gulik is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies (temporary) at Leiden University, as well as visiting lecturer of Social and Cultural Psychology at Radboud University (Nijmegen). His research centers on the issues of self-legitimation in Wicca.

# 1. Twenty Years On: An Introduction<sup>(1)</sup>

Ethan Doyle White<sup>1</sup> and Shai Feraro<sup>2</sup>

As the twentieth century came to a close, a British historian best known for his work on the volatile world of seventeenth-century England brought out a historical examination of Wicca, a new religious movement that had been established only half a century before. This work, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*, was the first monograph devoted to the history of Wicca to be written by a professional academic. In this, it was a startlingly brave and ambitious work. Prejudices against alternative religions ran high and extended onto those who dared study them. Despite this atmosphere of uncertainty, *Triumph* had many things going for it. It was a ground-breaking study, produced by a well-established historian, and published by Oxford University Press, one of the world's most prestigious publishing houses.

Twenty years later, and the world has moved on. Hutton's career has broadened and developed. As well as his continuing position at Bristol University, from 2009 to 2013 he worked as a Commissioner for English Heritage and then as the chair of the Blue Plaques Panel. He has produced eight further monographs, on a broad range of topics, from the reception of Siberian shamanism to the image of the witch through history. He is, if not a household name, then at least an oft-recognised face on British television, known as a regular talking head on history documentaries and as presenter of the series *Professor Hutton's Curiosities* (2013). The emphasis that he places on communicating directly with a broad, non-academic audience through television, radio, and public talks has earned him something of a cult fan following: there are not many professional historians who can claim to have an appreciation group devoted to them on Facebook, let alone one with over a thousand members. At the same time, he remains a well-respected figure among the scholarly community due to his prodigious output and his friendly and helpful demeanour. The editors of this volume, while hailing from different parts of the world and trained in different disciplinary backgrounds, owe a debt to both Hutton and *Triumph* in helping to open up the study of Wicca and modern Paganism as a worthy area of academic enquiry. He led the way in a manner that has allowed a range of younger scholars to follow in his footsteps.

It is at this juncture that we feel it important to take stock and pay tribute to this trail-blazing volume. The study of both modern Paganism and modern occultism has grown rapidly, assisted by a number of newly formed journals and scholarly societies. The year 2005 saw the establishment of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE), founded four years after the launch of *Aries*, an academic journal devoted to the subject. Although Hutton has never been closely associated with this academic movement, perhaps in large part because its institutional links are closer to the study of religion than to history, his scholarly interests clearly echo those of the various scholars operating under its aegis. The years following *The Triumph of the Moon* also witnessed the growth of the academic study of modern Paganism. The year 2004 saw the launch of *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* as a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal devoted to the subject,

---

<sup>1</sup> Ethan Doyle White (Corresponding author), University College London, London, UK

<sup>2</sup> Shai Feraro, Oranim College of Education, Kiryat Tiv'on, Israel

<sup>(1)</sup> © The Author(s) 2019  
Shai Feraro and Ethan Doyle White (eds.)  
Magic and Witchery in the Modern West  
Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15549-0\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15549-0_1)

while 2003 marked the first session on modern Paganism at the American Academy of Religion's annual meeting. *The Triumph of the Moon* helped to set the standard for these developments and remains a continuing source of inspiration.

## Wicca, Paganism, and Occultism

Wicca is a new religious movement that came to public awareness in England during the 1950s, although it was likely constructed over the course of the previous three decades, using a variety of older sources. Its early practitioners presented it as the survival of an ancient pre-Christian belief system which had persisted throughout the centuries of Christian dominance in the form of a witches' cult. In adopting this origin myth, early Wiccans were utilising the historical framework developed by various scholars, most notably Margaret Murray (1863–1963), who argued that the witch trials carried out in early modern Christendom were an attempt to extinguish a surviving pre-Christian religion. Although historians demolished and discarded this framework during the 1960s and 1970s, the “Murray thesis” remained important for the development of Wicca and is still retained by some practitioners today as a mythic origin story.<sup>3</sup>

Precise definitions as to who or what constitutes a real “Wiccan” have varied amid emic arguments over that designation; the term emerged in Britain during the early 1960s to describe the religious movement in its broad sense, although some denominations subsequently sought to restrict the term solely to themselves, thereby denying others the legitimate usage of it. While both definitions remain in use, the broader and more inclusive variant is likely more widespread.<sup>4</sup> In examining Wicca in the broader sense of the word, we find a religion that is theologically diverse, containing duotheists, monotheists, polytheists, agnostics, and atheists within its midst. When deity forms are utilised, they are usually drawn from the pre-Christian belief systems of Europe and its environs and commonly include both female and (or in place of) male divinities. Practitioners typically identify as “witches” and perform rites—either solitarily or in groups known as covens—which involve spellcasting as a common practice and which practitioners refer to as being “magical” in nature. Wiccans often mark a series of seasonal festivals known as Sabbats, collectively termed the Wheel of the Year; this emphasis on observing the changing of the seasons leads many practitioners to identify Wicca as a form of “nature religion” or “nature spirituality.”<sup>5</sup>

Wicca is the best known and largest form of modern Paganism, a broad milieu comprising a variety of religious, spiritual, and esoteric groups consciously inspired and influenced by the non-Abrahamic belief systems which existed in Europe, North Africa, and the Near East prior to the establishment of Christian and Islamic hegemony.<sup>6</sup> Alongside Wicca, other prominent forms of modern Paganism include modern Druidry, whose practitioners identify with the druids of Iron Age Western Europe, and Heathenry, a movement heavily inspired by the belief systems of the pre-Christian societies of linguistically Germanic Europe.<sup>7</sup> Numerically smaller forms include groups professing to revive the belief systems of the ancient

---

<sup>3</sup> On the problems of the witch-cult theory, see Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-Hunt* (London: Heinemann for Sussex University Press, 1975), 99–125; Jacqueline Simpson, “Margaret Murray: Who Believed Her and Why?,” *Folklore* 105, no. 1–2 (1994): 89–96; Caroline Oates and Juliette Wood, *A Coven of Scholars: Margaret Murray and Her Working Methods* (London: Folklore Society, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Ethan Doyle White, “The Meaning of ‘Wicca’: A Study in Etymology, History and Pagan Politics,” *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 12, no. 2 (2010): 185–207.

<sup>5</sup> On Wicca see Ethan Doyle White, *Wicca: History, Belief, and Community in Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> This is the definition presented in Ethan Doyle White, “Theoretical, Terminological, and Taxonomic Trouble in the Academic Study of Contemporary Paganism: A Case for Reform,” *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 18, no. 1 (2016): 43.

<sup>7</sup> For information on Druidry see Graham Harvey, *Contemporary Paganism: Religions of the Earth from Druids and Witches to Heathens and Ecofeminists*, second edition (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 17–34. For Heathenry, see Jennifer Snook, *American Heathens: The Politics of Identity in a Pagan Religious Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press,

Greeks, Canaanites, and Egyptians.<sup>8</sup> In Eastern and Central Europe, various “Native Faith” movements have developed in recent decades in an effort to reconstruct the ancient polytheistic traditions which were supplanted by Christianity. These groups usually try to distance themselves from Western forms of modern Paganism.<sup>9</sup>

Like most modern Pagan religions, Wicca also constitutes a form of esotericism and of occultism. Defining “esotericism” remains a contested issue, although the term has long been associated with such diverse practices as Kabbalah, Theosophy, and New Age. The historian of religion Wouter Hanegraaff has argued that esotericism can be best understood as a conceptual category within Western culture into which society’s “rejected knowledge” has been relegated by both mainstream Judeo-Christian religion and the forces of scientific rationality.<sup>10</sup> Within scholarship on esotericism, the term “occultism” is usually reserved for esoteric currents that developed from the nineteenth century onwards, in part because the term itself first appeared in the 1840s. Hanegraaff has argued that these can be distinguished from other, older esoteric traditions because they have had to either “come to terms with a disenchanted world” or operate “from the perspective of a disenchanted secular world.”<sup>11</sup> In reflecting beliefs which are at odds with both Judeo-Christian doctrine and established rationalist understandings of the universe, Wicca is clearly a form of esotericism, something made particularly clear through its heavy utilisation of elements from older esoteric currents, such as Freemasonry and ceremonial magic. At the same time, the fact that it emerged within a disenchanted twentieth-century society and operates in a context where it has to respond to scientific rationality places it within the category of occultism.

There are other variants of occultism which have also utilised the term “witchcraft” in reference to themselves and their practices. These include certain forms of Thelema, the religion established by Aleister Crowley in 1904, and various groups operating under the banner of Satanism or Luciferianism. Thus, while we might speak of Wicca as a form of modern witchcraft, it is not the only religious tradition that can be classified in this way. This testifies, in a sense, to the enduring power of the witch as a symbol with resonance for individuals living today. As Hanegraaff notes, the witch is a “positive antitype” and gains its power through its “implicit criticism of dominant Judeo-Christian and Enlightenment values”; “there is hardly a better way to express one’s rejection of the values informing mainstream society than claiming the name of its traditional enemies.”<sup>12</sup> To put it another way, the image of the witch carries with it counter-cultural chic.

As the title of this work makes clear, the chapters in this edited volume are united in their focus on magic and witchery, or witchcraft, in the modern Western world. Both are of course old terms and carry a great deal of baggage, both as they have been used in colloquial parlance and how they have been defined and redefined by scholars over the years. The last decade has seen increasing attention paid to the concept of “magic” by scholars of religion, and as a result there has been a growing acceptance

---

2015); Stefanie von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival: Transformations of Germanic Neopaganism* (Leiden: Brill, 2017); Jefferson F. Calico, *Being Viking: Heathenism in Contemporary America* (Sheffield and Bristol: Equinox, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Paul Harrison, *Profane Egyptologists: The Modern Revival of Ancient Egyptian Religion* (London: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> For relevant literature see Kaarina Aitamurto and Scott Simpson, eds., *Modern Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Central and Eastern Europe* (Durham, UK: *Acumen*, 2013); Kathryn Rountree, *Contemporary Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Europe: Colonialist and Nationalist Impulses* (New York: Berghahn, 2015); Mariya Lesiv, *The Return of Ancestral Gods: Modern Ukrainian Paganism as an Alternative Vision for a Nation* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013); Kaarina Aitamurto, *Paganism, Traditionalism, Nationalism: Narratives of Russian Rodnoverie* (London: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998 [1996]), 422; Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Occult/Occultism,” in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 888. See also Marco Pasi, “Occultism,” in *The Brill Dictionary of Religion Volume III*, ed. Kocku von Stuckrad (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 1364–1368.

<sup>12</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “From the Devil’s Gateway to the Goddess Within: The Image of the Witch in Neopaganism,” in *Belief Beyond Boundaries: Wicca, Celtic Spirituality and the New Age*, ed. Joanne Pearson (Milton Keynes and Aldershot: Open University and Ashgate, 2002), 304–305. See also Ronald Hutton, *The Witch: A History of Fear, from Ancient Times to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

that the term is too loaded with negative connotations to prove much use as any sort of cross-cultural and pan-historical analytic category.<sup>13</sup> Thus, that is not the meaning of “magic” as it is being used here. Rather, this book looks at “magic” as a category with emic value within forms of modern occultism. Within this milieu, “magic” has come to be employed in reference to an occluded force through which individuals—“magicians”—can bring about physical changes in the universe through their own willpower, usually facilitated through ritualised or ceremonial acts.<sup>14</sup> It is this emic understanding of “magic” that is held to by most Wiccans, Satanists, Thelemites, and other occultists and can usefully be re-adopted for the etic purposes of scholarly examinations of these religious traditions.

## The Triumph of the Moon

*The Triumph of the Moon* has its origins in Hutton’s longstanding interest in the reception of Europe’s pre-Christian religions and in the modern Pagan milieu more specifically. In part, this interest was inherited from his mother, a modern Pagan “of a recognisable Victorian and Edwardian kind.” She did not engage in religious rites, although “was deeply influenced by the Greek and Roman classics, regarded the Olympian deities as the natural divinities of the world, had a sense of a single archaic mother goddess as standing behind them, and felt an immanent divinity in nature.”<sup>15</sup> She was Russian, although gave birth to Hutton in Ootacamund, southern India, in 1953. As a child, and following the sudden death of his British father, Hutton relocated with his mother to Britain, where they settled into a council flat in eastern England.<sup>16</sup> Raised as a Pagan within this environment, Hutton shared his mother’s passion for the ancient past and found an outlet for this interest in a local archaeological society. With this society and other groups, he took part in various excavations between 1965 and 1976, as well as visiting every Early Neolithic chambered tomb in England and Wales between 1966 and 1969.<sup>17</sup>

As a teenager, Hutton engaged with the counter-culture of the 1960s and 1970s, taking part not only in its political aspects, including protests against misogyny and racism—in 1978 he was nearly killed by neo-Nazis due to his support of the Anti-Nazi League<sup>18</sup>—but also more cultural and artistic facets, like performances at folk clubs and free festivals. It was during this period that he gained his first experiences with modern Paganism as a practical religious system, attending seasonal rites organised by a Pagan group in Epping Forest, a woodland straddling the Essex/Greater London border, in 1968–1969.<sup>19</sup> It was also at this point in his life that he encountered one of the most prominent figures in Wiccan history, Alex Sanders (1926–1988), the founder of the Alexandrian tradition.<sup>20</sup> Operating within this milieu, Hutton initially believed in the witch-cult theory and other accounts of pre-Christian survivals that were popular with Pagans: “I believed everything I read in Margaret Murray, Robert Graves, Sir James Frazer, Gerald Gardner, Charles Godfrey Leland, and authors who thought that medieval Celtic literatures embodied reliable portraits of the ancient pagan past: simply because all of them either

<sup>13</sup> See for instance Randall Styles, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 215–222; Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 164–177; Bernd-Christian Otto and Michael Stausberg, *Defining Magic: A Reader* (Durham: Equinox, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Henrik Bogdan, “Introduction: Modern Western Magic,” *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 12, no. 1 (2012): 1–16.

<sup>15</sup> Ethan Doyle White and Ronald Hutton, “An Interview with Professor Ronald Hutton,” *Albion Calling*, 7 July 2014, <http://ethandoylewhite.blogspot.co.uk/2014/07/an-interview-with-prof-ronald-hutton.html>.

<sup>16</sup> “Trust Your Struggle: Professor Ronald Hutton, University of Bristol Department of History,” Bristol SU, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jZSMVEtfgSs>.

<sup>17</sup> Ronald Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), xii–xiii.

<sup>18</sup> Ronald Hutton, “The Past and the Post Modern Challenge,” *The Ley Hunter* 125 (1996): 8.

<sup>19</sup> Kate Large and Ronald Hutton, “Professor Ronald Hutton: Reframing Modern Paganism,” *Pagan Dawn*, 13 December 2016, <http://www.pagandawnmag.org/professor-ronald-hutton-reframing-modern-paganism/>.

<sup>20</sup> Caroline Tully and Ronald Hutton, “Interview with Professor Ronald Hutton,” *Necropolis Now*, 20 May 2011, <http://necropolisnow.blogspot.com/2011/05/interview-with-professor-ronald-hutton.html>.

embodied or built upon what was then absolute academic orthodoxy.”<sup>21</sup> In 1973, he even debated the historical veracity of Leland’s claim to have found a surviving pagan witches’ cult in late nineteenth-century Tuscany with the historian Norman Cohn (1915–2007), an expert in the early modern witch trials. Hutton has noted that in that exchange, Cohn “floored” him, an experience that contributed to his desire to read more of the new research, and original records, on the witch trials of the early modern period.<sup>22</sup>

Although fascinated by the prehistoric past, Hutton decided that his talents were better suited to history rather than archaeology. After gaining undergraduate and master’s degrees in history from Pembroke College, Cambridge, in 1980 Hutton completed his DPhil at St John’s College, Oxford, on the English Civil War.<sup>23</sup> Embarking on an academic career, first at Magdalen College, Oxford, and then at Bristol University, his first four academic monographs were devoted to early modern history.<sup>24</sup> His interest in the period extended from purely academic pursuits and into an involvement with the Sealed Knot, a historical re-enactment group devoted to the English Civil War.<sup>25</sup>

Spreading his wings and moving onto a subject other than early modern Britain, in 1991 Hutton brought out *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles*, a summary of what was then known about the pre-Christian belief systems of the Atlantic Archipelago.<sup>26</sup> The work was well received in archaeological circles, and in 1994 he was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries. Being the first publication to provide such an overview of the subject, it was little surprise that it also attracted interest from modern Pagans and helped to establish Hutton’s early reputation in Pagan circles. This was followed by two studies of British folk culture and the ritual year, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400–1700* and *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain*.<sup>27</sup> Although reflecting the growing scholarly consensus that most recorded folk customs were not “pagan survivals” but reflected medieval or early modern developments, these works also proved popular among more intellectual sectors of the Pagan milieu.

Although the professor keeps his personal religious beliefs private, he has retained close links to the modern Pagan community in Britain and in the latter half of the 1990s decided that the time was right to produce a historical account of part of it. In writing *The Triumph of the Moon*, Hutton was taking a chance. It allowed him to pursue a subject that was clearly of interest to him and a great many others, but which bore with it little academic respectability and would no doubt open him up to ridicule from certain unsympathetic quarters. In particular, he was interested in exploring how Wicca had actually come into being. It was already apparent to many senior British Wiccans that their inherited origin story was inadequate, for since the 1960s and 1970s scholarship on the early modern witch trials had demonstrated that there had never been a witchcraft religion to start with, whether Satanic or pre-Christian in basis. In 1990, he had attended a conference on “New Age Dimensions of Goddess Spirituality” held at King’s College London. Many prominent British Wiccans were in attendance, and they declared “one by one, that [Wicca’s] traditional historiography should be regarded as myth and

---

<sup>21</sup> Large and Hutton, “Professor Ronald Hutton.”

<sup>22</sup> Tully and Hutton, “Interview.”

<sup>23</sup> Ronald Hutton, “The Royalist War Effort in Wales and the West Midlands 1642–1646,” PhD Thesis, Oxford University (1980).

<sup>24</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Royalist War Effort, 1642–1646* (London: Routledge, 1982); Ronald Hutton, *The Restoration* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985); Ronald Hutton, *Charles the Second* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989); Ronald Hutton, *The British Republic, 1649–1660* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990). Hutton has revisited this period in *A Brief History of Britain 1485–1660: The Tudor and Stuart Dynasties* (London: Constable and Robinson, 2011) and in his forthcoming work on Oliver Cromwell.

<sup>25</sup> Doyle White and Hutton, “An Interview.”

<sup>26</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles: Their Nature and Legacy* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991). This was later transformed into an updated and expanded variant, *Pagan Britain* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013).

<sup>27</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400–1700* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) and Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

metaphor rather than a literal history.” This opened up the way for Hutton to recover, “so far as it could be done—their real history.”<sup>28</sup>

Prior to Hutton’s work, virtually all historical research into the history of Wicca had been carried out beyond the walls of the academy, typically by practitioners themselves. Two prominent Alexandrian Wiccans, Janet (b. 1950) and Stewart Farrar (1916–2000), had teamed up with the ex-Gardnerian “Mother of Wicca” Doreen Valiente (1922–1999) to produce and publish studies on how Gerald Gardner (1884–1964) adapted his Wiccan liturgies over time.<sup>29</sup> The American Aidan A. Kelly (b. 1940) had also explored some of these texts for his PhD research in the mid-1970s, although only published it in 1991 with the popular-focused esoteric company Llewellyn.<sup>30</sup> Kelly’s work proved highly controversial and was criticised by several prominent figures within the Wiccan community, sometimes unfairly.<sup>31</sup> A few professional historians had also paid some attention to the subject of Wiccan history. In his 1962 work on early modern witchcraft, *A Razor for a Goat*, Elliot Rose devoted several pages to a discussion of Wiccan history, mostly to critique Gardner’s claims regarding Wicca’s ancient origins.<sup>32</sup> Rose’s work was followed by a 1996 chapter by the ex-Wiccan James W. Baker, in which he recognised Wicca as an “invented tradition” and sought to identify some of the older material which influenced it.<sup>33</sup> Later, the scholar of English literature Diane Purkiss devoted part of her discussion of the representation of the witch figure to Wicca’s ideas about its history.<sup>34</sup> These were supplemented by Tanya Luhrmann’s pioneering anthropological study of a Wiccan coven and other London-based occult groups, originally conducted as part of her doctoral research.<sup>35</sup> Luhrmann’s work was well received in anthropological circles, although as Hutton himself encountered, many in the British Wiccan community were offended by her book’s suggestion that, due to “interpretative drift,” magicians and Wiccans underwent a form of self-delusion, coupled with her apparent abandonment of Wicca and magic on the completion of her dissertation. Accordingly, there was a level of mistrust towards subsequent researchers who came after her.<sup>36</sup>

This was the state of affairs when Professor Hutton decided to take a chance by delving further into the subject. By this point, he was already settled as a tenured professor and thus, he noted, he “could afford to take the risk.”<sup>37</sup> Many of his fears regarding the academic acceptance of the work were proved correct, and he has since revealed how working towards *The Triumph of the Moon* affected his career trajectory at the time:

[I]t is remarkable how high a price I paid for my association with Wicca, especially after *Triumph of the Moon* came out. An American scholar visiting Cambridge University asked historians what I was doing, and was informed that he could forget about me, because I had gone mad, become a witch, and left the academic profession. The student newspaper in my

<sup>28</sup> Ronald Hutton, *Witches, Druids and King Arthur* (London: Hambledon and London, 2003), 265.

<sup>29</sup> Janet Farrar and Stewart Farrar, *The Witches’ Way* (London: Robert Hale, 1984), 1–4.

<sup>30</sup> Aidan A. Kelly, *Crafting the Art of Magic: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft Volume I: 1939–1964* (St Paul: Llewellyn, 1991). Later republished in a modified form as Aidan A. Kelly, *Inventing Witchcraft: A Case Study in the Creation of a New Religion* (Loughborough: Thoeth, 2007).

<sup>31</sup> Lois Bourne, *Dancing with Witches* (London: Robert Hale, 1998), 93; Donald Frew, “Methodological Flaws in Recent Studies of Historical and Modern Witchcraft,” *Ethnologies* 2, no. 1 (1998): 33–65.

<sup>32</sup> Elliot Rose, *A Razor for a Goat: Problems in the History of Witchcraft and Diabolism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989 [1962]), 200–230.

<sup>33</sup> James W. Baker, “White Witches: Historic Fact and Romantic Fantasy,” in *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft*, ed. James R. Lewis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 171–192.

<sup>34</sup> Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>35</sup> Tanya Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

<sup>36</sup> Noted first by Joanne Pearson, “‘Going Native in Reverse’: The Insider as Researcher in British Wicca,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 5, no. 1 (2001): 55–56, later echoed by Hutton, *Witches, Druids and King Arthur*, 260–264.

<sup>37</sup> Hutton, *Witches, Druids, and King Arthur*, 265.

own university put a photograph of me on its cover with caption “Warning! This Man Could Be A Witch!” For nearly ten years my career stalled. I was not considered fit for positions of higher managerial responsibility or any honours, applications for research grants were rejected, invitations to give guest lectures and papers dried up.<sup>38</sup>

This disparaging response did not derive from concerns about Hutton’s methodology or the accuracy of his conclusions and arguments, none of which raised serious concern among his peers. Rather, it stemmed from the fundamental prejudice against Wicca and other forms of alternative spirituality that permeate much of the academy. This sentiment holds that beliefs in magic or forms of occultism are essentially irrational and that those who study them must therefore share in this fundamental irrationality. Many of those working in this area of scholarly investigation have encountered similar sentiments.<sup>39</sup> One of Hutton’s doctoral students, the late Dave Evans (1962–2013), found that on meeting one noted professor, he was informed that they did not regard his subject, “the history of esotericism[,] to be worthy of any academic time or effort, as they turned their back on [him] and walked away.”<sup>40</sup> Describing his experiences in the Netherlands during the late 1980s and early 1990s, Hanegraaff commented on how professors of religion regarded New Age: “they didn’t know anything about it, they were not interested, they were usually quite dismissive, they usually had a tendency of mostly making fun of it, they didn’t take it seriously as religion.”<sup>41</sup> This attitude has not totally gone away; one of this anthology’s co-editors has found colleagues light-heartedly characterising their work on Wiccan history as “Harry Potter studies.”

Hutton gained a warmer reception within the academy in the late 2000s following the publication of his work on the reception of the Iron Age druids, namely his magisterial 2009 work *Blood and Mistletoe* and its 2007 counterpart aimed at a wider audience, *The Druids*.<sup>42</sup> This was presumably regarded as a more fitting and respectable subject for historical enquiry, having previously been examined by well-regarded scholars like Stuart Piggott (1910–1996). The restoration of Hutton’s reputation within the British academy may also have been influenced in part by broader developments that had occurred within the academic study of esotericism and modern Paganism, as noted above. The study of modern Paganism has still yet to fully establish itself, though; in 2010, Hutton cautioned that the subject “remains marginal and the preserve of relatively few scholars who rarely occupy positions of strength.”<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that there is a growing community of scholars committed to the study of the subject—something largely absent when Hutton was writing *The Triumph of the Moon*—means that his book is no longer alone and will likely be received more warmly by many academic readers than it might have done at the time of publication.

The other community who took an interest in Hutton’s book were Pagans themselves. In many cases their response has been positive. Since the publication of *Triumph*, he has been invited to speak at various Witchfest events in the UK, as well as giving the Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids’ first Mount Haemus Lecture in 2000. In 2011, Hutton described how he “still receive[s] regular letters from people who were either first attracted to Wicca as a result of reading *Triumph* or who were reassured

<sup>38</sup> Large and Hutton, “Professor Ronald Hutton.”

<sup>39</sup> This attitude is not restricted to history and has also been noted among British archaeologists, first by Ralph Merrifield, who referred to it as the “ritual phobia,” see Merrifield, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1987), xiii, 1–9. Recently, it has been noted that said attitudes still persist, see Ceri Houlbrook and Natalie Armitage, “Introduction: The Materiality of the Materiality of Magic,” in *The Materiality of Magic: An Artefactual Investigation into Ritual Practices and Popular Belief*, eds. Ceri Houlbrook and Natalie Armitage (Oxford and Philadelphia: Oxbow, 2015), 1–2.

<sup>40</sup> Ethan Doyle White and Dave Evans, “An Interview with Dr Dave Evans,” *Albion Calling*, 1 December 2012, <http://ethandoylewhite.blogspot.co.uk/2012/12/an-interview-with-dr-dave-evans.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Wouter Hanegraaff, “Wouter Hanegraaff on Western Esotericism,” The Religious Studies Project, 22 October 2012, <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/wouter-hanegraaff-on-western-esotericism/>.

<sup>42</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Druids* (London and New York: Hambledon and Continuum, 2007); Ronald Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

<sup>43</sup> Ronald Hutton, “Writing the History of Witchcraft: A Personal View,” *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 12, no. 2 (2010): 251.



by it after a collapse of confidence resulting from loss of faith in its traditional history.”<sup>44</sup> At the same time, he has also received a hostile reception from members of the Wiccan community who were angry at what they saw as his part in criticising their traditional origin myths. Much of this hostility occurred privately, with Hutton noting that “every morning for years I put up with abusive emails from Pagan fanatics, mostly in America, who misunderstood my work as an attack on their faith.”<sup>45</sup>

On rarer occasions, practitioners have sought to challenge Hutton in a public setting. In 2003, an Australian Pagan recently arrived in Britain named Jani Farrell-Roberts openly criticised him in a short article published in *The Cauldron* magazine.<sup>46</sup> A more concerted criticism of *The Triumph of the Moon* was made in a slim, self-published volume by Ben Whitmore, an Alexandrian Wiccan based in New Zealand. Whitmore’s 2010 book, *Trials of the Moon*, focused largely on critiquing Hutton on matters of detail as part of a broader argument that *Triumph* had failed to seriously consider that pre-Christian beliefs had survived in folk culture before being revived in the form of Wicca.<sup>47</sup> In response to what Hutton has described as Whitmore’s attempts to “annihilate my reputation,” the professor has since addressed the latter’s work on two occasions.<sup>48</sup> It is significant that none of Hutton’s critics come from scholarly backgrounds in history or any related discipline, and none are professional academics. As Hutton has observed, it is also noteworthy that his public detractors have arisen not from Britain but from within the Pagan communities in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States.<sup>49</sup> Several scholars of Paganism have since turned their attention to this phenomenon, exploring it from various angles.<sup>50</sup>

Since Hutton’s tome was published, further research has taken scholarly understandings of the history of Wicca and modern witchcraft in new directions, gradually expanding our wider pool of knowledge. A number of researchers—most notably Philip Heselton, Joanne Pearson, Henrik Bogdan, and Ethan Doyle White—have built upon Hutton’s pioneering work by exploring early Wicca as it emerged and developed in Britain during the early to mid-twentieth century.<sup>51</sup> The growth of feminist-oriented forms of Pagan witchcraft in Britain in the latter decades of that century has also attracted research, namely

---

<sup>44</sup> Ronald Hutton, “Revisionism and Counter-Revisionism in Pagan History,” *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 13, no. 2 (2011): 254.

<sup>45</sup> Large and Hutton, “Professor Ronald Hutton.”

<sup>46</sup> Jani Farrell-Roberts, “A New or Old Western Paganism?,” *The Cauldron* 108 (2003): 7–9.

<sup>47</sup> Ben Whitmore, *Trials of the Moon: Reopening the Case for Historical Witchcraft* (Auckland: Briar Books, 2010).

<sup>48</sup> Hutton, “Writing the History of Witchcraft;” Hutton, “Revisionism and Counter-Revisionism.” This quote is from page 249 of the latter.

<sup>49</sup> Hutton, “Revisionism and Counter-Revisionism,” 250–251.

<sup>50</sup> Caroline J. Tully, “Researching the Past is a Foreign Country: Cognitive Dissonance as a Response by Practitioner Pagans to Academic Research on the History of Pagan Religions,” *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 12, no. 1 (2011): 98–105; Christine Hoff Kraemer, “Perceptions of Scholarship in Contemporary Paganism,” paper presented at the Contemporary Pagan Studies Group, American Academy of Religion Annual Conference 2011 in San Francisco. Text available online at academia.edu, [https://www.academia.edu/1706701/Perceptions\\_of\\_Scholarship\\_in\\_Contemporary\\_Paganism](https://www.academia.edu/1706701/Perceptions_of_Scholarship_in_Contemporary_Paganism).

<sup>51</sup> Philip Heselton, *Wiccan Roots: Gerald Gardner and the Witchcraft Revival* (Chieveley: Capall Bann, 2000); Philip Heselton, *Gerald Gardner and the Cauldron of Inspiration: An Investigation into the Sources of Gardnerian Witchcraft* (Milverton: Capall Bann, 2003); Philip Heselton, *Witchfather: A Life of Gerald Gardner*, two volumes (Loughborough: Thoth Publications, 2012); Philip Heselton, *Doreen Valiente: Witch* (Nottingham: The Doreen Valiente Foundation, 2016); Joanne Pearson, *Wicca and the Christian Heritage: Ritual, Sex and Magic* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007); Henrik Bogdan, *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007); Henrik Bogdan, “The Influence of Aleister Crowley on Gerald Gardner and the Early Witchcraft Movement,” in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, eds. Murphy Pizza and James R. Lewis (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 81–107; Doyle White, “Meaning of ‘Wicca’”; Ethan Doyle White, “Robert Cochrane and the Gardnerian Craft: Feuds, Secrets, and Mysteries in Contemporary British Witchcraft,” *The Pomegranate* 13, no. 2 (2011): 205–224; Ethan Doyle White, “An Elusive Roebuck: Luciferianism and Paganism in Robert Cochrane’s Witchcraft,” *Correspondences: An Online Journal for the Academic Study of Western Esotericism* 1, no. 1 (2013): 75–101; Ethan Doyle White, “Devil’s Stones and Midnight Rites: Megaliths, Folklore, and Contemporary Pagan Witchcraft,” *Folklore* 125, no. 1 (2014): 60–79; Ethan Doyle White, “An’ it Harm None, Do What Ye Will: A Historical Analysis of the Wiccan Rede,” *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 10, no. 2 (2015): 142–171; Ethan Doyle White, “The Creation of ‘Traditional Witchcraft’: Pagans, Luciferians, and the Quest for Esoteric Legitimacy,” *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 18, no. 2 (2018): 188–216; Ethan Doyle White, “Drawing Down the Moon: From Classical Greece to Modern Wicca,” in *Fictional Practice: Magic, Narration, and the Power of Imagination*, eds. Berndt-Christian Otto and Dirk Johansen (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

from Shai Feraro.<sup>52</sup> Moving away from Britain, there have been others, such as Chas S. Clifton, Robert Mathiesen, and Michael Lloyd, who have focused on the place of Wicca and related forms of modern Paganism in the United States.<sup>53</sup> Hutton's work has also provided a solid grounding for the work of various anthropologists and folklorists too. Helen Cornish was conducting research among the Wiccan community in Britain at the time that *Triumph* was published and was thus able to witness the effect that it had, subsequently referring to a "Huttonisation" of Wiccan history.<sup>54</sup> On the other side of the Atlantic, the folklorist Sabina Magliocco built on Hutton's work in her discussion of how the Wiccan and Pagan communities utilise folklore.<sup>55</sup> Reflecting the respect in which *The Triumph of the Moon* is held among scholars of modern Paganism, in 2009 Dave Evans and Dave Green published a volume commemorating the tenth anniversary of the book.<sup>56</sup> It is difficult to imagine how this research would have developed and taken shape had it not been for Hutton's book to lead the way. On a personal note, one of the editors (Feraro) found it invaluable during his post-graduate years. One specific chapter, "Uncle Sam and the Goddess," provided the inspiration for his PhD thesis, a study of women and gender issues in British magical and Pagan groups. Hutton was kind enough to meet with him at his Bristol office and generously provided advice and council both during and following the course of his research. For the other editor (Doyle White), *The Triumph of the Moon* and *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles* were the very first academic books that he ever read, while still in secondary education, and played an important role in setting forth the academic path that he has pursued ever since.

*The Triumph of the Moon* has had a chequered past, bringing condemnation and scorn from sectors of both academia and from parts of the Pagan community, the first for daring to take the subject seriously, the latter for refusing to take its claims literally. This, however, is a testament to the importance of Hutton's work and to his bravery in writing it. Had his work been inconsequential, its reception would likely have been tepid.

## Outline of the Chapters

This book is a celebration of Ronald Hutton and of *The Triumph of the Moon*. More than that, however, it is a celebration of scholarship on the historical development of Wicca and modern Western witchcraft, taking stock of that which has gone before while venturing out to explore new areas of research. In a sense, it is a *festschrift*, although Hutton is still an active scholar and we hope that he will continue to both educate and entertain for many years to come. To this end, the editors have brought together contributions from a range of different disciplinary backgrounds and geographical locations, all of which focus on the place of magic and witchcraft in the modern West.

---

<sup>52</sup> Shai Feraro, "'God Giving Birth': Connecting British Wicca with Radical Feminism and Goddess Spirituality during the 1970s and 1980s: A Case Study of Monica Sjöö," *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 15, no. 1–2 (2013): 31–60; Shai Feraro, "Connecting British Wicca with Radical Feminism and Goddess Spirituality during the 1970s and 1980s: The Case Study of Monica Sjöö," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 30, no. 2 (2015): 307–321; Shai Feraro, "Hecate at the Women's Peace Camp: The Presence of Goddess Spirituality and Dianic Witchcraft at Greenham Common during the 1980s," *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 11, no. 2 (2016): 226–248; Shai Feraro, "'A Song of Wood and Water': The Ecofeminist Turn in 1970s and 1980s British Paganism," in *Radical Changes in New Religious Movements*, eds. Eileen Barker and Beth Singler (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

<sup>53</sup> Chas S. Clifton, *Her Hidden Children: The Rise of Wicca and Paganism in America* (Walnut Creek: Altamira, 2006); Robert Mathiesen and Theitic, *The Rede of the Wicca: Adriana Porter, Gwen Thompson and the Birth of a Tradition of Witchcraft* (Providence: Olympian Press, 2005); Michael Lloyd, *Bull of Heaven: The Mythic Life of Eddie Buczynski and the Rise of the New York Pagan* (Hubbardston: Asphodel Press, 2012).

<sup>54</sup> Helen Cornish, "Spelling Out History: Transforming Witchcraft Past and Present," *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 11, no. 1 (2009): 14–28.

<sup>55</sup> Sabina Magliocco, *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America* (Pennsylvania: University of Penn State Press, 2004).

<sup>56</sup> Dave Evans and Dave Green, eds., *Ten Years of Triumph of the Moon: Academic Approaches to Studying Magic and the Occult: Examining Scholarship into Witchcraft and Paganism, Ten Years after Ronald Hutton's The Triumph of the Moon* (*n.p.*: Hidden Publishing, 2009).

Hugh B. Urban opens the volume with a chapter taking us back to the mid-twentieth century and to Gerald Gardner, the “Father of Wicca.” Urban examines how Gardner was influenced by ideas drawn from Hindu Tantra in the formulation of his Great Rite, the main sex magic act in the Gardnerian ritual system. At the same time, Urban highlights that Gardner and other early Wiccans like Doreen Valiente downplayed this influence, likely out of concern that the negative associations which Tantra had in the British imagination would rub off on Wicca. In emphasising these South Asian influences on the burgeoning Wiccan movement, Urban contributes to broader critiques of the utility of the concept of “Western esotericism,” arguing that this term underplays the relationship between Western and non-Western traditions. Moving us forward several decades, Shai Feraro follows with an examination of the Pagans Against Nukes (PAN) group, established by a Gardnerian Wiccan high priest in 1980. Set up in protest against the planned deployment of American nuclear Cruise missiles on British soil, Feraro highlights PAN’s instrumental role in the linking of American-influenced feminist/Dianic Witchcraft and Goddess Spirituality with British Wicca and Wiccan-derived Paganism by way of demonstrations, social and ritual activities, and specifically through its mouthpiece, *The Pipes of PAN*.

Turning from historical to anthropological perspectives on modern Pagan witchcraft, Helen Cornish contributes a chapter based on fieldwork conducted at the Museum of Witchcraft (now the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic) in Boscastle, Cornwall. She examines how modern occult witches approach the Museum and the broader Cornish landscape around it, with a specific focus on how the figure of the Wise Woman has gradually become dominant in narratives that seek to build a meaningful and authentic link to the past. Heading further west, Jenny Butler’s chapter draws on her long-term ethnographic research with the Irish Pagan community and focuses on the influence of Irish culture—whether through the landscape, mythology, folklore, the Irish language, or notions of Celticity—on local manifestations of Wicca and Paganism.

Sabina Magliocco examines how the beliefs of modern Pagans have been shaped by historical and folkloric notions of fairies, elves, and related spirit beings. While deeply rooted in both historical literature and folklore, Magliocco argues that fairies have undergone a significant reappraisal within modern Paganisms, becoming friendlier, less dangerous, and altogether tamer than their folkloric predecessors, something she links to modern Pagans’ ecologically minded attempts at re-enchanting the universe. This emphasis on eco-spirituality leads us to Sarah M. Pike’s contribution, which builds on Hutton’s discussion of how early nineteenth-century English Romanticism impacted views of the divine in nature, and in particular how the opposition of an earth-identified goddess to modernity influenced modern Paganism. These sensibilities, argues Pike, have influenced environmentalist activism since the 1970s and during the 1990s and 2000s developed into two competing images—that of the earth as nurturing Mother, who cares for her human children, and that of a wild nature, unknowable to and unconcerned with human life. The cultural psychologist Léon A. van Gulik takes the volume in a new direction with his chapter, which emerges from his fieldwork among the Wiccan community in the Netherlands and Flanders. Exploring the themes of creativity and renewal among the Wiccan community, van Gulik identifies various competing binaries at play among practitioners, including traditionalism and eclecticism, and egalitarianism and elitism. He goes on to discuss how these Wiccans’ creative process is furthered by the various tensions that arise from the interplay between individuals and the group.

Wiccans are not the only modern occultists to adopt the term “witchcraft” in reference to themselves and in the penultimate three chapters this volume turns to some of these other, less studied groups. Building on Hutton’s treatment of Aleister Crowley’s influence on Gardnerian Wicca, Manon Hedenborg White discusses two post-Crowleyan constructs of witchcraft developed by Thelemites: that of John Whiteside “Jack” Parsons (1914–1952), who headed the Ordo Templi Orientis’ Agape Lodge in Los Angeles, and Kenneth Grant (1924–2011), head of the New Isis Lodge in London. Although neither created a specific tradition of witchcraft *per se*, both Parsons and Grant wrote extensively on the subject, providing interpretations different in important respects from that of Gardner and other early Wiccans. Ethan Doyle White’s subsequent chapter constitutes a scholarly biography of Andrew D. Chumley (1967–2004), an English occultist who established the Cultus Sabbati in the early 1990s. Through

this small group and his varied writings, Chumbley promoted a Luciferian tradition often referred to as Sabbatic Witchcraft or the Sabbatic Craft, coming to exert a considerable influence among self-described “Traditional Witches.” The book retains its focus on this latter milieu in Chas S. Clifton’s contribution, which explores how some of those operating within it emphasise the use of entheogens as part of their practice. Such practitioners often present these mind-altering substances as forms of the flying ointment which appeared in various early modern portrayals of witchcraft and employ references to them as a means of differentiating themselves and their own practices from Gardnerian-based Wicca. Clifton presents this as an example of “secretism,” in that “Traditional Witches” wish to be seen as having secrets that only they know and which give them kudos and respect within the occult milieu. Finally, Professor Hutton rounds off the volume with his thoughts on how Pagan witchcraft, and modern Paganism more broadly, have changed over the past twenty years.

## 2. The Goddess and the Great Rite: Hindu Tantra and the Complex Origins of Modern Wicca<sup>(2)</sup>

Hugh B. Urban<sup>1</sup>

Gerald Gardner (1884–1964) is widely recognised as one of the most important figures in the development of modern Paganism in the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> To date, most of the scholarship on Gardner’s early Wiccan movement has focused on the various influences drawn from modern British and European sources, such as the controversial work of historian Margaret Murray (1863–1963), the interest in pagan culture in nineteenth-century Romantic literature, and the growth of Western forms of esotericism such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.<sup>3</sup> While acknowledging all of these important influences, this chapter will trace a rather different genealogy in the birth of modern Wicca—namely, influences drawn from South Asian traditions, and specifically from Hindu Tantra. By the early twentieth century, Tantra was widely known in England, first, through British Orientalist scholarship, though largely in an extremely negative and exoticised way; second, through the influential works of Sir John Woodroffe (1865–1936), who gave them a far more positive interpretation; and third, through new movements such as the works of the infamous British occultist Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) and the esoteric group he headed, the Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O.). Gardner was a member of the O.T.O. and clearly drew much inspiration from it.<sup>4</sup>

As Ronald Hutton briefly noted in his landmark work on the history of Wicca, the structure of Gardner’s early covens is almost identical to the structure of the Tantric circle or *chakra* as described by Woodroffe.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Gardner’s plan for the Wiccan rite of sexual union—the Great Rite—is strikingly similar to the description of Tantric union outlined both in Woodroffe’s work and, more importantly, in the work of Gardner’s contemporary, Gerald Yorke (1901–1983), who wrote extensively on both the O.T.O. and Hindu Tantra (and was also directly cited by Gardner).<sup>6</sup> While these similarities might at first appear indirect based on the limited references to Tantra in Gardner’s own writings, they begin

---

<sup>1</sup> Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, USA  
Hugh B. Urban

**Email:** urban.41@osu.edu

<sup>2</sup> See especially Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon : A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Henrik Bogdan, *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008); Hugh B. Urban, *Magia Sexualis: Sex, Magic and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> See Hutton, *Triumph*, 171–240; Bogdan, *Western Esotericism*, 145–168.

<sup>4</sup> On the O.T.O.’s influence on Gardner, see Hutton, *Triumph*, 205–240; Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, 166–168; Bogdan, *Western Esotericism*, 148–150.

<sup>5</sup> Hutton, *Triumph*, 231. See John Woodroffe, *Shakti and Shakta* (New York: Dover), 597; Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, 176–177.

<sup>6</sup> See Gerald Yorke, “Tantric Hedonism,” *The Occult Observer* 3 (1949): 177–183. This essay is cited in Gardner’s *Meaning of Witchcraft*, with direct comparisons to Wicca.

(2) © The Author(s) 2019  
Shai Feraro and Ethan Doyle White (eds.)  
Magic and Witchery in the Modern West  
Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15549-0\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15549-0_2)

to appear far more explicit when we look at the work of his most important initiate, Doreen Valiente (1922–1999), who openly acknowledged the borrowings from Tantra in modern Wicca.<sup>7</sup>

What is most interesting, however, is not the fact that this Tantric influence should exist in early modern Paganism, but rather that it was largely *downplayed* by Gardner himself and by most of those involved in early Wicca. The reasons for this are several, but surely primary among them are: first, the desire to create a distinctly *Western* form of magical practice rooted in the rich symbolic history of the British and European past; and second, to distance Paganism from the controversial, scandalous, and perverse reputation that Tantra had acquired in the British popular imagination since the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> There were similar attempts to fashion a distinctly “Western” form of esotericism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ranging from the early Golden Dawn to Dion Fortune’s re-imagining of Qabalah as a “yoga of the West”.<sup>9</sup>

To conclude, I will suggest that the influences from Hindu Tantra represent one—but only one of the many important elements that helped give birth to Wicca and Paganism as new religious movements. As such, Gardner’s Wicca is perhaps best understood as a kind of *bricolage*, composed of many elements drawn from both East and West, and woven into a creative new spiritual synthesis.<sup>10</sup> It also forces us, however, to rethink certain basic scholarly categories such as “Western esotericism” and the very idea that so-called Western traditions are somehow separate and distinct from things “Eastern”. Indeed, the case of Gardner’s Wicca suggests that the categories of East and West are in fact outdated binaries of nineteenth-century Orientalist discourse and do not very well map onto the complex nature of contemporary esoteric movements, in which influences from Asia and Europe mingle in complex, creative, new ways.<sup>11</sup>

## The “Extreme Orient”: Tantra in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century England

As most scholars today agree, the term “Tantra” or “Tantrism” does not refer to a singular, monolithic, or homogeneous tradition; rather, like the term “Hinduism”, Tantra is largely a modern category that we use to describe a wide array of diverse texts, traditions, rituals, and sects that spread throughout the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain communities of South and East Asia from roughly the fifth-century CE onwards.<sup>12</sup> Despite their tremendous diversity, however, these various Tantric traditions do share some common elements and themes. Perhaps most importantly, as Tantric scholar André Padoux suggests, they share a common emphasis on the power of desire (*kama*) and the idea that desire—which is normally a source of bondage to this physical world—can be transformed through Tantric practice into a powerful source of spiritual liberation: “Rather than placing desire and liberation in opposition to each other, and rather than denying the one to benefit the other, the theory holds ... that desire is the hallmark of each and every individual’s initiation into the path of salvation.”<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Doreen Valiente, *Witchcraft for Tomorrow* (Blaine, WA: Phoenix Publishing), 151ff.

<sup>8</sup> See Hugh B. Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics and Power in the Study of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 1–72.

<sup>9</sup> See R. A. Gilbert, *The Golden Dawn and the Esoteric Section* (London: Theosophical History Centre, 1987); Dion Fortune, *The Mystical Qabalah* (Newburyport, MA: Weiser Books, 2000 [1935]), 3–8.

<sup>10</sup> On the concept of *bricolage*, see Hugh B. Urban, *The Church of Scientology: A History of a New Religious Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), Chap. 1; Hugh B. Urban, “The Occult Roots of Scientology? L. Ron Hubbard, Aleister Crowley and the Origins of a Controversial New Religion,” *Nova Religio* 15, no. 3 (2012): 91–116.

<sup>11</sup> For good critiques of Orientalist discourse and these categories of “East” and “West”, see Urban, *Tantra*: 1–71; Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India, and the “Mystic East”* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Kennet Granholm, “Locating the West: Problematizing the Western in Western Esotericism and Occultism,” in *Occultism in Global Perspective*, eds. Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic (New York: Routledge, 2015), 17–36.

<sup>12</sup> See David Gordon White, “Tantrism,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), Vol. 13, 8984; Urban, *Tantra*, 1–43.

<sup>13</sup> Madeleine Biardeau, *Hinduism: The Anthropology of a Civilization* (Paris: Flammarion, 1981), 149–150; see André Padoux, *Vac: The Concept of the Word in Selected Hindu Tantras* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 40; Hugh B. Urban, *The Power of Tantra*:

When European authors of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries first encountered texts called *tantras*, they were initially quite horrified and repulsed. In the eyes of British colonial administrators and Christian missionaries, a tradition that could combine sensual desire and sexual union with the pursuit of spiritual liberation seemed not only bizarre but also abominable and even demonic. Throughout nineteenth-century Orientalist literature, Tantra was described in the most vivid language as “nonsensical extravagance and crude gesticulation” (H. H. Wilson), as “Hinduism arrive at its last and worst stage of medieval development” (Sir Monier-Williams), and as “black art of the crudest and filthiest kind” in which a “veritable devil’s mass is purveyed in various forms” (D. L. Barnett).<sup>14</sup> Imagined as the darkest aspect of the “Indian mind” itself, Tantra seemed to many British authors to represent the clearest evidence of the need for rational orderly imperial rule in the subcontinent.<sup>15</sup>

In the early twentieth century, a few brave souls began to counter this negative representation of Tantra by defending and revalorising this as a noble religious tradition with a profound philosophical ideal. Perhaps the most important figure in the modern defence of Tantra was the enigmatic High Court judge and secret *tantrika*, Sir John Woodroffe, who published under the pseudonym Arthur Avalon.<sup>16</sup> Woodroffe’s writings and translations of Tantric texts are quite vast, but for the sake of this chapter, I would like to briefly cite one of his most influential works, *Shakti and Shakta*, which was first published in 1918. Here Woodroffe defines Tantra primarily as a path of *power*, focused on the concept of *shakti* or the divine energy of the Goddess—the “Mother-Power”, “World Mother”, or “Indian Magna Mater”—that pervades both the physical cosmos and the human body.<sup>17</sup> As such, Woodroffe concludes, this worship of the Great Mother as Divine “Creatrix” is perhaps the oldest object of worship in human history and the root of virtually all religion itself:

The worship of the Great Mother as the Grand Multiplier is one of the oldest in the world ... when we throw our minds back upon the history of this worship, we discern even in the most remote and fading past the Figure, most ancient, of the mighty Mother of Nature. I suspect that in the beginning the Goddess everywhere antedated, or at least was predominant over, the God.<sup>18</sup>

Woodroffe’s publications also gave us the description of secret Tantric ritual that is today best known to English readers. The most famous (or perhaps infamous) of these is the rite of *chakra puja* or “circle worship”, in which male and female participants gather to share the *panchatattva* (“five principles”). Also known as the *pancha-makara*—the so-called five M’s or five things beginning with *ma-* in Sanskrit—these are five substances or practices that are normally considered impure by mainstream Hindu social standards, namely, *mamsa* (meat), *madya* (wine), *matsya* (fish), *mudra* (original referent unclear), and *maithuna* (sexual union). Typically consisting of equal numbers of males and females, the *chakra* is led by a guru and his partner, themselves identified with the Lord (Ishvara or Shiva) and his divine consort (Shakti, the Goddess as Power, incarnate in the female body itself):

Worship with the Pancatattva generally takes place in Cakra or circle composed of men and women, Sadhakas and Sadhikas, Bhairavas and Bhairavis siting in a circle, the Shakti being on the Sadhaka’s left. Hence it is called a Cakrapuja. A Lord of the Cakra (Cakreshvara) presides sitting with his Shakti in the center.<sup>19</sup>

---

Religion, Sexuality, and the Politics of South Asian Studies (*New York: I. B. Tauris, 2010*), 19–25.

<sup>14</sup> Wilson, *Religious Sects of the Hindus* (Calcutta: Susil Gupta, 1858), 140; Monier-Williams, *Hinduism* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1894), 122–123; Barnett, quoted in John Woodroffe, ed., *Principles of Tantra: The Tantratattva of Sriyukta Siva Candra Vidyarnava Bhattacharya Mahodaya* (Madras: Ganesh and Co., 1960), 3–5.

<sup>15</sup> See Urban, *Tantra*, 44–72.

<sup>16</sup> On Woodroffe’s life and relation to Tantra, see Kathleen Taylor, *Sir John Woodroffe: ‘An Indian Soul in a European Body?’* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Urban, *Tantra*, 134–164.

<sup>17</sup> Woodroffe, *Shakti and Shakta*, xvii, 356.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 407. See also *Shakti and Shakta*, 95: “A glorious feature of the Shakta faith is the *honor which it pays to women*. And this is nature for those who worship of the Great Mother, whose representative all earthly women are.”

<sup>19</sup> Woodroffe, *Shakti and Shakta*, 611.

Woodroffe goes on to note that there are two main varieties of the *chakra puja*: there is a symbolic or “right-handed” (*dakshinachara*) form, in which the transgressive elements are taken purely metaphorically or replaced by less transgressive elements (e.g., milk, sugar, and honey may be used instead of alcohol, or the non-sexual adoration of the Goddess in the female body may be substituted for sexual union); and then there is a literal or “left-handed” (*vamachara*) form, in which these practices are each engaged in physically.<sup>20</sup> In the latter left-handed form, the physical joining of male and female becomes a great mystery, as “sexual union takes on the grandeur of a great rite”.<sup>21</sup>

As will see below, all of these basic elements of Woodroffe’s description of Tantra are clearly present in Gardner’s later Wiccan tradition and the Great Rite. The identification of the priest and priestess with the male and female deities, the central emphasis on power (particularly bodily and female power), the organisation of the ritual in a circle composed of alternating male and female partners overseen by the leader and consort, the central role of transgressive practices (above all ritual sexual union), and finally the division into a symbolic and a literal form of the central ritual—all of these would become fundamental components of Gardner’s Great Rite.

## Unleashing the Beast: Tantra and Sexuality in the Works of Theodor Reuss, Aleister Crowley, and Gerald Yorke

While Woodroffe began to give Tantra a more positive interpretation in scholarly discourse, other groups would soon begin to give Tantra a more positive interpretation in actual ritual practice. Perhaps the most important early European group to begin incorporating Tantric practices was the Ordo Templi Orientis, which was founded in Germany in the 1890s.<sup>22</sup> The original inspiration for the O.T.O. is usually attributed to Carl Kellner (1851–1905), a wealthy Austrian paper chemist who had studied both Western traditions such as Freemasonry and Indian yoga. While Kellner’s actual involvement in Tantric practice is disputed, it would later be claimed that he studied with three Eastern masters—a Sufi named Soliman ben Aifa and two Hindu *tantrikas* named Bhima Sen Pratapa and Sri Mahatma Agamya Paramahansa.<sup>23</sup>

The primary architect of the O.T.O., however, was Kellner’s associate, Theodor Reuss (1855–1923). Combining elements of Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, and Hindu Tantra, Reuss presented the O.T.O. as a powerful brotherhood that has been operating covertly throughout all of human history. As he wrote in a 1904 edition of the journal *Oriflamme*, the O.T.O. possesses the innermost secret of all esoteric systems—the secret of the “Wise Men of the East”—and so also the means to rebuild the Temple of Solomon.<sup>24</sup> In the 1912 anniversary issue of *Oriflamme*, Reuss identified this tremendous secret more specifically as the teaching of sexual magic, a teaching that unlocks the mysteries of all esoteric systems: “Our Order possesses the KEY which opens up all Masonic and Hermetic secrets, namely the teaching of sexual magic, and this teaching explains, without exception, all the secrets of Nature, all the symbolism of FREEMASONRY and all systems of religion.”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 596–603.

<sup>21</sup> Woodroffe, 597.

<sup>22</sup> On the O.T.O., see Marco Pasi, “Ordo Templi Orientis,” in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 898–906; Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, 81–108.

<sup>23</sup> The connection of Kellner with Tantric teachers was asserted in the journal *Oriflamme* in 1912. See Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, 81–108; Joscelyn Godwin, Christian Chanel, and John Patrick Deveney, *The Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1995), 422–428. Some authors claim that Kellner engaged in a form of Tantric practice. See Peter R. Koenig, “Ordo Templi Orientis Spermognosis,” <http://www.parareligion.ch/spermo.htm>. Others, however, claim that his knowledge was limited to Hatha Yoga and that the Tantric elements were introduced by Reuss. See Josef Dvorak, “Carl Kellner,” *Flensburger Hefte* 63 (December 1998).

<sup>24</sup> Reuss, “Von den Geheimnissen der okkulten Hochgrade unseres Ordens,” in *Historische Ausgabe der Oriflamme* (Berlin: Verlag von Max Perl, 1904), 31.

<sup>25</sup> Reuss, *Jubilaeums-Ausgabe der Oriflamme* (1912), 21; Reproduced in R. Swiburne Clymer, *The Rosicrucian Fraternity in America* (Quakertown, PA: Rosicrucian Foundation, 1935–1936), 614.



It is unclear how much, if anything, Kellner had known about Tantra or sexual practices; but Reuss wrote at length about Tantra and had clearly absorbed the Orientalist equation of Tantra with sexual practices—indeed, with “sexual religion”. In his words, “Tantra (sexual religion) is built on the active principle of generation, as it manifests in the female energy (Shakti) and the manly energy (Shiva)”.<sup>26</sup> This Tantric “sexual religion” is for Reuss essentially the same as that of the Eleusinian mysteries and early Christian Gnosticism, both of which he sees as cults of fertility and sensual ecstasy—which is, in turn, the foundation of all religion and culture, in his view: “The Eleusinian mysteries were pure Phallus cult. The ceremonies were those of the Tantrics. ... The secret teachings of the Gnostics (Primitive Christians) are identical with the Vamachari rites of the Tantrics. ... Phallicism is the basis of all theology and underlies the mythology of all peoples.”<sup>27</sup>

The most influential but also most infamous leader of the O.T.O. was the British occultist Aleister Crowley. Calling himself by the deliberately provocative title of “Beast 666”, and known in the popular media of the day as the “wickedest man in the world”, Crowley was arguably the most important twentieth-century figure in the modern revival of magic and occultism.<sup>28</sup> While dismissed or ignored by many scholars of modern esotericism, Crowley was one of the first individuals to begin incorporating ideas drawn from yoga and Tantra in his occult practice, creating one of the most important early bridges between so-called Western and Eastern esoteric traditions.<sup>29</sup> Like Reuss, Crowley’s actual knowledge of Tantra was probably not extensive and largely limited to the representations of Tantra in late nineteenth-century British Orientalist discourse. Nonetheless, he was arguably one of the most important figures in the early transmission of Tantric ideas to a British, European, and American audience, where they were quickly combined with various aspects of Western esotericism.<sup>30</sup>

Beginning in 1910, Crowley became involved with Reuss’ O.T.O. and soon became its most infamous member. According to his own rather fanciful account, he was approached by Reuss, who had read a cryptic chapter of Crowley’s *Book of Lies* and accused him of revealing the innermost secret of the O.T.O.: the secret of sexual magic.<sup>31</sup> Though Crowley had done so unintentionally, the story goes, he was named the Sovereign Grand Master General of Ireland, Iona, and all the Britons. Going even further than Reuss, Crowley identified sexual magic as the most powerful of all forms of magic—a secret that even he himself had not fully understood after years of experimentation, and one so powerful that it “cannot be used indiscriminately” or revealed to the unworthy:

If this secret which is a scientific secret were perfectly understood, as it is not by me after more than twelve years’ almost constant study and experiment ... there would be nothing which the human imagination can conceive that could not be realized in practice. ... If it were desired to have an element of atomic weight six times that of uranium that element could be produced.<sup>32</sup>

Like Reuss, Crowley discusses Indian Tantric techniques and various other generic Oriental exotica. Styling himself “Mahatma Guru Sri Paramahansa Shivaaji”, Crowley wrote quite a bit on *hatha yoga* (or “yoga for yahoos”, as he called it)<sup>33</sup> and also included a discussion of Tantric sexual techniques in his *De*

---

<sup>26</sup> Reuss, “Parsifal und das Enthüllte Grals-Geheimnis” (1914), in Peter Koenig, *Der Kleine Theodor Reuss Reader* (Munich: Arbeitsgeschaft für Religions- und Weltanschauungsfragen, 1993), 71.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>28</sup> On Crowley’s influence, see Urban, “The Beast with Two Backs: Aleister Crowley, Sex Magic and the Exhaustion of Modernity,” *Nova Religio* 7, no. 3 (2004): 7–25; Djurdjevic, *India and the Occult*.

<sup>29</sup> See Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr, eds. *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Lawrence Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt: A Life of Aleister Crowley* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2002); Urban, “The Beast with Two Backs”; Djurdjevic, *India and the Occult*.

<sup>30</sup> See Urban, “Unleashing the Beast: Aleister Crowley, Tantra and Sex Magic in Late Victorian England,” *Esoterica: The Journal of Esoteric Studies* 5 (2003): 138–192.

<sup>31</sup> Crowley, *The Book of Lies* (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 2012), 5–6.

<sup>32</sup> Crowley, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley: An Autohagiography* (New York: Penguin, 1989), 767.

<sup>33</sup> Crowley, *Eight Lectures on Yoga* (Las Vegas, NV: New Falcon Publications, 1985).

*Arte Magica*.<sup>34</sup> Yet, as his disciple Kenneth Grant (1924–2011) acknowledges, Crowley’s references to Tantra reveal a general ignorance of actual Tantric techniques and reflect a more widespread Orientalist stereotype of Tantric eroticism and libertinism.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to quasi-Tantric references, however, Crowley also added his own interpretations and ritual flourishes to the O.T.O.’s magical repertoire—including a full-scale Gnostic Mass, filled with highly erotic symbolism. An elaborate, highly choreographed ceremony, the Gnostic Mass is a creative re-imagining of the secret rites alleged to have been practiced by the early Gnostics and later corrupted by the Catholic Church. Although there is no physical intercourse involved in the Mass, its symbolism is highly sexual. The primary actors are the priest, who parts a sacred veil with his “Lance”, and the priestess, who removes her robes to embody the nakedness of the divine female principle.<sup>36</sup>

At the same time, Crowley also revised the O.T.O.’s hierarchy of initiatic degrees, introducing practices that would have been considered transgressive by early twentieth-century British social standards. In Crowley’s revised O.T.O. system, there are 11 degrees of initiation, the highest of which involve sexual techniques. Thus, the eighth degree involves auto-erotic magic or masturbation; the ninth degree is based on heterosexual intercourse; and the eleventh degree involves anal intercourse with both male and female partners.<sup>37</sup> This was at a time when masturbation was still widely considered to be a cause of mental illness, and sodomy was still illegal.<sup>38</sup>

However, perhaps the clearest direct link between Tantric ideas and Gardner’s early Wicca movement is another of Crowley’s students, Gerald Yorke. Although not a member of the O.T.O., Yorke wrote extensively about the Order and was also a member of one of Crowley’s other initiatic magical groups, the Argentium Astrum. Deeply interested in Tantra, Yorke served as a personal representative of the thirteenth Dalai Lama and wrote several articles on both Buddhist and Hindu Tantric practices. Indeed, in 1949—the same year that Gardner published his fictional account of witchcraft, *High Magic’s Aid*—Yorke published an article entitled “Tantric Hedonism”; as we will see below, this article was quoted at length by Gardner in a later book on Wicca. The Tantric cosmology and practice described in Yorke’s essay bears an unmistakable resemblance to Gardner’s Wicca, beginning with the complementarity between the male and female principles, embodied in the Sun and Moon, phallus and womb:

In the microcosm that is the universe of the Hindu, the Sun symbolizes the creative aspect of God. ... The Moon is the receptive principle. In the microcosm that is man and woman these two planets are replaced by the *lingam* (phallus) and the *yonis* (womb), which are worshipped in temples dedicated to them.<sup>39</sup>

Yorke goes on to explain that the macrocosmic union of Sun and Moon is realised on the microcosmic level in the union of man and woman. However, this union can take place in either a literal form—an

---

<sup>34</sup> See Crowley, *Liber Agape, De Arte Magica* (Rochester, UK: Kadath Press, 1986), XVI: “[T]he wise men of India have a belief that a certain particular Prana, or force, resides in the Bindu, or semen. ... Therefore they stimulate to the maximum its generation by causing a consecrated prostitute to excite the organs, and at the same time vigorously withhold by will. ... [T]hey claim that they can deflower as many as eighty virgins in a night without losing a single drop of the Bindu. Nor is this ever to be lost, but reabsorbed through the tissues of the body. The organs thus act as a siphon to draw constantly fresh supplies of life from the cosmic reservoir, and flood the body with their fructifying virtue ... (see almost any Tantra, in particular *Shiva Sanhita*).”

<sup>35</sup> See Urban, “Unleashing the Beast.” Grant recounts Crowley’s correspondence with David Curwen, who studied left-hand Tantra in South India. According to a letter from 1946, Crowley was rather annoyed that Curwen seemed to possess much greater knowledge about Tantra and sexual magick; as Crowley himself admitted, “Curwen knows 100 times as much as I do about Tantra”, cited in Grant, *Remembering Aleister Crowley* (London: Skoob Books, 1993), 49.

<sup>36</sup> See Crowley, *Liber XV: Ecclesiae Gnosticae Catholicae Canon Missae* (CreateSpace, 2014); Urban, “Unleashing the Beast.”

<sup>37</sup> See Bogdan, *Western Esotericism*, 153; Bogdan, “Transgressing the Morals”; Urban, “Unleashing the Beast.” Two of the most important texts for the IX degree rituals are *Liber Agape* and *De Arte Magica* and the magical diaries based on his sexual operations; see Symonds and Grant, eds. *The Magical Record of the Beast 666* (London: Duckworth, 1972). The IX degree rite was also published in censored form as “Two Fragments of Ritual.” See also Francis King, ed., *The Secret Rituals of the O.T.O.* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1973).

<sup>38</sup> See Urban, “Unleashing the Beast”; Urban, “The Power of the Impure: Transgression, Violence and Secrecy in Bengali Sakta Tantra and Modern Western Magic,” *Numen* 50, no. 3 (2003): 269–308.

<sup>39</sup> Yorke, “Tantric Hedonism,” 177.

actual rite of sexual union—or in a symbolic form—a metaphoric union. Yorke also notes that the most esoteric of Tantric sexual techniques had been passed on to Western occult societies and is now “the treasured secret of an Hermetic Order known as the O.T.O.”<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps most significantly, however, Yorke’s account of Tantric ritual departs quite widely from Crowley’s version of sexual rituals in the O.T.O. Whereas Crowley advocated explicitly transgressive techniques such as masturbation and anal intercourse in the upper grades of the O.T.O., Yorke (following Woodroffe) describes Tantric ritual as primarily a matter of *married heterosexual* couples engaged in a very non-transgressive celebration of sexual union as a holy act: “They marry and are taught to honour their partner as a living symbol of the Divine Mother. ... [T]he ideas of worship, self-sacrifice, and gratitude to a beneficent Creatrix are brought into the play (*lila*). Sex is thought of as holy and not as a sin.”<sup>41</sup> As we will see below, Yorke’s version of Tantra—understood as non-transgressive and monogamous, based on honouring the Divine Mother and the holiness of sex—is very close to Gardner’s version of the Great Rite. It is probably no accident that Yorke’s article appeared in 1949, at almost the exact same time that Gardner had just left the O.T.O. and was about to establish the first modern Wiccan covens.

## The Great Rite: Gardner’s Ritual Magic and the Birth of Wicca

Gerald Gardner had long been interested in things “Eastern” and “Oriental”. Born to a wealthy upper middle-class family near Liverpool, Gardner was sent to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in 1900 to learn the tea trade. There he is said to have developed an interest in local Singhalese culture and in Buddhism.<sup>42</sup> In 1911, Gardner travelled to Borneo to work on a rubber plantation, where he also explored local religious practices, such as Duseun séances and healing rituals. That same year, he also travelled to Malaya to work on a rubber plantation in Perak, where he continued his investigations of local beliefs, including forms of magic. During his years in Ceylon and Malaya, we should note, he also became involved in Freemasonry, which probably helped influence the structure of the grades of initiation in his later Wiccan covens.<sup>43</sup>

One of Gardner’s interests throughout his life was weaponry, and he investigated exotic weapons and ritual objects in a variety of cultures. While in Malaya, he became especially fascinated with the Malay long knife called the *kris* or *keris*, an important ritual implement with religious and magical uses. Gardner would collect some 400 examples of the *keris* and discuss their magical uses with the locals. Indeed, he even wrote an academic paper on the subject entitled “Notes on Two Uncommon Varieties of the Malay Keris”, which was published in *The Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* in December 1933 and later republished in Gardner’s book, *Keris and Other Malay Weapons* in 1936.<sup>44</sup> As Peter Levenda notes in his study of Tantra in Southeast Asia, the *keris* is a ritual object that is “long understood to represent Shiva and the vital life force”, closely associated with Shiva’s divine creative power.<sup>45</sup> It seems likely that Gardner’s interest in ritual objects such as the *keris* reappeared in his use of the *athame* as the central priestly implement—and the symbol of the male sexual principle—in later Wicca.

Gardner returned to England in 1936 and continued to develop his interests in spirituality, magic, folklore, and the occult. For the next decade he explored different spiritual options, joining the Ancient

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 179. On this point, see Woodroffe, *Shakti and Shakta*, 332.

<sup>42</sup> See Philip Heselton, *Witchfather: A Life of Gerald Gardner, Volume 1* (Loughborough: Thoth Publications, 2012), 47–102.

<sup>43</sup> See Hutton, *Triumph*, 236ff. Heselton, *Witchfather*, 83–95.

<sup>44</sup> Gardner, “Notes on Two Uncommon Varieties of the Malay Keris,” *The Keris and Other Malay Weapons* (Kuala Lumpur: MBRAS. Reprinted from *The Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, December 1933).

<sup>45</sup> Peter Levenda, *Tantric Temples: Eros and Magic in Java* (Lake Worth, FL: Ibis, 2011), 178.

British Church, the Ancient Druid Order, the Folk-Lore Society, and the Society for Psychical Research. Gardner would also become closely involved with Crowley and the O.T.O., although the exact timing and details of his involvement are still a bit unclear. While some sources claim that he was involved with Crowley as early as 1940, it can only really be documented that he met with the Beast in 1947 and thereafter held a document that appeared to give him the authority to constitute a camp of the O.T.O. in England. As Hutton suggests, it seems likely that Gardner was attempting at this time to revive the Order in England, which was still flourishing in Europe and the United States but had become moribund in the British Isles. However, Gardner's enthusiasm for the O.T.O. quickly waned, and his efforts to start a branch of the Order had largely failed by 1950. Instead, he turned his attention to witchcraft, publishing his novel *High Magic's Aid* in 1949, followed by his "non-fiction" work, *Witchcraft Today* in 1954.<sup>46</sup>

Gardner himself, of course, claimed that he had been introduced to Wicca long before his meeting with Crowley, stating that he been initiated into a witches' coven based near the New Forest during the late 1930s. Nonetheless, the influence of Crowley and the other sources is evident in the various drafts of Gardner's main ritual text, *The Book of Shadows*—a kind of personal ritual notebook that helped form the basis for most later Wiccan practices. As Doreen Valiente noted, the title of this text appears to have been borrowed from an Indian source—a document called "the Book of Shadows", which was published in a 1949 issue of *The Occult Observer*.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, the text of Gardner's *Book* also underwent several revisions, particularly concerning the material borrowed from Crowley. As Janet and Stewart Farrar note in their discussion of the *Book*, the earliest drafts contained quite a lot of borrowings from Crowley and the O.T.O. It was largely due to Valiente's criticisms that he was persuaded to remove much of the Crowleyn material in the final draft, on the grounds that it was "not really suitable for the Old Craft of the Wise".<sup>48</sup>

Nonetheless, even in the final draft of the text, Crowley's Gnostic Mass is still quoted directly and at length, specifically in the ceremony of the Great Rite.<sup>49</sup> As the central ceremony of the third and final degree of initiation, the Great Rite embodies the union of the divine male and divine female principles and centres primarily on the polarity of masculinity and femininity. Thus, the *athame* or short sword is presented as the masculine principle and the cup of wine as the feminine, while the lowering of the former (the "lance") into the latter (the "grail") is a symbolic act of sexual union. The female body is itself the altar in the ritual, with her vagina located in the centre of the circle, while the male is the bearer of the "lifted lance" or phallus. Ultimately the male and female celebrants themselves become embodiments of the God and Goddess, who are united through their human vehicles in the ritual. The union itself may be performed either symbolically—as a metaphor wedding of male and female energies—or literally—as a physical act of sexual intercourse.<sup>50</sup> In either case, both the imagery and the actual text of Crowley's O.T.O. rituals are evident. For example, when the male Magus invokes and praises the High Priestess as the embodiment of the Goddess, he quotes Crowley's Mass verbatim:

O circle of stars [kiss], whereof our Father is but the younger brother [kiss], Marvel beyond imagination, soul of infinite space, before whom time is ashamed, the mind bewildered and understanding dark, not unto thee may we attain unless thine image be of love [kiss].<sup>51</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Hutton, *Triumph*, 222.

<sup>47</sup> Mir Bashir, "The Book of Shadows," *The Occult Observer* 1, no. 3 and 4 (1949–1950). See Doreen Valiente, *The Rebirth of Witchcraft* (London: Robert Hale, 1989), 51–52.

<sup>48</sup> Farrar and Farrar, *The Witches' Way* (London: Robert Hale, 1984), 3; see Hutton, *Triumph*, 209–212; Urban, *Magia*, 170.

<sup>49</sup> See Crowley, *Liber XV*, 27; Gardner, *The Gardnerian Book of Shadows* (London: Forgotten Books, 2008), 16.

<sup>50</sup> See Farrar and Farrar, *The Witches' Bible: The Complete Witches' Handbook* (Custer, WA: Phoenix Publishing, 1996), 48–49: "It can be enacted in either of two forms. It can be ... purely symbolic—in which case the whole coven is present the whole time. Or it can be 'actual'—that is to say, involving intercourse. ... But whether it is symbolic or 'actual', witches make no apology for its sexual nature. To them, sex is holy—a manifestation of that essential polarity which pervades and activates the whole universe, from Macrocosm to Microcosm. ... The couple enacting the Great Rite are offering themselves, with reverence and joy, as expression of the God and Goddess aspect of the Ultimate Source."

<sup>51</sup> Gardner, *Book of Shadows*, 16. This directly quotes Crowley's Gnostic Mass: Crowley, *Liber XV*, 27.

In addition to the obvious borrowing from Crowley's O.T.O., it is also difficult not to see the direct or indirect influence of Tantra—or at least a Westernised version of Tantra as transmitted by Kellner, Crowley, Woodroffe, and Yorke. As Hutton points out, the parallels with Tantra are evident even in the structure of the Wiccan coven itself. According to Gardner's key text, *Witchcraft Today*, a coven is defined as “the people who celebrate the rites in the circle. Traditionally, this consists of six perfect couples and a leader; preferably the couples are husband and wives, or at least betrothed”.<sup>52</sup> The similarities with Woodroffe's account of the Tantric circle are fairly obvious. The priestess in Gardner's circle also plays much the same role as the Shakti or Bhairavi in the Tantric *chakra*, as the embodiment of the Goddess and the bearer of her divine power: “the real power remained in the hands of the true priestess, who usually worked all the magic”.<sup>53</sup> As in Woodroffe's account, moreover, the priestess' power is a very much physical and *embodied* sort of power, since “the witch power exudes from the body”.<sup>54</sup> In sum, Hutton concludes:

Crowley had drawn in turn upon oriental traditions of tantra, and it is possible that Gardner made direct borrowings from these himself, either from his own experience of the East or through English works such as *Shakti and Shakta* by ‘Arthur Avalon’ ... who described an Indian rite called the panchamakara. In this, women and men sat alternately in a circle at midnight presided over by a leader and by a beautiful naked priestess representing the goddess. ... The seating plan of the participants is exactly that of Gardner's witches, who also had a presiding couple in which a woman represented a goddess.<sup>55</sup>

Thus, there is a good deal of *circumstantial* evidence of Tantric elements in Gardner's Wicca. But is there any concrete evidence of more *direct* influences? Explicit references to Tantra are not frequent in Gardner's work, but there are enough to indicate that he had a good, general knowledge of the tradition and of its influence on Crowley and the O.T.O. The most direct reference to Tantric practice appears in his 1959 book, *The Meaning of Witchcraft*, where Gardner makes several clear comparisons between Western witchcraft and Hindu Tantra, noting the obvious similarities between the Indian ideal of Shakti and the witches' Great Goddess:

It is considered that the Great Mother of pre-Aryan India and her horned consort are the prototype of Lord Shiva, the Lord of Beasts (*Pasupati*) and the Lord of Yoga, and his bride, Shakti, the Great Mother whose rites among the Tantrics strongly resemble the Western witch covens.<sup>56</sup>

Similarly, when arguing that some of the prehistoric megaliths at Avebury in Wiltshire represent the male and female principles, he invokes the Tantric symbolism of lingam and yoni, Shiva and Shakti. In his discussion of the Tantric imagery, Gardner quotes from Yorke's essay “Tantric Hedonism” (1949):

Perhaps I can best explain this by quoting what Gerald Yorke has said in an essay about the religion of the Tantrics of India: “It seeks the spiritual through the senses while denying validity to them. It is a religion of light, life and love, in which the sting is taken out of death by the rosary of skulls round the neck of the naked goddess Kali, and in which sex is regarded as sacred.”<sup>57</sup>

Gardner also acknowledges that his own term for the preferred method of working naked in the Wiccan circle is similarly drawn from South Asian traditions—“‘sky-clad’ as they say in India”—referring

<sup>52</sup> Gerald Gardner, *Witchcraft Today* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel, 2004 [1954]), 114–115.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>55</sup> Hutton, *Triumph*, 231.

<sup>56</sup> Gardner, *Meaning of Witchcraft*, 65.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

to the Sanskrit term *digambara*.<sup>58</sup> And he notes that even more specific Wiccan practices such as drinking wine also mirror those of the *tantrikas*, as described by Woodroffe: “The taking of wine during the rites is part of the ceremony. ... [A] similar meal is partaken of, according to Arthur Avalon in *Shakti and Shakta*, by the Tantriks of India, who are also worshipers of a great Mother-Goddess.”<sup>59</sup> Finally, Gardner refers directly to the Tantric use of ritual transgression, noting that Crowley had engaged in similar uses of impurity as part of the O.T.O.:

Crowley contended that sudden feelings of revulsion could have a great effect on some natures, and there is no doubt that he made the most extraordinary experiments in these directions. The ‘great Tantric secrets’ which he used in his secret order, the O.T.O. ... were of this nature, and there is no doubt that he occasionally produced results.<sup>60</sup>

In sum, Gardner not only clearly knew a good deal about Tantric symbolism and practice, he also drew direct comparisons between Tantra and the religion of the witches.

Of course, it would be far too simplistic to suggest that Gardner adopted Wicca entirely from Tantra, just as it would be too simplistic to say that he took it all from Crowley. After all, there are other obvious influences, such as Murray’s accounts of the witches’ circle, which also, in her quasi-historical narrative, centre on fertility rites.<sup>61</sup> Rather, it would be more accurate to say that Gardner’s covens were probably influenced by a complex mixture of multiple sources, which include both Murray’s account of the witches’ coven, Woodroffe’s account of the Tantric *chakra*, and Crowley’s Gnostic Mass, among others. Moreover, Gardner’s Great Rite also reflects a far less “transgressive” ideal of sexual union than either the more extreme left-hand forms of Tantra or Crowley’s O.T.O., which involved forms of masturbation and anal intercourse. Rather, Gardner’s Rite is a clearly *heterosexual* one—ideally performed between a married couple—which is almost identical to Yorke’s more sanitised description of Tantra outlined in the “Tantric Hedonism”. Moreover, Gardner’s Great Rite is described as taking place in either a symbolic or a literal form—that is, either as a metaphoric or a physical act of sexual union—which also closely parallels Yorke’s account. In sum, the Great Rite might be best understood as both a complex *bricolage* assembled from multiple sources and a general *sanitisation* of those sources for a twentieth-century British audience, downplaying or tempering their more transgressive elements.

## “The Path for the Dark Age in Which We Live”: Doreen Valiente on Tantra and Witchcraft

While Gardner himself only referred occasionally to Tantra, his most important student and collaborator, Doreen Valiente, did so openly and repeatedly. Indeed, if the connection to Tantra is largely implicit in Gardner’s writings, it becomes quite *explicit* in Valiente’s. Her key work, *Witchcraft for Tomorrow* (1978), shows extensive knowledge of both Tantra—primarily through the works of Woodroffe—and Crowley, though she is more ambivalent towards the latter, grudgingly acknowledging the depth of his insights and the beauty of his poetry.<sup>62</sup>

Unlike Gardner, Valiente is also more forthcoming about her sources and influences, both textual and artistic. For example, she mentions an exhibition in 1971 sponsored by the Arts Council of Great Britain, focused on the art “associated with the eastern cult of Tantra ... which has served to awaken a lively interest in tantric ideas among occultists and other seekers for truth in the Western world”.<sup>63</sup> She also discusses her reading of British missionaries and Orientalists on Tantra, such as William Ward,

<sup>58</sup> Gardner, *Witchcraft Today*, 149; for use of phrase “skyclad” see Farrar and Farrar, *Witches’ Way*, 195ff.

<sup>59</sup> Gardner, *Meaning of Witchcraft*, 8.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>61</sup> See Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962 [1921]), 190–191.

<sup>62</sup> Valiente, *Witchcraft*, 44.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

Edward Sellon, and more recent scholars such as art historian Philip Rawson. Her primary influence, however, is clearly Woodroffe's work—particularly his translation of the *Mahanirvana Tantra* and his explication of Tantric philosophy, *Shakti and Shakta*—which she cites extensively and uses to draw direct comparisons between Tantra and witchcraft:

His book *Shakti and Shakta* set out to defend the Tantras from their detractors, both British and Hindu. In it he describes the worship of the pre-Aryan Great Mother Goddess of the ancient East, in terms which are strongly reminiscent of the practices of European witchcraft ....

In *Shakti and Shakta* we read of the secret circle, often held at midnight in which men and women worshippers were seated alternately. ... The object of adoration was a beautiful naked priestess who was regarded as the incarnation of the goddess.<sup>64</sup>

In Valiente's view, the parallels that lie between Tantra and witchcraft are both philosophical and practical. Both traditions, she suggests, are rooted in a fundamental form of pantheism—or the belief that the divine is in all things and all things are divine. Both rest on the fundamental polarity of the divine male and female principles—the Horned God and Great Goddess, or the male Shiva and female Shakti or Kali.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, both ultimately teach a kind of antinomianism—or the idea that “to the pure all things are pure” and that the one who truly knows the divine is beyond good and evil. Thus, if all things are divine, then even acts that seem immoral or transgressive to mainstream society—such as ritual sexual intercourse—can be great sacraments and means to union with the divine:

As Sir John Woodroffe has pointed out in his book *Shakti and Shakta*, it is particularly associated in the history of religions with pantheism, the belief that God is all and all is God. As such, it is found both in east and west; a number of Christian heretics have taught it to their followers. ... Curiously enough, a number of these heretics celebrated an Agape, a love-feast, very similar to the witches' sabbat ....

In the east, the Tantrics who follow the ancient scriptures called Tantras ... also have this doctrine in a more or less esoteric form.<sup>66</sup>

Ultimately, Valiente concludes, these deep similarities between Tantra and witchcraft suggest that the two have a common root in the prehistoric religious life of humankind. The two simply developed on parallel but separate trajectories in different cultural contexts—one in India and one in Western Europe:

These basic ideas of the great cosmic sacred marriage and its reflection at the human level, of the use of the sexual act as a sacrament and an act of worship, taken in conjunction with the antiquity of Tantric teaching and practice, seem to indicate that what became Tantra in the east became witchcraft in the west. Certainly the tantric chakrapuja or circle of worship bears resemblance to the practices of the witches' Sabbat, both of today and yesterday.<sup>67</sup>

In modern Western society, Valiente writes, the time is now ripe to acknowledge Tantra and its celebration of sexuality as the most appropriate spiritual path: “We can see for ourselves the rightness of the claim in the *Mahanirvana Tantra* that the Tantric path is the path of attainment for the men

---

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 136–137.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 23: “The image of a horned head with a light between the horns survives in the secret Tantric worship of India to this day. In the *Mahanirvana Tantra*, which describes the worship of the supreme goddess, Adya Kali, by means of the Panchatattva ritual, which includes the offering of wine, meat, fish, grain and sexual intercourse within a consecrated circle, we are told how a male horned animal should be sacrificed to the goddess.”

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 138.

and women of the Kali Yuga or Dark Age in which we live.”<sup>68</sup> No doubt, Valiente is also implying that Tantra’s “Western counterpart”, witchcraft, should also be recognised as an ideal path for modern individuals, too. Therefore, she concludes, it is quite unsurprising that some Tantric practices may have also been incorporated into contemporary witchcraft: “It will be seen from the foregoing how naturally it has followed, in accordance with the evolving trends of the Aquarian Age, that modern witches should adapt the Tantric sexual magic for use in their own private and magic circles.”<sup>69</sup>

In sum, while Gardner largely obscured or downplayed references to Tantra in his early version of Wicca, Valiente adopted a different strategy. Rather than ignoring it completely, she makes the argument that Tantra shares with witchcraft a common ancestry, a parallel history, and a strikingly similar set of beliefs and practices.

## Conclusions: Gardnerian Wicca as “Occult *Bricolage*” and “Tantra for the West”

To conclude, I would like to offer two ways of making sense of Gardner’s early Wiccan tradition. First, I want to make it clear that I am not reducing Wicca simply to these Tantric influences transmitted through Crowley, Yorke, and the O.T.O.; rather, I would suggest that Tantra needs to be understood as *one* important—but by no means the *only*—influence in the rich confluence of spiritual currents that became Wicca. The Tantric influence is clearly also mingled with elements from the Romanic fascination with paganism, modern magical orders such as the Golden Dawn, the new interest in Druidism, and a host of other alternative religious currents flowing through early twentieth-century England. As such, Gardner’s Wicca is best understood as an “occult *bricolage*” that combined diverse elements from many different traditions in an original new way.

Second, I would suggest that Gardner was at once incorporating and yet *re-coding* these Tantric elements to create a distinctly “Western” religion. That is to say, he was drawing upon many Tantric ideas of sexuality, the body, and the Goddess, but presenting them as an ancient tradition rooted in “*Western*” history, clearly appealing to a British and European audience. In this sense, Gardner was part of a larger movement in British occultism that was seeking a distinctly “Western” path as an alternative to the growing interest in Asian spirituality that we see in the Theosophical Society and O.T.O. As R. A. Gilbert has shown, many adepts within the Theosophical Society, such as Anna Kingsford, Edward Maitland, and William Wynn Westcott, were dissatisfied with the over-emphasis on Asian traditions and were seeking distinctly “Western” forms of esotericism and occult practice. This would be one of the reasons for the formation of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, which was a synthesis of largely Western esoteric traditions such as Rosicrucianism, Kabbalah, astrology, and alchemy.<sup>70</sup> Gardner’s Wicca, I would suggest, was part of a similar attempt to create a “Western” path, appealing to those who wanted to rediscover an ancient magical tradition in the West.

At the same time, Gardner was also likely trying to downplay or cover over the largely negative reputation that Tantra had in the British imagination. In mid twentieth-century Britain, Tantra was still largely associated with sexual perversion, black magic, and crude superstition,<sup>71</sup> so it would have been difficult to openly embrace it. This is much the same reason that Gardner and his student Valiente would downplay and cover over the clear influence from Crowley in early Wicca, since he had likewise become a source of embarrassment and scandal in the British popular imagination.<sup>72</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>70</sup> Gilbert, *The Golden Dawn*.

<sup>71</sup> See Urban, *Tantra*, 44–72.

<sup>72</sup> See Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, 170.



In sum, Wicca as a modern form of the “Western esoteric tradition”<sup>73</sup> must also be recognised as deeply indebted to South Asian traditions such as Tantra. And by the 1960s, as Valiente herself pointed out, the “Western” tradition of Wicca was freely being blended with Indian forms of spirituality in the eclectic, freewheeling world of the New Age counterculture.

In this sense, I would argue, the example of Wicca should challenge us to rethink the now-familiar category of “Western esotericism” itself.<sup>74</sup> Although I too have used this phrase in my own work, I have never been comfortable with it and have always been bothered by the baggage of nineteenth-century Orientalist discourse that inevitably comes with any attempt to divide the world into “East” and “West”. As a student trained in South Asian studies at a time when postcolonial theory and subaltern studies were coming to the fore, I know all too well that the discourse of the “West” has a deeply problematic legacy, closely tied to the projects of imperialism and colonialism.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, as a student of European and American esoteric traditions, I would also say that it is artificially limiting, since so much of modern esotericism was born precisely through the complex and contested *encounters between* traditions coming from Asia and those coming from Europe. It seems much more productive to me not to think in terms of “Western esotericism”, set in distinction to Asian traditions such as yoga, Tantra, or Taoism, but rather to look at the fascinating *intersections* of esoteric traditions in diverse parts of the world—intersections that shatter any binary narrative of East and West and instead reveal a more complex, decentralised, and dynamic way of re-imagining esotericism as a whole. Thinking about esotericism in terms of these sorts of *historical encounters* would allow us not only to examine the intersections of Kabbalah, Hermeticism, and Christian mysticism in European esotericism, but also to examine, for example, the intersections of Greek and Arab thought in Islamic mysticism; or the intersections between Chinese, Indian, Arab, and European forms of alchemy; or the intersections between Indian thought and Romanticism; or the intersections between Buddhism, yoga, and Crowley’s work; or the profound influence of Indian ideas such as the *chakras* on virtually all contemporary New Age phenomena in North America and Europe.<sup>76</sup>

Esotericism might then be re-imagined as *neither* “Western” nor “Eastern” but rather as a series of *knots* or *nodes* that lie within more complex historical networks that circulate through the religious, social, and political order alike.<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>73</sup> See Wouter Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 43–44.

<sup>74</sup> On this point, see also Granholm, “Locating the West,” 17: “in a late modern globalizing world, solid distinctions between ‘West’ and ‘non-West’ are becoming increasingly difficult and problematic to sustain.”

<sup>75</sup> See King, *Orientalism and Religion*; Urban, *Tantra*.

<sup>76</sup> See Djurdjevic, *India and the Occult*; Granholm, “Locating the West”; Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, 81–161; Lawrence M. Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

<sup>77</sup> These last comments are based on Urban, “Subtle Bodies: Cartographies of the Soul, from India to ‘the West’ and Back Again,” keynote lecture at the Association for the Study of Esotericism Conference, University of California, Davis, 18 June 2016.

### 3. Playing *The Pipes of PAN*: Pagans Against Nukes and the Linking of Wiccan-Derived Paganism with Ecofeminism in Britain, 1980–1990<sup>(3)</sup>

Shai Feraro<sup>1</sup>

The final chapters of Ronald Hutton's *The Triumph of the Moon* surveyed several key developments that materialised in British Wicca and Wiccan-derived Paganism during the 1970s through to the 1990s. The present chapter expands on Hutton's pioneering work by centring on the history of Pagans Against Nukes (PAN)—an important group that existed throughout the 1980s and was not covered in Hutton's treatment of the British Pagan scene of the period. Founded in 1980 by a former Gardnerian Wiccan high priest to protest the planned deployment of American nuclear cruise missiles on British soil, the PAN network became instrumental in linking strands of American-influenced feminist/Dianic Witchcraft and Goddess Spirituality with British Traditional Wicca and Wiccan-derived Paganism by way of demonstrations, social and ritual activities, and specifically through its mouthpiece, *The Pipes of PAN*. In late 1990, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, the network and magazine folded as well.

#### Contemporary Paganism and Goddess Spirituality

The emergence of contemporary Paganism in the Western world owes much to Gerald Gardner (1884–1964), a retired British civil servant who embarked upon a quest to revive what he described as the ancient religion of pre-Christian witchcraft (or Wicca, as it came to be known) during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Since Gardner's death, Wicca has evolved into the most widely known and influential of the traditions which comprise contemporary Paganism today.<sup>2</sup> Virtually all Wiccans characterise themselves by definition as witches as well as Pagans. However, not all Pagans who subscribe to the broader definition of “witch” would also characterise themselves as “Wiccan”. Indeed, some—especially in the United Kingdom—would often be at pains to state that they are “not Wiccan”.<sup>3</sup> Ethan Doyle White argues that the original meaning of the term “Wicca”—as it developed in Britain between the 1950s and early 1970s—was inclusive of all the above-mentioned proponents of Pagan witchcraft. The 1970s

---

<sup>1</sup> Oranim College of Education, Kiryat Tiv'on, Israel

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> These would include, for instance, feminist witches who are influenced by Starhawk (b. 1951), whose reclaiming tradition fuses Wicca with radical and cultural feminist ideologies. Another example would be the adherents of “Traditional Witchcraft”, who claim to follow a path which predates Gardner's Wicca. To further complicate matters, in the United States the term “British Traditional Witchcraft”, or BTW, is often used to refer to initiatory Wiccan groups with a lineage stemming from Gardner, namely Gardnerian and Alexandrian.

<sup>(3)</sup> © The Author(s) 2019

Shai Feraro and Ethan Doyle White (eds.)

Magic and Witchery in the Modern West

Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic

[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15549-0\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15549-0_3)

ushered an explosion of new Pagan Craft traditions, who sought to disassociate themselves from the initiates of Gerald Gardner or Alex Sanders (1926–1988) and refused to define themselves as “Wiccans”. Many individuals active in these groups preferred to label themselves “Pagan”. Since the 1980s, however, solitary, eclectic Pagan witches—especially of the “Teen Witch” variety—began to describe themselves as “Wiccans” in books and websites, using the term “Wicca” again in its original all-inclusive usage. In the meantime, distinctly Pagan spiritual paths—such as Druidry and Heathenry—began to spread as well. Some British Traditional Wiccans of the Gardnerian and Alexandrian initiatory lines reacted to this development by claiming that the term “Wicca” can be assigned to them alone, as a form of boundary maintenance.<sup>4</sup> Our discussion focuses on the 1980s, a period in which the Pagan community in Britain was dominated almost exclusively by British Traditional Wiccans and by Wicca-inspired Pagans and witches.<sup>5</sup>

There exists a clear and direct correlation between contemporary Paganism and Goddess Feminism, as both milieus call for “restoring” the connections between human beings, the natural world, and the sacred feminine.<sup>6</sup> Scholars of contemporary Paganism agree that Wiccan practices and ideology were influenced by second-wave radical feminism, as a result of Wicca’s expansion into the United States during the 1960s.<sup>7</sup> The influence of radical and cultural feminist ideas on 1970s/1980s British Paganism, however, is an under-researched area.<sup>8</sup> The common view is that UK-based British Traditional Wicca was not affected by feminist developments in the United States and that radical (and spiritual) feminism’s influence on the British Pagan “scene” during this period was negligible.<sup>9</sup> As I have shown elsewhere, however, contact and cross-fertilisation between British Traditional Wiccans and Goddess Feminists did exist during this period and contributed to the shaping of contemporary British Paganism.<sup>10</sup>

## Ecofeminism and the 1980s British Pagan Scene

The feminist turn that swept through large and significant sections of the Pagan milieu in both the United States and Britain was also accompanied by the adoption of an ecological discourse. This was mainly due to the popularity of James Lovelock’s “Gaia Hypothesis”, which maintained that the earth’s ecosystem behaved as a single, living, organism.<sup>11</sup> At the turn of the 1980s, ecological concerns coalesced with feminist discourse, and ecofeminist campaigning groups with a significant Pagan presence began to emerge. *Wood and Water* magazine—a specifically feminist-inclined Pagan publication—appeared

---

<sup>4</sup> Ethan Doyle White, “The Meaning of ‘Wicca’: A Study in Etymology, History, and Pagan Politics,” *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 12, no. 2 (2010): 185–207.

<sup>5</sup> Hutton, *Triumph*, 374.

<sup>6</sup> Cynthia Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993); Kathryn Rountree, *Embracing the Witch and the Goddess: Feminist Ritual-Makers in New Zealand* (London: Routledge, 2004); Ursula King, *Women and Spirituality: Voices of Protest and Promise* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1989); Wendy Griffin, “Webs of Women: Feminist Spiritualities,” in *Witchcraft and Magic: Contemporary North America*, ed. Helen A. Berger (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 55–83.

<sup>7</sup> Chas S. Clifton, *Her Hidden Children: The Rise of Wicca and Paganism in America* (Lanham: AltaMira, 2006), xi; Sarah M. Pike, *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 119; Jone Salomonsen, *Enchanted Feminism: The Reclaiming Witches of San Francisco* (London: Routledge, 2002), 6.

<sup>8</sup> Ronald Hutton’s chapter on “Uncle Sam and the Goddess”, in *The Triumph of the Moon*, is a notable exception, 340–368.

<sup>9</sup> Joanne Pearson, *Wicca and the Christian Heritage: Ritual, Sex and Magic* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 3; Ann-Marie Gallagher, “Woven Apart and Weaving Together: Conflict and Mutuality in Feminist and Pagan Communities in Britain,” in *Daughters of the Goddess: Studies in Healing, Identity, and Empowerment*, ed. Wendy Griffin (Walnut Creek: Altamira, 2000), 43–45; Michael York, *The Emerging Network: A Sociology of the New Age and Neo-Pagan Movements* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 121; Tanya M. Luhmann, *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft: Ritual Magic and Witchcraft in Present-Day England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

<sup>10</sup> Shai Feraro, “‘God Giving Birth’—Connecting British Wicca with Radical Feminism and Goddess Spirituality during the 1970s–1980s: A Case Study of Monica Sjöö,” *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 15, no. 1–2 (2013): 31–60.

<sup>11</sup> Hutton, *Triumph*, 352–355.

in 1979 and quickly became the mouthpiece for a loosely knit milieu of Pagans and Goddess women interested in both feminist and ecological issues.<sup>12</sup>

In the United States, Women and Life on Earth was formed in March 1980, and by November of that year had carried out the Women's Pentagon Action. In San Francisco, the feminist witch Starhawk (b. 1951)<sup>13</sup> joined 300 other women in organising a ritual demonstration to support the thousands of women marching on the Pentagon. In 1981, she was arrested alongside 1900 other protestors during the Abalone Alliance's ten-day blockade of the Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant, which was also the site of similar rituals.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile in Britain, a Women and Life on Earth network was founded in September 1980, with Stephanie Leland, an American expatriate, serving as its national coordinator. Later renamed as Women for Life on Earth, on September 1981 the organisation sponsored a group of 39 women and children (and a few men) who marched from Cardiff to the entrance of the Greenham Common military airbase in Berkshire. The nine-day walk was part of a protest against plans to place 96 American nuclear cruise missiles at the base as deterrent against the Soviet Union. Upon arrival, the marchers established a peace camp near the base's main entrance. The camp—which quickly became a “women-only” space—was the scene of large-scale radical feminist protest activities which included a significant presence of Goddess women and feminist/Dianic Witches throughout the 1980s.

During the latter part of the decade, the Paganlink Network, which served as a campaigning organisation and information service for newcomers to Paganism in Britain, became increasingly associated with “political” ecologically minded rituals. One of Paganlink's key activists was Rich Westwood (d. 1989), who co-edited the Pagan magazine *Moonshine* with his wife Kate. In 1989 Westwood co-published a booklet titled *Awakening the Dragon: Practical Paganism, Political Ritual and Active Ecology*, which drew directly from Starhawk's *Dreaming the Dark* and encouraged “Pagans to mix ritual and magical practices with political action”.<sup>15</sup>

## Pagans Against Nukes

In addition to *Wood and Water*, the 1980s British Pagan scene included another important feminist-inclined magazine—*The Pipes of PAN*, the organ of Pagans Against Nukes (PAN), a group co-founded by Kate and Philip Cozens (the latter is known today by the name of Rufus Brock Maychild).<sup>16</sup> The path that would lead Philip Cozens to co-found PAN began during the 1970s, when as a student at Cambridge he became a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Through reading Friedrich Engels and contemporary feminist literature, Cozens became acquainted with various takes on the myth of matriarchal prehistory, but was yet uninterested in spirituality and ritual. Following his studies, he encountered a novel which deeply affected him. It was Marion Campbell's *The Dark Twin* (1973), set in ancient Scotland at a point of conflict between Goddess religion and patriarchal cults. Shortly afterwards, Cozens—a Women's Liberation sympathiser and a subscriber to *Spare Rib*—came across an ad placed in the magazine's January 1977 issue by Caitlin Matthews (b.1952), who in turn introduced him to Wiccan magazines and groups.<sup>17</sup> Titled “Mother Goddess”, Matthews' ad aimed at providing

<sup>12</sup> See Shai Feraro, “A Song of Wood and Water: The Ecofeminist Turn in 1970s–1980s British Paganism,” in *Radical Changes in Minority Religions*, eds. Eileen Barker and Beth Singler (London: Routledge, forthcoming, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed examination of Starhawk's 1970s–1980s writings, see Shai Feraro, “The Politics of the Goddess: Radical/Cultural Feminist Influences of Starhawk's Feminist Witchcraft,” in *Female Leaders in New Religious Movements*, eds. Christian Giudice and Inga Bårdsen Tøllefsen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 229–248.

<sup>14</sup> Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex & Politics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982).

<sup>15</sup> Andy Letcher, “Raising the Dragon: Folklore and the Development of Contemporary British Eco-Paganism,” *The Pomegranate* 6, no. 2 (2004): 183–184.

<sup>16</sup> Cozens counted Hilary Llewellyn-Williams and Tony Padfield—the original editors of *Wood and Water*—as dear friends. In 1981, he attended a gathering of *Wood and Water* subscribers, where he met Monica Sjöö for the first time (after having been already familiar with her work). Personal email correspondence with Rufus Brock Maychild, 2 March 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Personal email correspondence with Rufus Brock Maychild, 2 March 2014. Matthews spent a brief period in a Gardnerian

“[a]n opportunity to meet witches who still honour the Mother”, and to “[l]earn about the role of women in the Old Religion”.<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that Matthews was by no means alone in her search for prospective witches among the readers of *Spare Rib*: an ad titled “Are You a Witch?”—which ran for four consecutive issues—referred both qualified witches and those with “a serious interest in magic and the occult” to the catalogue of Star Child, a business which operated out of Whitby, North Yorkshire.<sup>19</sup>

Before long Cozens was initiated into an Alexandrian coven, and a few years later—following a relocation—he joined a coven which described itself as “Celtic traditional” in Reading, Berkshire. After a while he became dissatisfied with the coven’s activities and left to form a new group with a female partner he met in the coven. Shortly afterwards, Cozens attained initiation as high priest in what later became known as the “Whitecroft” line of the Gardnerian tradition. His links with the Gardnerians were minimal, however, and he became much more involved with several uninitiated Pagans. It was around that time that he founded Pagans Against Nukes (PAN) with his partner Kate.<sup>20</sup> According to Cozens, the idea behind PAN came to him after he participated in an anti-nuclear demonstration at Greenham Common (before the establishment of the Women’s Peace Camp) and noticed a “Christians For Peace” group amongst the many banners.<sup>21</sup> The Cozens aspired to establish the visibility of PAN in the Pagan and occult scene right from the start: in late 1980 they founded a magazine—titled *The Pipes of Pan*—which quickly reached exchange agreements with publications such as *The Cauldron* and *Wood and Water* and several relevant bookshops (including Atlantis in London) and sent copies of its issues to the United States. Over the following months they maintained a presence at the Aquarian Festival<sup>22</sup> and brought their banner to a Greenham demonstration held on Easter Monday 1981.<sup>23</sup> By May of that year they had received over 150 written enquiries, which included “a number [of individuals] interested in Paganism generally as the spiritual aspect of the general ecological movement”.<sup>24</sup> At its height, *The Pipes of PAN* had a print run of about 400–500 copies, and its coordinators “developed strong links with feminist/Dianic pagans”.<sup>25</sup> According to Prudence Jones—a Wiccan who headed the Pagan Federation during the 1980s—PAN “had quite a high profile in the Pagan community” throughout this period.<sup>26</sup> Cozens later recalled that among those supportive of the group were the prominent Wiccan Doreen Valiente (1922–1999), the Gardnerian high priestess Patricia Crowther (b.1927), the Alexandrian couple

---

Wiccan coven but found that path to be unsatisfactory and later emerged as a leading figure in the British Western Mysteries movement. Ronald Hutton, *Witches, Druids and King Arthur* (London: Hambledon and London, 2003), 244; “Interface With Caitlin & John Matthews,” *Pagan Voice* (July 1992): 9–10.

<sup>18</sup> *Spare Rib* 54 (January 1977): 30.

<sup>19</sup> *Spare Rib* 48 (July 1976): 30; *Spare Rib* 49 (August 1976): 30; *Spare Rib* 50 (September 1976): 31; *Spare Rib* 51 (October 1976): 31.

<sup>20</sup> Personal email correspondence with Rufus Brock Maychild, 2 March 2014; Michael Howard, *Modern Wicca: A History from Gerald Gardner to the Present* (Woodbury: Llewellyn, 2010), 264.

<sup>21</sup> Personal email correspondence with Rufus Brock Maychild, 2 March 2014.

<sup>22</sup> The London-based Aquarian Festival was the brainchild of Joan Andrews, who began to organise it in 1977 and during the early 1980s. According to Tanya Luhrmann, this New Age festival was “very magic-oriented”. By 1984, *Prediction*—an occult monthly sold by major newsagents with a 32,000 circulation—began to organise the yearly event as the Prediction Festival. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft*, 6, 19, 30–31.

<sup>23</sup> *The Pipes of PAN* 2 (Imbolc 1981), 1, 3, 4; *The Pipes of PAN* 3 (Beltane 1982). The founding of PAN can be traced to the time around the festival of Samhain (31 October) 1980, since the Samhain 1982 issue of *The Pipes of PAN* marked the organisation’s two-year anniversary. “Two Years of P.A.N.,” *The Pipes of PAN* 9 (Samhain 1982): 1.

<sup>24</sup> “Two Years of P.A.N.,” *The Pipes of PAN* 9 (Samhain 1982): 1.

<sup>25</sup> Personal email correspondence with Rufus Brock Maychild, 2 March 2014; “Five Years of P.A.N.,” 2. A report from an early 1983 issue of *The Pipes of PAN* noted the magazine had “several hundred subscribers/readers” at the time. Fr. Prometheus, “The PAN Meet of 21st November 1982,” *The Pipes of PAN* 10 (Imbolc 1983): 2. By 1986 *The Pipes of PAN* was exchanging issue copies with over 30 Pagan magazines from the UK and abroad. See *The Pipes of PAN* 24 (Lughnasadh 1986): 12.

<sup>26</sup> Personal interview with Prudence Jones. As a member of the Territorial Army (a kind of British equivalent to the American National Guard), Jones was at conflict with much of the aim of the women at Greenham and had no involvement with either the camp itself or its support groups in her locality. She “avoided having any direct confrontation, because ... I could see entirely where they were coming from—like anybody else I thought nuclear warfare was a bad thing ... but it was a threat you had to make.” As editor of *The Wiccan*, she did however provide a platform for the first issue of *The Pipes of PAN*, which has been sent to her by Cozens, and did not add her own opinion regarding nuclear weapons to the report. *The Wiccan* 70 (February 1981): 5.

Stewart (1916–2000) and Janet Farrar (b.1950), and Michael Howard (1948–2015), the founder-editor of *The Cauldron* magazine.<sup>27</sup>

Not all British Wiccan initiates supported Greenham or Pagans Against Nukes, however. Cozens was of the view that Alex and his wife Maxine Sanders (b.1946), for instance, “ignored” it.<sup>28</sup> Jean “Ellen” Williams (1928–2015) and Zachary Cox, who headed the Gardnerian Bricket Wood Coven and launched their own occult magazine in 1977, were staunchly critical of PAN. While Cox printed the first, single-sheet, issue of *The Pipes of PAN* (which reached them by post) in *The Aquarian Arrow*, he and his wife made their reservations clear in their comment—titled “Pagans Against Progress?”.<sup>29</sup>

## PAN and Starhawk

In November 1981, Ken Rees—who wrote for *Wood and Water* and *The Pipes of PAN*—published reviews of Starhawk’s *The Spiral Dance* in both magazines and highlighted her “political awareness concerning human rights, ... [and] Women’s Liberation”. Rees underlined the book’s chapters on the worldview of witchcraft and on the God as “particularly recommended ... [and] thought provoking”.<sup>30</sup> Cozens listed the former chapter as “[o]ne of the many things that impressed ... [him] in Starhawk’s *The Spiral Dance*” and noted that the magazine’s editorial collective wished to sponsor a writing competition (of either poetry or prose) which would be based on the creation myth presented within it. The winner was to receive a copy of Starhawk’s follow-up work, *Dreaming the Dark*.<sup>31</sup> The August 1983 issue of *The Pipes of PAN* featured a warm review of this latter volume, which focused on Starhawk’s discussions of concepts such as “power-from-within”, “estrangement” and immanence, and the editorial of the August 1984 issue quoted a paragraph from the book.<sup>32</sup> PAN’s admiration for Starhawk subsequently developed into direct communication; in early 1985 *The Pipes of PAN* featured Starhawk’s report on her participation in a peace delegation to Nicaragua.<sup>33</sup> Cozens himself eventually met Starhawk during her visit to the UK later that year: she stayed at his house in Reading for a few days, visiting the prehistoric site of Avebury with him and his partner, and later proceeding to Greenham.<sup>34</sup>

## PAN and the Greenham Cause

*The Pipes of Pan* covered Women for Life on Earth’s march to Greenham during the autumn of 1981, and the magazine reported on activity at the camp throughout the 1980s.<sup>35</sup> PAN members also participated in several protest activities at Greenham throughout the decade.<sup>36</sup> Six (including Phillip Cozens) attended the 1982 “embrace the Base” action, and PAN’s support of Greenham women is also

---

<sup>27</sup> Personal email correspondence with Rufus Brock Maychild, 2 March 2014. Michael Howard also noted visiting Rufus and his partner often, who lived several miles away from him following his 1982 relocation to Wales. Email correspondence with Michael Howard, 13 January 2011. During the 1980s, however, *The Pipes*’s editors expressed disappointment at the fact that “[w]ith a couple of exceptions, none of the ‘well-known’ Craft names, and few of the ‘mainline’ Craft folk have been interested”. “Five Years of P.A.N.,” *The Pipes of PAN* 21 (Samhain 1985): 2.

<sup>28</sup> Personal email correspondence with Rufus Brock Maychild, 2 March 2014.

<sup>29</sup> Zachary Cox, “Pagans Against Progress?: Press Release with Editorial Comment,” *Aquarian Arrow* 10 (Early 1981?): 30–32. Cox saw nuclear weaponry as a means of averting a third world war and preferred it to be regulated and controlled, not outlawed altogether. He also took issue with PAN due to the lack of a similar effort to disarm the United States and the Soviet Union of their nuclear capabilities. Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> K. I. Rees, “The Spiral Dance,” *The Pipes of PAN* 5 (Samhain 1981). That same month, Rees wrote a review of the book for *Wood and Water* as well. K. I. Rees, “The Spiral Dance,” *Wood and Water* 2:1 (Samhain 1981): 23.

<sup>31</sup> Rufus, “‘Myth’,” *The Pipes of PAN* 11 (Beltane 1983): 3, 10.

<sup>32</sup> “Reviews,” *The Pipes of PAN* 12 (Lughnasadh 1983): 7–8; *The Pipes of PAN* 16 (Lughnasadh 1984): 1.

<sup>33</sup> Starhawk, “Religion and Revolution—Notes From Nicaragua,” *The Pipes of PAN* 18 (Imbolc 1985): 10–11.

<sup>34</sup> Personal email correspondence with Rufus Brock Maychild, 2 March 2014.

<sup>35</sup> “Women’s Peace Camp—Greenham Common,” *The Pipes of PAN* 5 (1981); “Stop Press!,” *Pipes of PAN* 6 (1982): 5; *The Pipes of PAN* 16 (1984): 10; Underwood et al., “10 Million Women—10 Days,” *The Pipes of Pan* 17 (1984): 7–8.

<sup>36</sup> Underwood et al., “10 Million Women—10 Days,” 7–8; Personal email correspondence with Rufus Brock Maychild, 2 March

evident in the decision of the Berkshire PAN branch to perform a magical working two days before the planned Greenham women's action, in order to ensure its success.<sup>37</sup> PAN supporters participated in the camp's "10 Million Women—10 Days" demonstration, and several of them—who participated a few months earlier in PAN's Earth Awareness Conference—organised a Pagan ritual (complete with circle casting, calling the elements and power-raising) for which they previously posted notes at the information tents of all the camp's different "gates".<sup>38</sup>

## PAN's Role in Connecting British Wiccans and Goddess Women

PAN members camped at the 1982 Green Gathering for most of its duration and organised an open Lughnasadh ritual there, "to which all Pagan & Magical traditions [were] welcome".<sup>39</sup> Several activists in the Matriarchy Research and Reclaim Network (MRRN) celebrated the festival at the Gathering as well, probably as part of the PAN ritual.<sup>40</sup> Jean Freer, an American Dianic Witch who lived in the UK and was heavily involved in Greenham and the MRRN network, attended the rite. Philip Cozens remembered seeing the Swedish Goddess feminist Monica Sjöö (1938–2005) at the Gathering, but he added that she probably did not attend the PAN ritual itself.<sup>41</sup> Also in attendance at the rite was Prudence Jones, whose subsequent report in *The Wiccan* magazine revealed that over a hundred Wiccans and Pagans participated in the ceremony, organised by PAN with assistance from Pagan Federation members, "Celtic and Thelemic Witches", and the leaders of the Los Angeles Roebuck coven of Cochranean witches.<sup>42</sup> Another key participant was Bel Bucca, the high priest of an Alexandrian coven who co-founded (with the help of his high priestess Ros Briagha) a Pagan learning centre called Elfane in Dyfed, Wales.<sup>43</sup> Rufus Maychild recalled recently that "the 'Thelemics' were a couple of young men I knew as friends in Reading rather than anything more formal".<sup>44</sup>

While the ritual which took place at the 1982 Green Gathering primarily attracted the participants of the Gathering itself, who were sympathisers rather than active Pagan practitioners, PAN organised a similar ritual event at the 1983 Green Gathering which was "more concentratedly [sic] Pagan in attendance". The rite was simple and included "the most basic chants and dances, such as Starhawk's 'We can rise with the fire of freedom'".<sup>45</sup> The ritual—which was attended by about 70 Pagans—inspired

---

2014; Amanda, "Greenham Festival of Life," *Pipes of PAN* 7 (1982): 3. According to Rufus Maychild, "Amanda" was a member of a Gardnerian coven he had been involved in. Personal email correspondence with Rufus Brock Maychild, 2 March 2014.

<sup>37</sup> Personal email correspondence with Rufus Brock Maychild, 2 March 2014; "News and Views," *Pipes of PAN* 10 (1983): 1.

<sup>38</sup> See Ros' report in Underwood et al., "10 Million Women—10 Days," 8. This was probably Ros Briagha, an Alexandrian High Priestess and a PAN supporter, as would be further explained below.

<sup>39</sup> "Notice," *Balefire: Journal of the Coven of Rhiannon and Merlin* 4, no. 8 (Beltane 1982): 5; "The PAN Grand Sabbat," *The Pipes of PAN* 8 (Lughnasadh 1982); Rufus, "The Sabbat in Retrospective," *The Pipes of PAN* 9 (Samhain 1982): 2.

<sup>40</sup> "Lammas Celebrations," *Matriarchy Research and Reclaim Network* 8 (July 1982). Rufus Maychild recalled recently that several women active in the Matriarchy Study Groups did attend the PAN ritual in a "participatory rather than leading" role. Personal email correspondence with Rufus Brock Maychild, 2 March 2014. For a study of the Matriarchal Study Groups in 1980s Britain, see Kayoko Komatsu, "An Empirical Study of Matriarchy Groups in Contemporary Britain and Their Relationship to New Religious Movements," M.A. Thesis, University of Leeds (1986).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. Monica Sjöö (1938–2005) was a Swedish-born artist and cultural feminist who resided mostly in Britain and became a vocal and influential proponent of Goddess Spirituality during the 1970s–1980s. For more information on Sjöö see Feraro, "'God Giving Birth,'" 31–60.

<sup>42</sup> "Paganism Return to Summer Festivals," *The Wiccan* 74 (August 1982): 1; Rufus, "The Sabbat in Retrospective," 3. Judging from a report in *The Pipes of PAN*, the Roebuck leaders were Ann and Dave Finnin. Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Rufus, "The Sabbat in Retrospective," 3; [http://www.oakdragonschool.org/who\\_are\\_we.html](http://www.oakdragonschool.org/who_are_we.html) (accessed 30 May 2015). The two were listed as contacts for PAN in the Dyfed region during early 1983. "PAN Groups and Contacts," *The Pipes of PAN* 10 (Imbolc 1983): 5.

<sup>44</sup> Personal email correspondence with Rufus Brock Maychild, 2 March 2014.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.; personal email correspondence with Rufus Brock Maychild, 17 March 2014; "Green Gathering 1983," *The Pipes of PAN* 11 (Beltane 1983): 1; "P.A.N. Lughnasadh Sabbat," *The Pipes of PAN* 12 (Lughnasadh 1983): supplement.

the creation of a London PAN group. In early 1985, the latter's founder reported that they had conducted seven rituals in the capital between late 1983 and late 1984 and that these had drawn together between 9 and 28 participants who were involved with PAN and Marian Green's Green Circle.<sup>46</sup> One of these rituals, which took place during the autumn equinox, "was attended by a visiting American couple from Starhawk's territory"<sup>47</sup>—probably a reference to the San Francisco Reclaiming Community.

PAN activists were however becoming increasingly dissatisfied with "the highly commercial, London-based festivals... [as well as frustrated] with festivals like the Glastonbury C.N.D Festivals and the Green Gatherings", so in 1984 they decided to organise the first Pagan summer festival, titled the "Earth Awareness Conference" (EAC), which was held in Sherwood Forest at the summer solstice.<sup>48</sup> This event attracted about a hundred participants and "had a strong feminist involvement", with an attendance of a "significant Dianic group 'led' by Jean Freer", Monica Sjöö "and a group of her friends", an American visitor named Bonnie Luchs (who edited *Pagan Unity News*) as well as "PAN subscribers generally".<sup>49</sup> According to Maychild's recollections, there was "some slight friction with 'separatism'", and this is corroborated by an account written by one participant in the Conference's aftermath, who stated that "yes, there did seem to be some tension between feminists and feminists".<sup>50</sup> According to the latter, these frictions extended to the design of the main ritual as well, as the pre-ritual discussions featured a "tedious" dispute regarding the sex of "the sun ... [,] a ball of molten rock and burning gas".<sup>51</sup> PAN tried to organise another EAC the following year, but due to lower participation eventually opted for a smaller gathering in rural Wales.<sup>52</sup>

## The Sjöö Versus Pennick Controversy

As reflected in the pages of *The Pipes of PAN*, the encounters between British Traditional Wiccans and allied Pagans, on the one hand, and proponents of Goddess Spirituality and Dianic Witchcraft, on the other, reveal that cross-fertilisation often brought with it intense debates and altercations. A clear case of this came about after Monica Sjöö, who found steady support from the magazine's editors, chose to share her recollections of the Beltane 1985 women's walk across Salisbury Plain with its subscribers.<sup>53</sup> Her article attracted criticism from occultist and geomancer Nigel Pennick (b. 1946), who—reading her as divisive and devoid of respect for men—proceeded to criticise her "absurd concept

<sup>46</sup> Wayland, "London P.A.N.—The First Year," *The Pipes of PAN* 18 (Imbolc 1985): 7–8. Tanya Luhrmann, who conducted her research into the London occult scene during this period, participated in at least three small ritual meetings organised in town by local PAN representatives during 1984, which attracted between 10 and 40 individuals. According to Luhrmann, "two or three people associated with PAN would inform a diffuse network that there would be a gathering in a London Park, usually around one of the traditional festivals". Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*, 80–81.

<sup>47</sup> Wayland, "London P.A.N.," 7.

<sup>48</sup> Nicola Miles and Philip Cozens, "The Earth Awareness Conference 1984," *Journal of the First Earth Awareness Conference* (Summer Solstice 1984).

<sup>49</sup> Personal email correspondence with Rufus Brock Maychild, 2 March 2014; Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*, 80–81; personal email correspondence with Rufus Brock Maychild, 17 March 2014.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.; Persona 1067, "Gas On, E.A.C!," *Journal of the First Earth Awareness Conference* (Summer Solstice 1984).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> "Earth Awareness Conference—1985," *The Pipes of PAN* 19 (Beltane 1985): 2; personal email correspondence with Rufus Brock Maychild, 17 March 2014.

<sup>53</sup> This five-day walk from Avebury to Stonehenge across Salisbury Plain took place during 30 April–4 May 1985 and was organised by women in the matriarchy groups together with 100–150 Greenham women, who sang a chant originally composed by American Goddess Feminist Shekhinah Mountainwater as they marched through the Plain. Starhawk, who was invited to participate in the walk by two Greenham-based feminist witches, arrived as the women were discussing the layout of the Beltane ritual, which they celebrated on Silbury Hill, and gave advice on its layout. Later recalled that after reaching Stonehenge, the women set up camp in the adjacent car park, and some then "held a long discussion about matriarchy and patriarchy and about what to do in the stones. Someone suggested using menstrual blood and that seemed very powerful ... we talked about the power of the Crone and about birth and women's mysteries." Komatsu, *Empirical Study*, 82; Andy Worthington, *Stonehenge: Celebration and Subversion* (Loughborough: Alternative Albion, 2004), 194; Starhawk, *Truth or Dare: Encounters with Power, Authority and Mystery* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1987), 250.



that guided missiles are phallic ... [, for] [i]n combination with the womb, the phallus brings life, and Monica Sjöo would not be on this earth now without that process”.<sup>54</sup> His letter prompted Rufus Cozens to defend Sjöo’s “missiles=phalli” equation as “not intended as strictly literal, but [having] to do with psychological-ideological imagery, and its material consequences”. Influenced by the radical feminist discourse on rape, he added that “many men see the phallus as their *weapon* [sic]” and further noted that even feminist-inclined men have “a great way to go before the male organ is universally experienced as loving-pleasuring, and sharing joyously in the generation of life”.<sup>55</sup>

Most of the magazine’s following issue was composed of letters from readers who either criticised or supported the points raised by Sjöo or Pennick.<sup>56</sup> Jo O’Clerigh, for instance, supported Sjöo without reservation and stated that “the truth is that history is as the feminists would have it ... [, as] [v]irtually all war has been devised and fought by men”. O’Clerigh then referred his readers to Carolyn Merchant’s *The Death of Nature* and described her analysis of the rise of the mechanistic worldview with Francis Bacon and René Descartes in order to urge men to “face up to the fact that either we help create something beautiful with our virility, ... or it will be degraded and corrupted and turned to evil by this Baconian madness which sees Earth, as it sees women, as a passive female awaiting domination, or, even further degraded as a dead machine without its own inner life and integrity”.<sup>57</sup>

While Janet and Chris Skilberk agreed with Sjöo that “most men exhibit appalling and unacceptable attitudes and behavior most of the time” and ensured fellow readers that her writings do not state “explicitly that all maleness is bad”, they simultaneously called upon “Monica and others ... [to be] aware that their writings portray personal qualities in women as individual, worthy and valid while portraying personal qualities in men as purely collective, unworthy and unacceptable”.<sup>58</sup> Dave Womersley added that the idea of matriarchy “worries” him, despite the assurances of matriarchalists that the women of this utopian society would not seek “power-over” men.<sup>59</sup> Greenham Cruisewatch member Ian Lee, on the other hand, suggested readers explore the bibliography of *The Ancient Religion of the Great Cosmic Mother*, written by Sjöo with the help of the American feminist poet Barbara Mor (1936–2015). Lee also recommended Merlin Stone’s *The Paradise Papers*, Merchant’s *The Death of Nature*, and Rich’s *Of Woman Born* in particular.<sup>60</sup> A reader using the pseudonym of “Tammuz” praised “women like Monica and Starhawk”, but at the same time agreed with Pennick that “[v]irility and fertility in sexual matters are completely different from the weapon-like image of the phallus” and criticised Rufus Maychild for his “eagerness to take up the burden of guilt for women’s suffering” and for the encouragement of “those who stereotype men with that view of the phallus, and only men”.<sup>61</sup>

The magazine’s editors, for their part, chose to restate both their support for Sjöo and their position “of firm support for feminism and for the Women’s Liberation Movement ... [while a]t the same time ... strongly support[ing] the development of positive male spirituality”, or, as they termed it, “the return of the male psyche from the jealous vengeful sadomasochism of the patriarchal cults to the gentle wildness

<sup>54</sup> Nigel Pennick, “From Nigel Pennick,” *The Pipes of PAN* 21 (Samhain 1985): 9–10.

<sup>55</sup> See the untitled editorial comment by Rufus Maychild, *The Pipes of PAN* 21 (Samhain 1985): 10–11.

<sup>56</sup> See *The Pipes of PAN* 22 (Imbolc 1986): 1, 7–14.

<sup>57</sup> Jo O’Clerigh, “Letter,” *The Pipes of PAN* 22 (Imbolc 1986): 8–9.

<sup>58</sup> Janet and Chris, “From Janet and Chris Skilberk,” *The Pipes of PAN* 22 (Imbolc 1986): 8.

<sup>59</sup> Dave Womersley, “From Dave Womersley,” *The Pipes of PAN* 22 (Imbolc 1986): 10. Later during that year he concluded that it was probably “wisest to let women who want to join all-female covens do so if they feel it’s right for them, ... [as p]robably most of them will find their way back to mixed covens later when they feel ready to do so [my emphasis]”. Dave Womersley, “A Reply to ‘The Politics of Witchcraft’,” *Quest* 69 (March 1987): 21.

<sup>60</sup> Ian Lee, “From Ian Lee,” *The Pipes of PAN* 22 (Imbolc 1986): 11. Lee’s Cruisewatch experiences are detailed in Ian Lee, “Dark Times, Bright Times,” *The Pipes of PAN* 27 (Summer/Autumn 1987): 2–6. Judith Noble, who was involved in Cruisewatch (as well as in the activities and demonstrations at Greenham Common, though she did not live on site), recalled that many Cruisewatch activists were interested in Goddess Spirituality and Paganism and that some were involved in Pagans Against Nukes as well. In fact, it was at Cruisewatch that she had met Wiccans for the first time. Personal Interview with Judith Noble.

<sup>61</sup> Tammuz, “From ‘Tammuz’,” *The Pipes of PAN* 22 (Imbolc 1986): 7.

of the Horned One”.<sup>62</sup> For co-editor Nicola Miles (later known as Nicola Beechsquirrel<sup>63</sup>), this was a step in a rather different direction than the one she chose during early 1982 when she critiqued the new *Wood and Water* editorial collective for their Samhain 1981 issue, which included an article by Sjöö that heavily criticised the New Age phenomenon—and particularly proponents of Earth Mysteries—as patriarchal:

[I]t seems that the magazine is in some danger of moving away from gentle, Goddess-oriented Earth Magic and into the realm of feminism/politics, which I feel would be a great shame. I noticed a tendency to promote matriarchy as preferable to patriarchy, which it may well be, but the promoters of this idea seem to have forgotten that the natural order of things does consist of both male and female elements and that in order to achieve a balanced and harmonious universe both sexes must co-operate with each other.<sup>64</sup>

Sometime between November 1985 and March 1986, in the aftermath of Pennick’s criticism of Sjöö, the editors of *The Pipes of PAN* received a letter from the prominent Wiccan Doreen Valiente, who expressed her support of Sjöö’s position. This led to a correspondence between Valiente and Sjöö, who enclosed a letter from Valiente with another that she sent to Jean Freer on 30 March 1986, informing the latter that Valiente “seems like a very fine woman”.<sup>65</sup>

In *The Pipes of PAN*’s spring 1987 issue, Freer alleged that Wiccans and other Pagans who make “the son a central figure in the Mysteries” were engaging in “subtle but insidious means to try to immobilize [sic]” Dianics.<sup>66</sup> Her denunciation of their insistence on acknowledging a male counterpart to the Goddess, as well as their criticism of Dianic core beliefs such as parthenogenesis and the segregation of boy children,<sup>67</sup> did not go unnoticed by the magazine’s subscribers. “Rosetta Stone”, who identified as a Gardnerian, felt it important to stress that while her initiators taught her that Wicca was primarily matriarchal, “the male was [of] essential although not of primary importance”. She proceeded to criticise Freer for her parthenogenesis “dream”, and added that while she was aware of the current repressive nature of patriarchal society, the solution lay in cooperation and not in “an equally repressive matriarchal society”.<sup>68</sup> A Gardnerian high priest named “Merlin” provided a critical yet far more accepting response.<sup>69</sup> Male-female polarity in ritual work was of course another area which divided feminist witches and Dianics and British Traditional Wiccans. It was perhaps no coincidence, then, that in his generally unfavourable review of Janet and Stewart Farrars’ *The Witches Goddess* in the same issue, Rufus

<sup>62</sup> “Editorial Notes,” *The Pipes of PAN* 22 (Imbolc 1986): 1; Nicola Miles, “Editorial Comment from Nicola,” *The Pipes of PAN* 22 (Imbolc 1986): 13; Rufus Cozens, “Editorial Comment from Rufus,” *The Pipes of PAN* 22 (Imbolc 1986): 14.

<sup>63</sup> Miles announced the changing of her surname to “Beechsquirrel” August 1986. Nicola Beechsquirrel, “I’ve Changed My Name,” *The Pipes of PAN* 24 (Lughnasadh 1986): 6.

<sup>64</sup> See her comment in “Letters,” *Wood and Water* 2, no. 2 (Imbolc 1982): 22.

<sup>65</sup> See the letter from Monica [Sjöö] to Jean [Freer], dated 30 March (in an envelope postmarked 3 April 1986), located in the Jean Freer Papers, Bristol Feminist Archive, DM2123/FA/Arch/41 Jean Freer. The enclosed letter was probably the one sent by Valiente to Sjöö on 25 March 1986, which is preserved in a privately held archive of Sjöö correspondences and diaries. I thank Rupert White for his kindness in sending a scan of the letter to me. Valiente’s original letter to *The Pipes of PAN*, sadly, did not survive in either the Monica Sjöö Archive or the Jean Freer Papers.

<sup>66</sup> Freer Jean, “The Dianic Craft,” *The Pipes of PAN* 26 (Spring 1987): 10.

<sup>67</sup> Freer espoused parthenogenesis as “a central concept in our vision” and added that “[t]hrough we fully acknowledge that parthenogenetic reproduction is not common at this time, we believe it will re-emerge when the time is right”. Freer, “The Dianic Craft,” 10. For an exploration of the parthenogenesis discourse among American lesbian feminist separatists see Greta Rensenbrink, “Parthenogenesis and Lesbian Separatism: Regenerating Women’s Community through Virgin Birth in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19, no. 2 (2010): 288–316.

<sup>68</sup> Rosetta Stone, “United We Stand—A Reply to ‘The Dianic Craft,’” *The Pipes of PAN* 27 (Summer/Autumn 1987): 18. A year earlier, Stone noted in *Quest* that she found “militant feminism” was the political stance she found “most difficult to equate with the Craft”, and added that the replacement of patriarchy with “an equally unbalanced matriarchal society” would achieve “nothing useful”. Rosetta Stone, “The Politics of Witchcraft,” *Quest* 67 (September 1986): 27–28.

<sup>69</sup> Merlin, “The Dianic Craft—A Reply,” *The Pipes of PAN* 27 (Summer/Autumn 1987): 19–20.

Maychild critiqued their emphasis on polarity, a construct which he understood to be “a patriarchal fetish”.<sup>70</sup>

In late 1990, following the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, Maychild and Beechsqirrel felt that the immediate threat of nuclear war had receded, and decided to cease production of *The Pipes of PAN* and terminate the Pagans Against Nukes network. In the spring of 1991 they established a new—and short-lived—magazine titled *Pandora’s Jar*: “a radical journal of Earth-centered Pagan spirituality and politics” committed to a “matristic” future, “in which as individuals we live in general equality, but where there is an overall focus towards the Great Goddess and all values implicit in Her”.<sup>71</sup>

With the Cold War over, the nature of political protest among British Pagans changed focus. By the 1990s, the main site of struggle for Ecopagans shifted to the road protest movement, which used non-violent resistance, protest camps, and political rituals to challenge the government’s plans for building new bypasses and highway expansions. These rituals were led by the Dragon Environmental Group, an organisation founded in 1990 with an initial membership of about 30 London-based Pagans and occultists. In 1996, the group’s membership peaked at 300, organised in 13 local groups across the country.<sup>72</sup> More recently, an environmental group called The Warrior’s Call—Pagans United Against Fracking has arisen. Its activists organise demonstrations and awareness-raising festivals, holding rituals in protection of their local lands, spirits, and communities.

## Conclusions

The discussion of grassroots-level activity of PAN and its mouthpiece during the 1980s, as presented throughout this chapter, highlights the importance of analysing the wider Pagan magazine scene in 1970s–1980s Britain when exploring how discourse on women and gender within the national Pagan community took shape amid the rise of radical and cultural feminisms in North America and the UK, the arrival of Dianic and feminist witchcraft texts from across the Atlantic, and the development of homegrown Matriarchal Study groups. While on the whole the movement shifted towards women’s issues when confronted with the growing feminist movement, the adaptation of feminist discourse and ideas by British Wiccan and Wiccan-derived Pagans was by no means uniform. As demonstrated elsewhere, some British Wiccans, such as John Score of *The Wiccan*, objected on the whole to radical and cultural feminist discourses and to separatist Dianic Witchcraft, while others, like Prudence Jones and Michael Howard, engaged and adopted feminist constructs to a higher degree.<sup>73</sup> Yet others, such as Phillip Cozens, embraced the ideas of British matriarchalists and—especially—American feminist witches, such as Starhawk wholesale, and participated in feminist-inclined networks like PAN and *Wood and Water* which mostly consisted of Wiccan-derived, yet non-initiate, British Pagans. Such disparities did cause, of course, highly charged debates among British Wiccans and Wiccan-derived Pagans, as disputes like the altercation between Sjöö and Pennick show.

---

<sup>70</sup> See the review of the book in *The Pipes of PAN* 27 (Summer/Autumn 1987): 16–17.

<sup>71</sup> “Editorial,” *The Pipes of PAN* 36 (Yule 1990): 1; *Pandora’s Jar* 1 (Spring 1991), 1, 3.

<sup>72</sup> Letcher, “Raising the Dragon,” 186–187.

<sup>73</sup> Feraro, “‘God Giving Birth’,” 31–60.

## 4. Other Sides of the Moon: Assembling Histories of Witchcraft<sup>(4)</sup>

Helen Cornish<sup>1</sup>

Notions of history and practice have been tightly interwoven in modern witchcraft through deep senses of continuity, but have not remained unchanged. Today, it is generally accepted that modern witchcraft is not the seamless continuation of ancient religious traditions as described by Gerald Gardner in the 1950s when he drew out Margaret Murray's theory of a prehistoric fertility cult as literal proof of historical legitimacy. Instead, witches have followed the lead of more recent historians, such as Ronald Hutton, who have revised these speculative histories. *The Triumph of the Moon* (1999) was pivotal in reorienting historical knowledge towards more realist empirical accounts that situates its origins within nineteenth- and early twentieth-century philosophical, religious, and occult ideas.<sup>2</sup> What counts as historical evidence has been challenged, and under these conditions Gardner and Murray's orthodoxies became, at most, valuable foundation myths. The uptake of revisionist histories since the 1990s also provided opportunities to trace alternative ideas about the past. Some elements receded, while others gained prominence, as emphases shifted from the Great Goddess to the wise-woman, identifying ancestry through folkloric and cunning traditions. New perspectives became commonplace, such as Hutton's pronouncement that "pagan witchcraft ... is the only religion which England has ever given the world",<sup>3</sup> which opened out creative components of emergent magico-religious practices while simultaneously remaining within realist empirical historicism. In practice, how knowledge about the past is revised is not straightforward; one version does not simply replace another, but elements are taken up in piecemeal and negotiated ways. The noisy arguments I encountered around 2000–2005 between British witches about verifying or rejecting orthodox histories have largely receded.<sup>4</sup> How the past is encountered and reproduced continues to be contradictory, often messy. While history has been rationalised, it has not become static, but remains in flux.

In this chapter I use "witch" in an all-encompassing manner to cover the multitude of esoteric traditions which self-define under that term, and "Traditional Witchcraft" to refer to those who actively reject

---

<sup>1</sup> Goldsmiths, University of London, London, UK  
Helen Cornish

**Email:** h.cornish@gold.ac.uk

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). See also Hutton, "The Status of Witchcraft in the Modern World," *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 9, no. 2 (2007): 121–131; Graham Harvey and Charlotte Hardman, eds., *Paganism Today: Wiccans, Druids, the Goddess and Ancient Earth Traditions for the Twenty-First Century* (London: Thorsons, 1996); Susan Greenwood, *Magic, Witchcraft and the Otherworld: An Anthropology* (Oxford: Berg, 2000); Joanne Pearson, ed. *Belief Beyond Boundaries: Wicca, Celtic Spirituality and the New Age* (Milton Keynes: Ashgate in association with the Open University, 2002); Sabina Magliocco, *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Ethan Doyle White, *Wicca: History, Belief and Community in Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*, vii.

<sup>4</sup> Helen Cornish, "Spelling out History: Transforming Witchcraft Past and Present," *The Pomegranate* 11, no. 1 (2009): 14–28. See also Joanne Pearson, *Wicca and the Christian Heritage: Ritual, Sex and Magic* (Oxon: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>(4)</sup> © The Author(s) 2019  
Shai Feraro and Ethan Doyle White (eds.)  
Magic and Witchery in the Modern West  
Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15549-0\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15549-0_4)

the term “Wicca” as they seek a sense of historical legitimacy they identify as distinct from forms of initiatory Pagan witchcraft such as Gardnerianism or Alexandrianism.<sup>5</sup> Terminology is a fraught subject amongst scholars of modern occult and witchcraft traditions. A plethora of labels, including “Wicca”, “Traditional Witchcraft”, and “Pagan witchcraft”, have been subjected to critical analysis.<sup>6</sup> Hutton’s use of “Pagan witchcraft” indicates specific magico-religious dimensions of twentieth-century Wiccan traditions,<sup>7</sup> but I met few who described themselves this way. Occult practitioners take multiple perspectives on names that indicate history, practice, lineage, or tradition. For example, “Wicca” has been used both as an umbrella term for all twentieth-century Pagan witchcraft and as a more specific term solely for the Gardnerian and Alexandrian traditions; different definitions have proved more popular in certain countries and in certain social circles at different times.<sup>8</sup> Attention to cunning traditions has increased over the last two decades as emphasis has shifted from origin stories about the Great Goddess to folk magic and been matched by a rise in “Traditional Witchcraft” as a primary form of identification.

This discussion is rooted in reflections on my anthropological research, which explores how the past is encountered. I started out in 1999 to understand how British witches were negotiating historical knowledge; at this time, serious discussions about evidence were gaining traction, and orthodox Gardnerian histories were under scrutiny. My fieldwork took place in informal and open groups of witches and Pagans in Sussex, attending public events, workshops, and lectures as opportunities arose, while also volunteering at the Museum of Witchcraft (now the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic) in Boscastle, Cornwall. The newly published *Triumph of the Moon* was often a topic of conversation as it percolated across these communities. Together these provided interconnected sites where the past was traced in polyvocal, and often contradictory ways. By 2005 heated debates had begun to settle into new certainties. Strategic distinctions between rationalist histories of a new magico-religious movement and alternative senses of the past could be made with clarity.<sup>9</sup> I continued to follow the ebb and flow of these ideas, as histories became established and challenged. The museum remained a primary site, where knowledge about the past was continually aired between the director, Graham King, museum staff, an active Friends Association, and practitioner-visitors, which kept open possibilities, in which the historical wise-woman has gained ascendancy in forging connections that many feel are meaningful and authentic.

*The Triumph of the Moon* is one strand amongst many in the making of meaningful histories. This chapter does not challenge current revisionist interpretations, but weaves them between less literal accounts. Anthropological approaches to history and the past have challenged assumptions that memory, history, and myth constitute clearly defined kinds of knowledge.<sup>10</sup> Instead, interconnections contribute towards holistic senses of historicity, where emotional, sensory, and imaginative ideas about the past are woven with empirical historiographies. The take up of revisionist interpretations has created spaces between formal claims for empirical history. More nuanced senses can be explored by identifying how

---

<sup>5</sup> Helen Cornish, “Cunning Histories: Privileging Narratives in the Present,” *History and Anthropology* 16 (2005): 363–376; Ethan Doyle White, “The Creation of Traditional Witchcraft: Pagans, Luciferians, and the Quest for Esoteric Legitimacy,” *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 18, no. 2 (2018): 188–216.

<sup>6</sup> Jo Pearson, “Demarcating the Field: Paganism, Wicca and Witchcraft,” *DISKUS* 6 (2000), <http://jbasr.com/basr/diskus/diskus1-6/Pearson6.txt>; Ethan Doyle White, “The Meaning of ‘Wicca’: A Study in Etymology, History and Pagan Politics,” *The Pomegranate* 12, no. 2 (2010): 185–207; Ethan Doyle White, “Theoretical, Terminological, and Taxonomic Trouble in the Academic Study of Contemporary Paganism: A Case for Reform,” *The Pomegranate* 18, no. 1 (2016): 31–59.

<sup>7</sup> Ronald Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*; Ronald Hutton, “Modern Pagan Witchcraft,” in *The History of Witchcraft and Magic in Europe. Volume 6: The Twentieth Century*, eds. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (London: The Athlone Press, 1999), 1–79.

<sup>8</sup> Doyle White, “Meaning of ‘Wicca’”. In the United States, “British Traditional Witchcraft” (BTW) has often been used to describe those who claim inheritance from British Gardnerian or Alexandrian lineages, although since the 1990s “Traditional Witchcraft” has become increasingly popular there in reference to non-BTW traditions.

<sup>9</sup> Helen Cornish, “Recreating Historical Knowledge and Contemporary Witchcraft in Southern England,” PhD Thesis, University of London (2005).

<sup>10</sup> Kirsten Hastrup, ed. *Other Histories* (London: Routledge, 1992); Eric Hirsch and Charles Stewart, “Ethnographies of Historicity: Theme Issue,” *History and Anthropology* 16, no. 3 (2005): 261–274; Charles Stewart, “Historicity and Anthropology,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 45, no. 1 (2016): 79–94.

the past is assembled through multiple sources, through material culture, landscape, and more experiential forms of evidence like storytelling, walking, singing, and ritual, as well as more conventional sources. Popular and official historical knowledge is found through books, talks, documentaries, and television programmes, while online archives have opened up access to primary and secondary sources. Interpretation and understanding is always contextual and situated within life histories and esoteric experience, which may include initiatory status and lineage. These all contribute to how the past is constructed and negotiated in the present.<sup>11</sup> Engagement with rationalist histories is fragmentary, as practitioners take up some ideas and reject others, creating and adapting as they make sense in their religious paths. Knowledge is not formed in a vacuum; reckoning the past is processual and happens within complex everyday contexts.

I situate some of these ethnographic approaches in the Boscastle Museum of Witchcraft, deep in Britain's West Country. More specifically, I pay attention to how accounts of historical skilled occult workers—described as “cunning men”, “wise-women”, or with the Cornish term “Pellar”—are taken up as antecedents to modern witchcraft and presented as “Traditional Witches”. While historians insist that these people do not provide a literal history for today's occult and magical groups, for members of the latter they are made salient through objects, stories, and emotions: through museum displays of everyday folk magic, the “Wise-Woman's Cottage”, and the story of “Joan Wytte, the Fighting Fairy Woman of Bodmin”. Joan, the named skeleton once displayed in the museum and now buried on the nearby hillside, particularly helps to show how histories are made in fragmentary and messy ways, through everyday practices shaped out of realist histories, myths, emotions, and the senses. In the museum, histories are produced in dialogic ways between visitor encounters and curatorial decisions. I sketch how the past is encountered in the spaces between official histories, as well as being situated within them.

## The Wise-Women in History and Practice

The historical record provides abundant examples of men and women who practiced sympathetic magic and fortune-telling, including the cunning folk who sold counter-charms, amulets, and talismans, working within the creative margins between medicine, Christianity, and natural science.<sup>12</sup> As recorded between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, the practices of these individuals were shaped by their specific cultural and historical conditions.<sup>13</sup> Although the existence of these wise-women and cunning traditions is not in dispute, historians remain unconvinced that they provide sources of ancestry for witches today.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, in modern witchcraft traditions many of the folk magical activities used by these historic practitioners continue to be systematically deployed, often conceptualised as hooks for historical depth that traces seemingly timeless significance.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, eds., *The Myths We Live By* (London: Routledge, 1990); Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Volume 1: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971); Willem de Blécourt, “Witch Doctors, Soothsayers and Priests. On Cunning Folk in European Historiography and Tradition,” *Social History* 19, no. 3 (1994): 285–303; Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*, 84–111; Owen Davies, *Cunning-Folk: Popular Magic in English History* (London: Hambledon, 2003); Jason Semmens, *The Witch of the West* (Plymouth: Printed for the author, 2004); Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits: Shamanistic Visionary Traditions in Early Modern British Witchcraft and Magic* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2005). These occult traditions are not static, and shape and reflect historical conditions as domestic and professional habits shifted during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

<sup>13</sup> Dirk Johannsen, “The Prophet and the Sorcerer: Becoming a Cunning-Man in Nineteenth-Century Norway,” *Folklore* 129, no. 1 (2018): 39–57.

<sup>14</sup> Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*, 111; Davies, *Cunning-Folk*, 193–197. For a specifically Cornish example, see Jason Semmens, “Bucca Redivivus: History, Folklore and the Construction of Ethnic Identity within Modern Pagan Witchcraft in Cornwall,” *Cornish Studies* 18 (2010): 141–161.

<sup>15</sup> For instance, Evan John Jones with Doreen Valiente, *Witchcraft: A Tradition Renewed* (Washington: Phoenix, 1990); E. W. Liddell and Michael Howard, *The Pickingill Papers* (Chieveley, Berkshire: Capall Bann, 1994); Michael Howard, *The Witches' Herbal* (Boscastle: Red Thread Books, 2012).

Within the modern occult milieu, descriptions of the “village wise-woman” are sprinkled across publications from Gardner’s *Witchcraft Today* (1954) right through to more recent histories, guidebooks, and manuals.<sup>16</sup> While Gardner’s orthodox history situates the origins of his mid-twentieth-century witchcraft in the religious practices of Murray’s prehistoric fertility witch-cult, with an added emphasis on the Great Goddess, he also builds on familiar descriptions of folk magic from nineteenth-century speculative histories, literature, and folklore.<sup>17</sup> Later, the notion of the witch as a skilled female worker proved powerful in the rise of feminist witchcraft during the 1960s and 1970s, whether or not these were framed through any religious, spiritual, or esoteric practices.<sup>18</sup> By the 1990s, the rise in solitary traditions saw a turn to an idealised rural past to identify the roots of non-initiatory witchcraft. For example, Rae Beth’s popular guidebook for solitary, non-initiatory witchcraft describes the “hedge witch” as an authentic esoteric practitioner distinct from “mainstream” modern witchcraft, one who is “outside all covens” and remains “a solitary being. She or he works alone, from and often for a particular town or village. Such people have always existed.”<sup>19</sup> The wise-woman is written into the past as an ancestor and gains impetus in apparently self-evident ways that spans diverse witchcraft sensibilities. Such claims to occult heritage draw on emotions, ritual practices, and the senses and are not necessarily perceived as being in contradiction with realist revisionist histories. “Shamanism” is often invoked to consider engagements with a spirited world based on modern Pagan principles, akin to Michael York’s “root religion”.<sup>20</sup> These complexities around historical explanations and occult practices are demonstrated through the collections and archives in the Museum of Witchcraft and find particular salience through the “Wise-Woman’s Cottage” and the account of Joan Wytte.

## Finding Wise-Women in the Museum of Witchcraft

The Museum of Witchcraft is a small, independent institution and like many other micromuseums was set up with passion and commitment, if not any formal curatorial skills.<sup>21</sup> The museum carries a weighty reputation as a heritage site for visitors, especially those who already identify with Pagan and occultist traditions. These visitors often freely describe the town, museum, and surrounding rural Cornish coast as “magical” and “enchanted”. Having been curated by three generations of directors

<sup>16</sup> An indicative although far from exhaustive list includes: Doreen Valiente, *Where Witchcraft Lives* (London: Aquarian Press, 1962); Valiente, *Natural Magic* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1975); Marian Green, *A Witch Alone: Thirteen Moons to Master Natural Magic* (London: Aquarian Press, 1991); Green, *Natural Witchcraft: The Timeless Arts and Crafts of the Country Witch* (London: Thorsons, 2001); Rae Beth, *Hedgewitch: A Guide to Solitary Witchcraft* (London: Robert Hale, 1990); Ann Moura, *Green Witchcraft: Folk Magic, Fairy Lore and Herb Craft* (St Paul, MN: Llewellyn, 1996); Kate West, *The Real Witches Handbook: A Complete Introduction to the Craft* (London: Thorsons, 2001); Gemma Gary, *Traditional Witchcraft: A Cornish Book of Ways* (Penzance: Troy Books, 2008); Michael Howard, *West Country Witches* (Hercules, CA: Three Hands Press, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> Consider Tylor and Frazer and their evolutionary models of magic, science, and religion: Edward Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art and Custom* (London: John Murray, 1871); James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1922).

<sup>18</sup> Such as: Zsuzsanna Budapest, *The Feminist Book of Lights and Shadows* (Venice, CA: Luna Publications, 1976); Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (New York: Harper Collins, 1979); Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1982). Not all such texts are about religious practice, but identify the witch as a historic mode for the suppression of women. See, for example, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English, *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* (London: Writers and Readers Publishing Co-operative, 1973); Marianne Hester, *Lewd Women and Wicked Witches: A Study of the Dynamics of Male Domination* (London: Routledge, 1992). Social science analyses of these perspectives can be found in Loretta Orion, *Never Again the Burning Times: Paganism Revived* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1995); Kathryn Rountree, *Embracing the Witch and the Goddess: Feminist Ritual-Makers in New Zealand* (London: Routledge, 2004). See also one historical analysis: Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> Beth, *Hedgewitch*, 18.

<sup>20</sup> Michael York, “Paganism as Root Religion,” *The Pomegranate* 6, no. 1 (2004): 11–18.

<sup>21</sup> Fiona Candlin, “Keeping Objects Live,” in *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies*, eds. Sharon Macdonald and Helen Rees Leahy (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 1–23; *Micromuseology: An Analysis of Small Independent Museums* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015). The Museum of Witchcraft is one of the more economically successful of Britain’s small, independent museums.

over the course of its history, the museum has been located in the West Country harbour town of Boscastle since 1960. Its founder, Cecil Williamson, settled here after several unsuccessful attempts to establish it elsewhere, including a period in the 1950s at the Witches' Mill on the Isle of Man (where he employed Gardner, to whom he eventually sold his collection, as his "resident witch").<sup>22</sup> At the end of a symbolic walk from Hampshire, Graham King took over the museum and its collection from Williamson at midnight on 31 October 1996. In 2013, ownership of the collection was transferred to the Museum of British Folklore under Simon Costin, and in 2015 it was renamed the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic to better reflect the contents of its collection.<sup>23</sup> Museological practices and historical ideas change over time, as King and Costin re-fashioned displays to update or reimagine interpretations. Running consistently throughout are representations of folk magic and professional occult workers: these are the individuals whom Williamson referred to as "the Wayside Witch", named "Aunty May" and who are identified as an ancestral source of skilled esoteric knowledge by many magical practitioners today.<sup>24</sup>

The museum provides a vivid opportunity to understand how the past is negotiated. Regardless of its amateur status, as a museum it offers expertise and authority, as well as enchantment.<sup>25</sup> Experiential, emotional, and rational histories are brought together in overlapping and contradictory ways as the past is deployed to make sense of the present. Both orthodox and revisionist versions of witchcraft histories are presented through a richly diverse collection of witchcraft imagery, esoteric artefacts, and folk objects, enhanced by an extensive library, archive, and magazine collection.<sup>26</sup> The museum provides an official history as well as alternative approaches to the past and thus illustrates interconnections between multiple historicities. It serves as a repository for donated objects from practitioners of varied occult traditions and provides a place for modern witches to actively construct and reflect histories. The usual museological anxieties<sup>27</sup> about the neutralised object are rarely found here, where objects are not retired from the world, but are perceived as active, even dangerous, vividly alive in an animated world. Visiting witches remarked on their visceral engagement, for example, how it might feel to concentrate on knotting a wind spell, holding a heavy length of rope, imagining the feel of the fibres between their fingers. These experiences and emotions are present and embodied, but fashioned through notions of continuity with the past; they are often personal, as visitors find their histories in exhibits, and in turn, they read objects through their experiences; it affirms and reaffirms, and is dialogic and fluid.

For many visitors, the museum and town are located at the heart of a spiritually important valley. They often enthusiastically relate their rising anticipation as they descend the winding road down to the town, recounting recollections of the noise of the water in the harbour or the wind on the cliffs. For

---

<sup>22</sup> Williamson owned several museums in the West Country, but these have long since been sold and the collections broken up. Williamson tells how his background in MI5 and film provided an ideal set of skills for setting up the museum. For more detailed histories see: Cecil Williamson, "Witchcraft Museums—and What It Means to Own One," *Quest* 27 (1976): 4–6; Graham King, "The Museum of Witchcraft," *The Cauldron* 101 (2001); Hannah Fox, "Representing the Craft for 50 Years: A Cauldron of Inspiration, Bubbling Away for Half a Century," *Dark Mirror* 30 (2002); Ronald Hutton, "Introduction," in *The Museum of Witchcraft: A Magical History*, ed. Kerriann Goodwin (Bodmin: The Occult Art Company and The Friends of the Boscastle Museum of Witchcraft, 2011), 9–11; Steve Patterson, *Cecil Williamson's Book of Witchcraft: A Grimoire of the Museum of Witchcraft* (Penzance: Troy Books, 2014); Sara Hannant and Simon Costin, *Of Shadows: One Hundred Objects from the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic* (London: Strange Attractor Press, 2016).

<sup>23</sup> Under Costin's directorship the exhibition spaces have been reimagined, although continue to focus on Williamson's Wayside Witch and relationships between magic and folklore. Currently, the Witch's Cottage remains at the heart of the museum, but the stone circle built by King has been replaced by a successful temporary exhibition space that runs in conjunction with themed conferences and publications.

<sup>24</sup> The term "Wayside Witch" is not used as an analytic taxon by historians, and it does not appear in the documentary record as a vernacular concept. It is likely to have been Cecil Williamson's personal description for professional occult workers.

<sup>25</sup> Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995); Sharon Macdonald, "Enchantment and Its Dilemmas: The Museum as a Ritual Site," in *Science, Magic and Religion: The Ritual Processes of Museum Magic*, eds. Mary Bouquet and Nuno Porto (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005), 209–227.

<sup>26</sup> The Museum of Witchcraft and Magic, *Museum of Witchcraft and Magic*, <http://museumofwitchcraftandmagic.co.uk/> (2015).

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Mieke Bal, "Telling Objects: A Narrative Perspective on Collecting," in *Grasping the World: An Idea of the Museum*, eds. Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2004), 123–145.



them, Boscastle's significance is reinforced both by its proximity to Tintagel, a town closely associated with Arthurian legend and the Celtic Revival, and its location in Cornwall, a land envisioned as being geographically and economically marginal.<sup>28</sup> The idea that Cornwall is a particularly spirited landscape is one that recurs throughout the Earth Mysteries and occult milieus.<sup>29</sup> Within these contexts, Cornwall is conjured as a mistily enchanted realm, full of prehistoric "sacred sites"; it is imagined as a place late to Christian conversion, resistant to modernisation, and clinging to pre-Christian sensibilities and peasant ways.<sup>30</sup> It is perceived as a land where wise-women, cunning folk, or Pellars could practice their craft uninhibited by new forms of science and medicine. For modern witches, this vision of Cornwall and its past magical practitioners contribute to valuable senses of continuity through practice and history at the same time as they take up realist revisionist accounts of the past within emotional and sensory museum contexts.

Although many visitors believe that because of the museum witchcraft has had a significant historical presence in Boscastle, there are no records of occult activity in the town prior to the museum's arrival. Historically a fishing town, with a natural coastal inlet protected by sixteenth-century harbour walls, Boscastle has had connections to literary fame since Thomas Hardy met his wife Emma here in 1870, and it was an established tourist destination when Williamson considered it an ideal "honeypot" in 1960.<sup>31</sup> Williamson nevertheless worked hard to claim connections between witchcraft, the town, and the surrounding area, and these connections have been maintained ever since. He portrayed nearby sites—especially St Nectan's Glen and the Rocky Valley Labyrinth, but also the standing stones of Dartmoor—as spiritually and historically significant places. Exhibits describe practices that resonate with the meeting of sea and river in the nearby harbour, where "sea witches" echo the rhythms and wildness of the waves. Their work as wise-women is established through "raising the wind"; a practice in which gusts are released by untying tightly knotted wind spells in lengths of rope. This practice is realised in Boscastle through a painted sign hanging at the front of the museum that depicts a witch, in nineteenth-century dress, selling her wares to sailors on the Boscastle harbour wall. This was first hung by Williamson and helped demonstrate the potency of magical possibilities. Although there are no records of this commercial occult exchange happening at this harbour, selling the wind through lengths of knotted rope was an established folk practice found all along the British coastline.<sup>32</sup> For many practitioners, the sign provides a welcome illustration of a plausible local history steeped in enchantment. Cornish esotericism is enhanced inside the museum through the identification of many artefacts as the personal possessions of West Country witches, wise-women, and cunning folk, often simply presented as "Old Grannies". These practitioners were local, skilled in folkloric techniques, and mostly female. They are epitomised in the museum by "Joan Wytte", claimed as the "Witch and Fighting Fairy Woman of Bodmin",<sup>33</sup> the corporeal remains of a Cornish witch, as an ancestor in the museum.

<sup>28</sup> Amy Hale, "Whose Celtic Cornwall? The Ethnic English Meet Celtic Spirituality," in *Celtic Geographies: Old Cultures, New Times*, eds. David C. Harvey, Rhys Jones, Neil McInroy, and Christine Milligan (London: Routledge, 2002), 157–170; Amy Hale, "The Land near the Dark Cornish Sea: The Development of Tintagel as a Celtic Pilgrimage Site," *The Journal for the Academic Study of Magic* 2 (2004): 206–225; Jesse Harasta, "'Arise St Piran': The Cult of the Saints and the Redefining of Cornwall," *Cornish Studies* 17, no. 1 (2009): 187–203.

<sup>29</sup> Rupert White, *The Re-Enchanted Landscape: Earth Mysteries, Paganism and Art in Cornwall 1950–2000* (n.p.: Antenna Publications, 2017); Amy Hale, "The Magic Life of Ithell Colquhoun," in *Pathways in Modern Western Magic*, ed. Nevill Drury (Richmond, CA: Conrescent Scholars, 2012), 307–322.

<sup>30</sup> These histories of Cornwall are multiple and partial, and sit alongside others that show early conversions to Christianity, enthusiastic Methodist revivals in the nineteenth century, and the keen uptake of industrial mining technologies. See Philip Payton, "Cornwall in Context: The New Cornish Historiography," *Cornish Studies* 5 (1997): 180–187. I do not suggest there are easy distinctions between secular and religious history nor between occult versus rationalist worldviews. To the contrary, this demonstrates how various Cornwalls found in the past resonate through meaningful stories identified through multiple sources.

<sup>31</sup> Williamson, "Witchcraft Museums—and What It Means to Own One," *Quest* 27 (1976): 4–6.

<sup>32</sup> Cyrus L. Day, "Knots and Knot Lore," *Western Folklore* 9, no. 3 (1950): 229–256. King commissioned a new sign from Cornish artist Vivienne Shanley, who used Boscastle residents as her models, reinforcing local identifications. A few years ago, some sailors who arrived at the museum by boat wanted to buy a knot-spell for their boat, and one was supplied from the museum networks.

<sup>33</sup> Cecil Williamson, "Original Text by Cecil Williamson: Museum Explanation of Joan Wytte," *The Museum of Witchcraft*

During Williamson's curatorship, some visitors considered the displays of striking occult ritual scenarios lurid and in contradiction to the principles of modern witchcraft. At the same time, many long-time practitioners familiar with the museum recall the quieter story of the "Wayside Witch", the skilled practitioner's of magical craft and herbal medicine, depicted consistently throughout the museum for those who "knew how to look". Williamson's museum labels often related long and compelling tales of people, places, and techniques, although King occasionally lamented the lack of precise acquisition information that made it difficult to develop an accurate collection record. Evidence can be less systematic, as Louise Fenton has recently shown when she tracked some of the displayed poppets and curses. She demonstrated how Williamson deliberately obfuscated details that might identify individuals, but left clues in his path.<sup>34</sup> Sometimes visitors provide verification as they stumble across objects they knew from elsewhere: recently the "talking tambourine" was confirmed as the possession of Kate ("the gull") Turner, the "Sea Witch of Penryn". These affirm Williamson's sense of Cornish esotericism and reinforces associations between West Country witchcraft, the museum and its location.

Under Williamson, the museum's objects had nestled alongside each other in seemingly random order. When King took over in 1996, he rationalised this collection of curiosities, allocating space on thematic grounds and dividing it into such categories as popular imagery of witchcraft, historical persecutions, and the personal belongings and magical tools of well-known modern witches. However, the focus on folk magic and the "Wayside Witch" remained. Today, its displays—including Williamson's collection of herbs, strangely shaped stones, moles' feet to heal cramp, amulets and charms for protection, sharks' teeth for divination, boxes, curios, and animal body parts used to protect, curse, and heal—ensure that historical wise-women and cunning traditions retain centre stage in the museum's portrayal of witchcraft and magic. The role of the occult expert is identified as a historically tangible ancestor, realised and connected through this collected material culture. King builds on Williamson's account, for we are told that: "other than court confessions and trial documents little is recorded of the village Wise-Women and Cunning Men that were the predecessors of modern witchcraft ... and were an essential part of village life".<sup>35</sup> The text goes on to relate how such skilled workers used "natural magic" and held the place of the "doctor, midwife and social worker in bygone times".<sup>36</sup> These are met with emotional senses of recognition by many visiting witches, especially those who see themselves as inheritors of these traditions.

## In the Wise-Woman's Cottage

The life of the wise-woman, the "Wayside Witch", is made concrete through King's construction of a cottage in the heart of the museum. Housing a wax mannequin referred to as Joan, it is arranged to illustrate how a nineteenth-century "professional soothsayer or Wise-Woman" might live and work. Her idealised occult expertise and reputation is made real as she sits at the table in front of the fire. She is surrounded by the tools of her trade, and is shown busy reading tea-leaves, tarot cards laid out nearby, while household animals sit at her feet. Nearby hang glass fishing buoys for scrying (fortune-telling), protection amulets dangle from the wooden dresser along with long, evenly knotted ropes, lengths of shells, and strings of "hagstones" (stones with a naturally formed hole). There are dried herbs on the dresser, and the shelf above the fire-place is decorated with materials collected from the surrounding countryside, leaves, rowan twigs, and so forth. A besom broomstick rests against the wall. While Joan is focused on her tasks, the museum visitor can peep through the open door and windows. As you pass, a

(n.d.), [http://www.museumofwitchcraft.com/displayrecord\\_mo](http://www.museumofwitchcraft.com/displayrecord_mo).

<sup>34</sup> Louise Fenton, "A Cabinet of Curses: A Study of People Behind the Poppets Held in the Museum of Witchcraft," unpublished paper given at 'Tools of the Trade: A Day of Talks for The Museum of Witchcraft' (May 2013), held at The Wellington Hotel, Boscastle. Fenton curated a temporary exhibition on curses in the museum during the 2017 season, "Poppets, Pins and Power: The Craft of Cursing".

<sup>35</sup> The Museum of Witchcraft, "Museum Text" (2002).

<sup>36</sup> Museum label (2002).

steady chanting of Cornish folk charms is audible. It is a compelling exhibit for many visitors, regardless of their personal identification with any occult traditions.

For visiting witches, Joan's cottage provides a powerful connection to the past manifested through skilled craft and esoteric practices, offering perceptible alternatives to orthodox histories. For those who have aligned their sense of the past more closely to revisionist accounts, the wise-woman—through Joan in the heart of the museum—suggests histories can be traced via means other than the documentary record. Here, the solitary and independent worker offers a past made real through craft skills, rather than through any direct cultic lineage. Importantly, it can be identified through the realities of sensory and emotional experiences. Visiting witches recall their own tools and describe the objects, the sticks, stones, bones, and flowers, they have collected. As one witch explained:

[T]here are so many things [in the museum] that are just what I use. Things you pick up off the beach, hag stones and driftwood. These are all magical objects you know, once you know what to do. And all these women, that's what they would have done, would have known.<sup>37</sup>

They explain that this is “a practical magic”, and they describe how they learn from experience, through rituals and practice, as well as through reading, attending talks, and sharing knowledge. Information is drawn from diverse sources and deployed to help situate connections between their own practice and senses of historical folk magic. Empirical and revisionist histories are threaded with folklore and personal experiences; it is through the cottage and the contingent objects that the history of “craft” becomes substance and made real by association with the life and death of Joan Wytte.<sup>38</sup>

## The Wise-Woman and Joan Wytte: Fashioning Heritage

Joan Wytte is the given identity of the human skeleton that hung from the museum ceiling from the 1960s until 1996. Concerned by the ethical repercussions of this display, on taking over the museum King displayed the body in a coffin before removing it from view and preparing it for burial in 1998. Wytte's life and death provides a nexus for examining how history and the past are realised through interconnected forms of historicity. While there is no documentary evidence to validate her life story, this does not mean it is a work of fiction rather than truth, or myth rather than history; instead, I suggest it demonstrates how information is taken up in piecemeal ways that draw on multiple sources to help situate a meaningful past in the present.<sup>39</sup> The records show that Williamson acquired the skeleton at an auction in the 1950s, and his explanatory museum label describes it the “corporeal remains of Joan Wytte, Fighting Fairy Woman of Bodmin (1775–1813)”. He related that Wytte was a reputed witch, and although small had the strength of a full-grown man; he reports that she died in jail after being arrested for assault. Williamson described the various scientific tests he had organised that indicated the likelihood of a Bodmin diet and claimed that forensic examination revealed she suffered from a deep abscess in her jaw, suggesting that the pain this caused her was responsible for her aggressive reputation. Williamson quoted government officials, cited news reports, and explained how the anatomist William Clift was visiting the prison at the time of her death and requested that her corpse be prepared as a scientific specimen. Williamson further related that the skeleton had later been used for a terrifying séance at the jail, and had been left forgotten in a cupboard until the prison was closed.<sup>40</sup> These details work to locate her in the historical record, which seems, like the displayed bones, a literal and evidential history.

---

<sup>37</sup> Fieldwork, Museum Interview (2002) with a self-identified Traditional Witch of ten years.

<sup>38</sup> Steve Patterson, *Spells from the Wise Woman's Cottage* (London: Troy Books Publishing, 2016).

<sup>39</sup> Helen Cornish, “The Life of the Death of ‘the Fighting Fairy Woman of Bodmin’: Storytelling around the Museum of Witchcraft,” *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 22, no. 1 (2013): 79–97. The lack of empirical evidence for the corporeal existence of Joan Wytte is also noted by Semmens, “Bucca Redivivus”.

<sup>40</sup> Williamson, “Original Text by Cecil Williamson: Museum Explanation of Joan Wytte”. There is a research folder in the

These compelling narratives appear plausible; however, there is no trace in the documentary records of an identifiable person called Joan Wytte living in Bodmin at this time, or of a woman being either imprisoned for assault or dying in Bodmin jail.<sup>41</sup> It has been suggested that the skeleton is a composite teaching model, although Williamson rejected this view; his notes describe the preparation as a “DIY job” and “not professional”.<sup>42</sup> This complicated account makes use of documented realist histories, some verifiable historical information and events, but also imagination, emotions, and the senses. Today, commonplace histories about how accused witches were likely to be poor women scapegoated by small communities are layered with ideas about cunning traditions and the rise of Paganism. Multiple strands link narratives and evidence together. Histories are not static, and updated versions are not made from scratch, but are instead processual, accommodating and rejecting new information or events as established accounts are revised and updated. The ways in which past historical accounts are sedimented in and through new interpretations are part of bigger contexts.

Responses to Wytte’s story are heterogeneous. Some consider it evidence for Williamson’s creative and imaginative storytelling. Others defend his account, suggesting that the historical record is unreliable, noting that records from Bodmin Prison and early censuses are sketchy. For many, the absence of evidence does not undermine Wytte’s value as a meaningful ancestor; to them, the tale of her life “feels true” in both bodily and emotional ways. One Traditional Witch explained how she offered him an emotional truth, noting that he recognised her as an ancestor regardless of whether or not she saw herself as a witch or had even literally existed. For him, Williamson’s story felt familiar and invoked deeply universal, “shamanic” perspectives. Individuals who adopt such approaches do not then always reject established scholarly understandings of the history of witchcraft; rather, many of those who see Wytte’s account as an inspirational tale also take empirical revisionist histories for granted.<sup>43</sup>

In 1998, King decided to bury the skeleton in Minster woods, just outside the churchyard high on the hillside behind Boscastle. In his view, it was a mark of respect and followed museological and archaeological concerns about the display of human remains.<sup>44</sup> In 2000, the site was marked with a memorial stone which declares: “Joan Wytte, born 1775 died 1813 in Bodmin Gaol, buried 1998, no longer abused”. The epitaph is decorated with a tripartite waxing, full, and waning moon, a symbolic image widely used within modern witchcraft and wider Pagan circles. Burial provided a pivotal twist as the memorial stone became an important marker of the museum in the Cornish landscape and a pilgrimage destination for many museum visitors. Wytte’s life and death has been retold through folklore publications and a folk-opera<sup>45</sup>; these fashion her tale to closely correspond with elements of twentieth-century Wicca and Traditional Witchcraft. Her story has spread across the internet, and she has entered the popular imagination as a key Cornish witch, albeit one that some consider unlikely in its literal representation of contemporary Pagan principles. She is encountered as an ancestor, and demonstrates visceral and emotional links that suggest the precarious status of occult workers in rural communities.

---

Museum of Witchcraft and Magic archive containing Williamson’s notes and some letters from visitors.

<sup>41</sup> The sense of dank and musty dungeons invoked by the tale of Joan Wytte is part of the emotional storytelling around her life. However, Bodmin Jail was newly built in 1788 as a light and airy space that exemplified proposals made by prison reformer John Howard. See Bill Johnson, *The History of Bodmin Jail* (Bodmin: Bodmin Town Museum, 2009).

<sup>42</sup> Patterson, *Spells from the Wise Woman’s Cottage*, 113. Museum of Witchcraft and Magic Archive folder.

<sup>43</sup> Cornish, “Life of the Death”.

<sup>44</sup> Robert J. Wallis and Jenny Blain, “A Live Issue: Ancestors, Pagan Identity and the “Reburial Issue” in Britain,” in *Security of Archaeological Heritage*, ed. Nick Petrov (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007), 1–22; Robert J. Wallis and Jenny Blain, “From Respect to Reburial: Negotiating Pagan Interest in Prehistoric Human Remains in Britain, Through the Avebury Consultation,” *Public Archaeology* 10, no. 1 (2011): 23–45; Gabriel Moshenska, “The Reburial Issue in Britain,” *Antiquity* 83 (2009): 815–820. See also Emma Restall Orr, “Human Remains: The Acknowledgement of Sanctity,” *Respect for Ancient British Human Remains: Philosophy and Practice*, Manchester Museum, 17 November 2006. [https://web.archive.org/web/20160304043403/http://www.museum.manchester.ac.uk/medialibrary/documents/respect/human\\_remains\\_the\\_acknowledgement\\_of\\_sanctity.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20160304043403/http://www.museum.manchester.ac.uk/medialibrary/documents/respect/human_remains_the_acknowledgement_of_sanctity.pdf).

<sup>45</sup> Kelvin I. Jones, *Seven Cornish Witches* (Penzance: Oakmagic Publications, 1998); Kathy Wallis, *Spirit in the Storm: The True Story of Joan Wytte, Fighting Fairy Woman of Bodmin* (Wadebridge, Cornwall: Lyngham House, 2003).

While Wytte's skeleton may no longer be on public display, for many visitors she retains a tangible presence in the mannequin that bears her name and sits inside the museum's Witch's Cottage. In this way, her presence helps to frame folk magic as a source of heritage for today's witches. As Steve Patterson reflects on the evidence for Wytte's proposed biography, he observes that "even though her mortal remains have been laid to rest, her story still stands firm before the viewing public. For the moment, the question as to whether she is a monument to our credulity or to our empathy must remain unsolved."<sup>46</sup> Outside the museum archive containing Williamson's notes, the evidence trail swiftly disappears, but regardless of whether or not she ever objectively existed, for today's witches Wytte is an occult ancestor and an exemplar of the Cornish witch.

## Reflections on the Wise-Woman, the Traditional Witch, and Making Histories in the Museum of Witchcraft

Claims made about "Traditional Witchcraft" today are complicated. For British witches, the term describes various Pagan and esoteric traditions which are presented as being continuous with the historical traditions of the wise-women and cunning folk. While these are perceived as foundational elements of history and practice for many contemporary practitioners, historians and scholars of religion dispute the accuracy of such claims. A notable rise in the number of practitioners who look to this kind of folkloric past runs alongside the uptake of revisionist, realist histories that reject older claims that modern witchcraft is the survival of a prehistoric fertility cult. These contradictions and overlapping narratives demonstrate that despite an apparent concern for documentary evidence, ideas about the past are not so readily distinguished between truth and fiction, or myth and history. History is less easily mapped in practice, but taken up in fragmentary and experiential ways. Sometimes it is the same witches who fought to promote revisionist histories within their communities who have most readily turned to the less than realist approach of claiming historical cunning traditions and wise-women as antecedents for their occult skills and practices.

The presence of the wise-woman in the Museum of Witchcraft resonates with the senses some visitors have that this can provide a coherent and stable route to the past. While most contemporary witches accept the histories proposed by professional historians, encapsulated and popularised through *The Triumph of the Moon*, their take up of these in practice also opens out opportunities and spaces for renewed invention and the possibilities of engagement with different kinds of histories and sources. Claiming cunning traditions as key historical sources and wise-women as ancestors is not new to modern witchcraft historiographies, but in its current shape it takes up a different kind of emphasis, alongside the rejection of orthodox Gardnerian accounts. The past is traced beyond realist texts, through ritual, esoteric knowledge, the senses, emotions, and spirited relationships between people, things, and the natural world. These senses of historical contingency offer dynamic illustrations of how official histories are used in combination with multiple sources and polyvocal accounts towards continually creative and engaging ways of assembling histories and the past in the present.

---

<sup>46</sup> Patterson, *Spells from the Wise Woman's Cottage*, 114–115.

## 5. The Nearest Kin of the Moon: Irish Pagan Witchcraft, Magic(k), and the Celtic Twilight<sup>(5)</sup>

Jenny Butler<sup>1</sup>

“The nearest kin of the moon” references a poem by William Butler Yeats, “The Cat and the Moon”, in which another line—“the sacred moon overhead”—has always been reminiscent to me of the significance of the moon in witchcraft practices both historical and contemporary.

Based on ethnographic research with the Irish Pagan community,<sup>2</sup> this chapter explores forms of modern Pagan witchcraft in the Irish context, with a focus on Wicca. The analysis is of Pagan witchcraft as it exists in Ireland and the influences on the beginnings and development of such magical practices in the Irish context. The Wiccan community in Ireland is diverse and connects in many ways with Ireland and Irish culture, whether through the landscape, mythology, folklore, or the Irish language. Contemporary Irish witches associate themselves with historical time periods and particular figures, either directly or symbolically, such as the wise woman of the early modern period. The discussion includes an examination of the ways in which folk magic and other practices influence practitioners of contemporary Pagan witchcraft and the means by which these two cultural forms—traditional Irish culture and modern Irish Pagan culture—intersect. The influence of the notion of the Celtic will also be explored, whether derived from the discourses of the mid-nineteenth-century Celtic Revival, the Anglo-Irish Literary Revival, or later ideas of Celticity that merged with Romantic nationalism.

These ideological strands and connections will be explored through an examination of interviews and conversations with Wiccans and other witches, in which they discussed their beliefs, rituals, material culture, and lifestyles. This chapter aims to provide an overview of Pagan witchcraft in the Irish milieu and to give a background to its development and to the kinds of cultural resources that are utilised in the identity-building and cultural processes at work in the community of Pagan witches in modern-day Ireland. By way of this broad evaluation, this examination aims to show that global religions and magical practices have their local flavours and particularised histories which are of high importance to the identities of modern-day practitioners.

### The Irish Historical Context

Among the proliferation of types of witchcraft in the modern West are local variations and national permutations of the “witch” identity and associated magical practices which also incorporate local tra-

---

<sup>1</sup> University College Cork, Cork, Ireland

<sup>2</sup> The field research on which this chapter is based was conducted in the Republic of Ireland, initially for a PhD project funded by a Government of Ireland Scholarship in the Humanities and Social Sciences awarded by the Irish Research Council, and subsequent research on contemporary Paganism in Ireland.

<sup>(5)</sup> © The Author(s) 2019  
Shai Feraro and Ethan Doyle White (eds.)  
Magic and Witchery in the Modern West  
Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15549-0\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15549-0_5)

dition. Wicca in Ireland has its own particular local flavour. When looked at in terms of its historical dissemination, Wicca in Ireland began as an offshoot of British Traditional Wicca, specifically Alexandrianism. With the formation of Wicca occurring in England, its early development in neighbouring Ireland was intricately entwined with the British magical milieu. Perhaps the first Wiccan coven in Ireland was that of Janet and Stewart Farrar, formed when the couple moved to Ireland in 1976.<sup>3</sup> The coven was of the Alexandrian tradition and, to their knowledge,<sup>4</sup> was the first Alexandrian coven in Ireland, possibly preceding any Gardnerian covens in the country. It is interesting to note the description in the biography of Stewart Farrar, *Writer on a Broomstick*, that tells how the contemporary self-identifying witch is immediately placed, by the Irish community around her, in the mould of the wise woman culturally familiar to Ireland: “Upon her arrival at the youthful age of 27, Janet found herself in the role of the ‘old wise woman’ of the village.”<sup>5</sup>

Apart from the “paths” or “traditions” of Wicca present in Ireland, there are also eclectic Wiccans, who merge elements from different Wiccan traditions in their own practices. Additionally, there are witches who are consciously eclectic in selecting elements from Wicca in addition to other forms of witchcraft, both historical and contemporary, since the eclectic identity “is not so much a tradition of neo-Pagan witchcraft as a melding of many traditions”.<sup>6</sup> Writing on the milieu of contemporary ritual magic, Egil Asprem points to the different forms of Wicca and explains that “yet other forms of Wicca may be classified as ‘eclectic’, lacking any formal organisation and blending in seamlessly with the Pagan segments of contemporary occulture”.<sup>7</sup> In Ireland, as a small country, the Pagan community mix, on a social level and in a communicative sense, perhaps more with each other—Wiccans with Druids and neo-Shamans—and the Pagan community with various types of other esoteric groups. There is also overlap between Paganism and various other occult traditions in terms of worldviews, beliefs, and practices, and as Graham Harvey points out, “sometimes Pagans fuse previously or apparently discrete elements of other traditions, practices or ideologies”.<sup>8</sup>

## Cultural Connections

In the Irish cultural context, as in most cultural settings, self-identification as a “witch” is a modern phenomenon. Ireland has its traditional stories of “hags” and magical workers, and there is familiarity with the witch figure of fairytales. Historically, there were those in society with specialist knowledge of healing with herbs or magic, such as the traditional figures of the “wise woman” and “fairy doctor”, discussed in more detail below. Though people associated with otherworldly knowledge were respected and feared through Ireland’s history, there are no known examples of people in Ireland’s past self-identifying as witches, unless such information was extracted by torture or duress. It is unlikely that people would have self-referentially described themselves as witches due to the negative associations with doing harm through magic. “The classic profile of early modern European witchcraft” is as Ronald Hutton describes, one “in which a pact with the Devil is followed by magical harm done to neighbours,

---

<sup>3</sup> Janet and Stewart Farrar relocated within Ireland a number of times, originally settling in Ferns, County Wexford, and moving in 1979 to Ballycroy, County Mayo, then on to Swords in County Dublin, then Drogheda, and finally to Kells in 1985, where Janet and Gavin Bone still reside today.

<sup>4</sup> Information here is based on interviews with Janet Farrar and Gavin Bone on 9 January 2002 at their home and conversations during 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Guerra with Janet Farrar, *Stewart Farrar: Writer on a Broomstick. The Biography of Stewart Farrar* (Cheltenham, Gloucestershire: Skylight Press, 2013 [2008]), 125.

<sup>6</sup> Shelley TSivia Rabinovitch, “Spells of Transformation: Categorizing Modern Neo-Pagan Witches,” in *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft*, ed. James R. Lewis (State University of New York Press, 1996), 78.

<sup>7</sup> Egil Asprem, “Contemporary Ritual Magic,” in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2015), 391.

<sup>8</sup> Graham Harvey, “Contemporary Paganism and the Occult,” in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2015), 361.

as a function of general malevolence on the part of the witch”.<sup>9</sup> The stereotypes of the witch, coupled with the connotations of the word “witch” itself, has meant that it has been used in most contexts in a negative sense.

During the Medieval period, particular ideas circulated about witchcraft, and magic or “sorcery” was understood in terms of evildoing and consorting with the Devil or drawing power or influence from evil spirits. Church authorities and wider society became concerned with the idea of devil-worshippers, sacrilege, and the blasphemy of inverting Christian sacraments. While “sources for the study of medieval Ireland are rare”, according to Andrew Sneddon, “they demonstrate that the universe was viewed in supernatural and, more specifically, magical terms” and argue that, in Ireland, “belief in potentially harmful magic, in particular love magic” had a long lineage “stretching back before Anglo-Norman colonisation in the twelfth century”.<sup>10</sup>

In world history and cross-culturally, the witch figure has accumulated different clusters of meaning—scapegoat for social ills, whether disease, crop failure, or accidents; spellcaster brewing potions in her cauldron; sinister crone who eats children; poisoner—and each and sometimes all of these persist into the present in popular perceptions of what witchcraft is. In the Irish context, traditional ideas about magic and otherworldly knowledge mixed together with the incoming ideas and concepts with different settlers, religions, and worldviews. The Anglo-Normans brought their beliefs and images of witchcraft, which also mixed with what went before. Yet, there wasn’t the prevailing fear of the demonic witch in league with the Devil, and Hutton notes that the Irish “managed to absorb a fervent Counter-Reformation Catholicism without also importing the stereotype of demonic witchcraft that commonly accompanied it”.<sup>11</sup> While Ireland does not have the cultural trauma and folk memory of the witch-hunts and witch-trials that happened in continental Europe, the connections between witchcraft and devil-worship became amalgamated later with the other associated symbols of witchcraft, compounded in modern times by media portrayals and especially horror films and popular literature. Thus, in contemporary Ireland, there are associations made in the popular mindset between consorting with demons and the Devil and witchcraft, and the lumping together of Pagan witchcraft practitioners and Satanists (in the popular sense of devil-worshippers).

Contemporary Pagan witches selectively engage with the corpus of images and cultural meanings associated with witches and witchcraft and create a unique witch identity that is part of the modern Pagan milieu, rejecting those associations which do not fit with the modern identity or that might be found distasteful. As historian Joanne Pearson notes, “the witch appears as an active and powerful figure, culturally constructed throughout history and easily manipulated to fit each age: that people today are happy to call themselves witches is just one more example of this process”.<sup>12</sup>

However, the cluster of meanings maintained within contemporary Pagan discourse can be difficult to convey to wider society where all of the other largely negative and derogatory associations endure and in a sphere in which contemporary Paganism is not widely understood. This has resulted in some prejudice against Pagans in general, and witches in particular, whether due to cultural fears of magic or religious-informed condemnation of occult involvement. Marginalisation of Wicca and other forms of witchcraft has resulted in some practitioners declining to make their involvement public and perhaps even to keep it secret from their family and friends. In her ethnographic study, *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America*, Sabina Magliocco says that “on the job”, Pagans “may try to minimise any elements that could identify them as members of a misunderstood religious minority and jeopardise their employment”.<sup>13</sup> This is also the case with some Irish witches who come from Catholic backgrounds

---

<sup>9</sup> Ronald Hutton, “Witch-Hunting in Celtic Societies,” *Past & Present* 212 (2011): 48.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Sneddon, *Witchcraft and Magic in Ireland* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 9.

<sup>11</sup> Hutton, “Witch-Hunting,” 63.

<sup>12</sup> Joanne Pearson, “Witches and Wicca,” in *Belief Beyond Boundaries: Wicca, Celtic Spirituality and the New Age*, ed. Joanne Pearson (Milton Keynes and Hants: The Open University in association with Ashgate Publishing, 2002), 168.

<sup>13</sup> Sabina Magliocco, *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 62.



or still live in Catholic households, or who may not want their employer to know about their occult involvement.

As mentioned above, the Irish occult milieu has always been closely interconnected with that of Britain, and particularly England, while trends and changing understandings of witchcraft and the occult have been similar in both regions. Some of my informants would have lived through the “Satanic Panic”, when fear of “Satanic cults” spread, largely inspired by the publication of *Michelle Remembers* by Michelle Smith and her husband, the psychiatrist Lawrence Pazder. In this book, the claim was made that Smith was remembering traumatic experiences at the hands of a Satanic cult. It resulted in a theory of organised “Satanic ritual abuse” occurring in contemporary society. During the 1980s and on into the 1990s, panic spread through the United States and United Kingdom about a “Satanic network”<sup>14</sup> that was sexually abusing children, practicing mind control, and even conducting human sacrifices. The belief that a Satanic network existed led to social workers removing children from parents who were believed to be involved in Satanic groups. This moral panic spread from the United States to the United Kingdom, where there were also cases of children being taken into care based on the belief that Satanic ritual abuse was occurring. “Occult activity”, including Paganism and witchcraft, was lumped together as “Satanic” at the time. By the time these social fears of Satanic ritual abuse subsided in the 1990s, and Smith and Pazder’s book had been discredited, long lasting damage had been done.

The belief that such a Satanic network existed cemented together the popular fears of the occult and ideas about secret networks being nefarious in purpose, and this conflation of ideas still lingers in relation to popular ideas about Paganism and witchcraft covens. Ann-Marie Gallagher points out that it is still the case that Pagan spiritualities “provoke fear and hatred amongst other groupings (both religious and non-religious) to the point that the fear of child kidnap by misinformed social workers is still real”.<sup>15</sup> Ideas have also persisted in popular culture about witches as diabolical agents practicing what was effectively described as a transposition and inversion of Christian worship, and “in accounts of witches’ Sabbaths, the rituals of the witches—being baptized in the name of Satan, parodies of the Eucharist, and so forth—appear as a sort of shadow to those of the Church”.<sup>16</sup> Since Pagan witches use the name “Sabbat” for their festivals,<sup>17</sup> there can be misunderstandings between this ritualised system of celebration of the changing seasons and the devil-worship accounts of the witch-trials. Given this historical backdrop of fear, and the fact that Catholicism is still the dominant religion in the country, one might assume that the practice of witchcraft would be rejected outright by wider society, but the situation in Ireland is much more complex than this.

## Religious Witchcraft in a Catholic Country

From the beginnings of recorded history, religion has been a definitional aspect of Irish identity and “it is a truism to say that the Catholic Church came to dominate both the public identity and the personal values of the great majority of the Irish people from the middle of the nineteenth century until recent times”.<sup>18</sup> Roman Catholicism has had a longstanding and strong influence over the lives of the Irish population, but these power structures and influences are now dwindling and starting to decline. In

---

<sup>14</sup> For an analysis of the “Satanic Ritual Abuse Panic”, see David Frankfurter, “The Satanic Ritual Abuse Panic as Religious-Studies Data,” *Numen* 50, no. 1 (2003): 108–117; for an analysis of the English context in particular, see Jean La Fontaine, *Witches and Demons: A Comparative Perspective on Witchcraft and Satanism* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Ann-Marie Gallagher, “Weaving a Tangled Web? Pagan Ethics and Issues of History, ‘Race’ and Ethnicity in Pagan Identity,” in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, ed. James R. Lewis and Murphy Pizza (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 587–588.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Laycock, “Carnal Knowledge: The Epistemology of Sexual Trauma in Witches’ Sabbaths, Satanic Ritual Abuse, and Alien Abduction Narratives,” *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural* 1, no. 1 (2012): 103.

<sup>17</sup> The phrase “witches’ sabbath” appears in witch-trial records to describe an outdoor gathering of witches with the Devil during the night. It has been suggested that the term as used during witch-hunts was derived from Hebrew and is possibly an imagined diabolical version of the Jewish “Sabbath”.

<sup>18</sup> Niall Coll, “Irish Identity and the Future of Catholicism,” in *Irish Catholic Identities*, ed. Oliver P. Rafferty (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 362.

spite of clerical sexual abuse scandals, media and public outcries over the treatment of survivors of the Magdalene Laundries, and of babies and their mothers in Catholic-run Mother and Baby Homes, the Catholic Church still holds much power in Irish society. Despite a fall in numbers, Roman Catholicism is still statistically the hegemonic religion of the country and “the island’s history of religious devotion and religious conflict continues to cast its shadow over social and political life”.<sup>19</sup> Given this situation, people growing up in Irish households—whether that household is Catholic or not—will be influenced to a greater or lesser extent depending on circumstance by Catholic ethos, ideology, or explicit religious belief. Kathryn Rountree, in her study of contemporary Pagans in Malta, remarks that even where these practitioners “identify spiritually as Pagan, they are, unavoidably, culturally Catholic”<sup>20</sup> and, in drawing some parallels between her ethnographic research in Malta and my ethnography of Irish Paganism, she observes that “overall, Irish and Maltese Pagans are perhaps less antagonistic towards the prevailing Catholicism of their societies than many of their counterparts elsewhere are towards Christianity”.<sup>21</sup> Similar to the Maltese context, people in Ireland who self-identify as witches have likely been raised if not in an overtly Catholic household, then in a society with a hegemonic Catholic ethos, where Catholicism has long been tied in subtle ways to Irishness itself to the extent that “being Irish and being Catholic became synonymous”.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, self-identifying as a witch in an Ireland that is still considered a Catholic country might seem provocative in some sectors of society at least.

Pagans are largely critical of Christianity, which is generally understood in Ireland as Catholicism or Protestantism.<sup>23</sup> Their critique focuses on Christianity’s monotheistic dogma and the hierarchical and patriarchal organisation of churches, while (along with other sectors of Irish society) Pagans have shown outrage at the widespread and endemic institutional corruption and abuses (sexual and otherwise) of the Catholic Church. More broadly, Irish Pagans rail against the Catholic Church’s continued efforts to secure spiritual authority over those who do not share this faith. One of main arguments made for legitimacy in the present day, by Irish Pagans at least, is that Paganism pre-dates Christianity and that the land itself has ancient, sacred precedence. The case is made frequently by Pagans that nature religion is the “indigenous” or “true” religion of the country.

## The Craft of the Wise and Hidden Knowledge

While claiming an ancient spiritual provenance as Pagans, the majority of Wiccans have detailed knowledge of the development of their own religious movement and simultaneously recognise that religious witchcraft in this form was founded by Gerald Gardner. Despite being well informed of Gardner’s activities and influences, the impact of Margaret Murray’s theory of a pre-Christian fertility cult existing in Europe, as she outlined in *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921), still persists in the discourses of Wiccans today in Ireland and globally. Ethan Doyle White observes that “at the heart of Wicca’s traditional conception of its own history lies the witch-cult theory”.<sup>24</sup> Murray’s influence can still be seen on Pagan websites and in popular books, especially her claim that a prehistoric “witch cult” continued intact as a religious tradition. Similarly, Murray’s ideas about the witch-trials are still influential, particularly her presentation of how ecclesiastical authorities had distorted the older reli-

<sup>19</sup> Gladys Ganiel, *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland: Religious Practice in Late Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Kathryn Rountree, *Crafting Contemporary Pagan Identities in a Catholic Society* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2010), 80.

<sup>21</sup> Rountree, *Pagan Identities*, 4–5.

<sup>22</sup> Tom Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1998), 17.

<sup>23</sup> “Protestant” in Irish popular discourse normally refers to the denominations of Anglican and Presbyterian, rather than the evangelical denominations like Pentecostalism or Baptist that were introduced to Irish society in later times; the particularised understanding of “Protestantism” is connected to the political and cultural situation that arose due to colonisation and conflict in Ireland’s history.

<sup>24</sup> Ethan Doyle White, *Wicca: History, Belief, and Community in Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Brighton, Chicago and Toronto: Sussex Academic Press, 2016), 14.

gious symbolism to play on the cultural fears of people in the Middle Ages, thereby connecting various traditional practices with devil-worship. As James Lewis states, “Gardner added only one ingredient to Murray’s claim, namely the claim that some witches—who were lineal descendants of prehistoric practitioners—had survived into modern times”<sup>25</sup> and this notion has been encountered during field research with Irish witches, whether oblique allusions to “witches” being tortured in the past or comparisons between themselves and those accused of practicing witchcraft during historical trials, or more explicit references to the “Burning Times”.<sup>26</sup> The “Burning Times” refers to the atrocities that occurred during the witch-trials and a common phrase among contemporary Pagan witches, “never again the Burning Times”, reflects an underlying identification of these modern practitioners with those people in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who were persecuted on charges of practicing witchcraft. This identification and solidarity points again to the idea of a discernible historical connection between modern self-identifying Pagan witches and those accused “witches” of past centuries.

There is also a tendency by some Pagan witches to conflate the information known from pre-history, and particularly pre-Christian Europe, with the popular customs—along with the idea of concealed knowledge in those popular customs—of the early modern period and later, and some even relate the court proceedings of the witch-trials to this material. Helen Cornish remarks that “despite criticisms of claims to continuous religious witchcraft, a crucial feature has been re-invoked—namely, that folk magic employed by cunning folk as a repository of hidden and surviving knowledge has been transmitted through oral traditions”.<sup>27</sup>

It should be highlighted that there is a whole spectrum of beliefs and understandings across Pagan communities, as in any other religious or cultural group; there are those who are well read in academic literature on religions and quite conscious of the historical realities, while others are more influenced by romanticised portrayals of a pagan Golden Age in the distant past. Existing within this spectrum are a number of different strands of thought to do with historical continuities and despite evidence that those accused did not likely self-identity or even practice witchcraft, and were not devotees of the “Old Religion”, this idea of a long-established line of witches through time is still extant among contemporary Pagans. As Hutton states, “the idea that the people who were tried for witchcraft in early modern Europe were actually devotees of a pre-Christian religion has a long pedigree”.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, for many Pagan witches, this lineage stretches back into the Celtic past and even with an awareness that there is not sufficient evidence to claim a traceable lineage right back to the Celts, the idea of hidden magical knowledge is an attractive one. Arising from this claim of a strand of esoteric knowledge to be found within the popular customs of times past, some witches provide traditional foundation narratives whereby an account is given of how witchcraft proceeded directly from the folk practices of the early modern era and some witches claim an uninterrupted lineage can be traced back centuries through practitioners, whether family members or otherwise.

The Romantic idea that ordinary people or “the folk” are repositories of special knowledge, whether hidden or dwindling, has motivated folklore collectors through the ages and also influences contemporary Pagan worldviews. As Sabina Magliocco remarks, “neo-paganism grows out of a yearning for cultural elements which have been lost or repressed, and an attempt to re-create them, or an approximation of them, in a contemporary context”.<sup>29</sup> It is interesting to note that the same imaginative mechanism is at work—itself a creation of the Romantic movement—in relation to the conceptualisation of “the folk”

<sup>25</sup> James R. Lewis, “Celts, Druids and the Invention of Tradition,” in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, ed. James R. Lewis and Murphy Pizza (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 481.

<sup>26</sup> A song called “Burning Times” written by Charlie Murphy and sung by popular Irish folk singer, Christy Moore, is well liked among the Irish Pagan community. The chorus of this song is often sung as a refrain during rituals: “Hear them chanting healing incantations/Calling for the wise ones, celebrating in dance and song/Isis, Astarte, Diana, Hecate, Demeter, Kali, Inanna”.

<sup>27</sup> Helen Cornish, “Cunning Histories: Privileging Narratives in the Present,” *History and Anthropology* 16, no. 3 (2002): 365.

<sup>28</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles: Their Nature and Legacy* (Malden, MA; Oxford and Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2003 [1991]), 300.

<sup>29</sup> Sabina Magliocco, “Reclamation, Appropriation and the Ecstatic Imagination in Modern Pagan Ritual,” in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, ed. James R. Lewis and Murphy Pizza (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 229.

for folklorists and the conceptualisation of the “magical folk” for Pagan witches. In her discussion of the intellectual history of folkloristics, Regina Bendix states that ethnicity and the conceptualisation of tradition “all turn in one way or another around dearly held beliefs in authenticity”.<sup>30</sup> In this way, a comparison can be made between the way in which folklorists inspired by romanticism understand folklore materials and the way in which folk cultures are understood by Pagans influenced by Romantic notions—ordinary people of the past are seen as continuing in an unadulterated form some type of “mystical” or spiritual knowledge in their customs and traditions. Concern with historical precedence and its associated legitimating power is very much to the fore in the contemporary Pagan movement, whether with regard to identity, political, and cultural status in the modern world, or in relation to magical lineage (initiatory or otherwise) and bona fide ritual actions. For example, Pagan witches look to traditional celebrations of the Irish ritual year in creating their rituals to mark the changing seasons.<sup>31</sup>

Folklore materials are utilised by Pagans in creative ways, for example, as inspiration when designing rituals and, as Magliocco points out, “folklore—in the form of narrative techniques and motifs—provides a door into the ecstatic imagination for many people”.<sup>32</sup> Nineteenth-century antiquarian folklore collections are used by Pagan witches for inspiration and information on Ireland’s past, but at issue here is the romantic filter already applied by the collectors of that material. The late nineteenth century saw what became known as the Anglo-Irish Literary Revival with its underpinnings of Romantic-era ideas and references. These notions were enhanced by the poet William Butler Yeats (1865–1939), who gave the literary renaissance itself the nickname “The Celtic Twilight”. Yeats, with his various interests, bridged the gap between the areas of traditional Irish culture and the occult milieu, a cultural intersection at the heart of the world of Pagan witchcraft. Yeats and his literary contemporaries romantically reimagined the “folk” of Ireland as being the inheritors of cultural strands passed down from a Celtic golden age. The folklore materials collected by the writers of this Revival, and the images of the ordinary Irish portrayed by them, were influential in the development of contemporary Paganism in Ireland and, for some, the folklore collections of this era are a vehicle via which they can engage with Ireland’s past and traditional culture.

The presumed spiritual connection that ancestral peoples had with the land and with nature is of thematic prominence in contemporary Pagan literature and discourse, whether in the sense of people physically sustaining themselves by living off the land—farming and fishing—or by spiritually sustaining themselves through connection to the land, spirits of place, and the expression of this connection through seasonal festivities and local custom to do with observance of the natural progression and cycles of plant and animal life.

## Healers, Hags, and Fairies

Of particular appeal for modern Pagan witches is the traditional figure of the “wise woman” and the male equivalent, the “fairy doctor” or “cunning man”. As mentioned above, there is a desire among contemporary Pagans to reconnect with natural cycles and natural healing methods, which for many means using unprocessed and “chemical free” (i.e. not synthetic or produced by Big Pharma) substances derived from plants. Among some Pagans there is also the desire to return to simpler lifestyles, a slower pace of work, and a higher value is placed on traditional methods of doing things. The traditional witch figure of Ireland is known as the *bean feasa*, the Irish language term for “wise woman”, or by the name *cailleach*, an Irish language term for “hag”, though used synonymously with the word “witch” when translated into English.

---

<sup>30</sup> Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 216.

<sup>31</sup> For additional information, see my article on the Irish Pagan community’s engagement with the traditional celebration of seasonal festivals, “The Neo-Pagan Ritual Year,” *Cosmos* 18 (2002): 121–142.

<sup>32</sup> Magliocco, “Reclamation,” 239.

This local witch figure is associated with knowledge of plant lore. Herbalism is part of the Irish healing tradition of pre-modern Ireland. Plant-based healing is viewed by many as more authentic and better since it stretches back long before the established medical profession. As Gearóid Ó Cruailaich described, “in the vernacular culture of the pre-modern Irish countryside, illness and injury are treated also, of course, by the herbalist and the bonesetter and to an increasing but very limited degree in the course of the nineteenth century, by the medical profession”,<sup>33</sup> and it is this older knowledge system that influences the practices of many Pagan witches today. Traditional healers in the pre-modern era might not have had the systematised knowledge associated with herbalism today, as found in health shops and specialised courses, and as Diane Purkiss points out, “contrary to wishful New Age thinking, most cunning folk did not use medicinal herbs, though many did use herbs magically”.<sup>34</sup> In a sense, this activity of traditional healers adheres to the contemporary prevalent stereotype of the witch as producer of poultices, tinctures, potions, and magical brews.

The use of traditional healing methods is connected with the witch identity, whether or not magical practice is involved. The association of oneself as witch with the use of traditional charms and cures lends a sense of authenticity to modern-day practitioners. Embedding a new religious movement such as Wicca in a historical backdrop and interlinking it with older forms of healing, celebration, and living allows for the creation of a unique identity and legitimises the cultural setting into which Wicca can be placed, in this case Irish Wicca. As Eric Hobsbawm points out, “all invented traditions, so far as possible, use history as a legitimator”<sup>35</sup> and this is a prominent feature of Wiccans’ discourse in speaking about the history of Wicca or Paganism and more pointedly in self-referential narratives where personal magical and traditional cultural histories are emphasised for the status and cachet this brings. This is undeniably a process found in the identity-construction of every individual and social grouping and “it is clear that different social groups adhere to different corpuses of tradition in defining their identities or in ascribing their identities to themselves”.<sup>36</sup> For Pagan identities, something from one’s past or connections with ancestors or locale becomes significant to a greater or lesser extent in defining themselves for the present. Within Wicca and other forms of Pagan witchcraft, the emphasis on past traditional lore and life is an obvious attempt to root the identities in the past and to add a sense of connection to what went before. Perhaps practitioners feel some unease around accusations—from the academic community as well as in media representations—of Wicca and other forms of modern Paganism being a passing pop-culture fad, and thus the grounding in Ireland’s cultural history becomes ever more important.

It must be noted that many of the connections being made by Pagan witches with traditional healers, and the practice of certain types of rituals, involve some reinterpretations and reimagining of the past. Historicity becomes ancillary when more imaginative connections are being made between present and past spiritualities and context can at times be transcended in favour of making “magical” connections explicit and in this process “the interesting question”, as Frykman and Löfgren point out, “is not whether this [process of] tradition-building gives a true or false picture of the past, but why this particular version of a shared history is chosen”.<sup>37</sup>

Discrepancies in worldview and belief between past peoples and modern practitioners may be overlooked in favour of similitude of custom and practice. Most prominent here is the difference between the meaning of “magic” in the popular mindset of the Irish of past eras and that of contemporary witches, influenced as they are by Thelemic and other occult conceptions of magic as manipulating spiritual energies or living in accordance with one’s magickal Will. The ethical framework of Wicca,

<sup>33</sup> Gearóid Ó Cruailaich, *The Book of the Cailleach: Stories of the Wise-Woman Healer* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2003), 73.

<sup>34</sup> Diane Purkiss, *Troublesome Things: A History of Fairies and Fairy Stories* (London: Allen Lane, 2000), 126.

<sup>35</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 12.

<sup>36</sup> Alan Gailey, Gailey, “Tradition and Identity,” in *The Use of Tradition: Essays Presented to G. B. Thompson*, ed. Alan Gailey (Co. Down: Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, 1988), 65.

<sup>37</sup> Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren, “Introduction,” in *Force of Habit: Exploring Everyday Culture*, ed. Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren (Lund: Lund University Press, 1996), 17.

with the maxim “An it harm none, do what thou wilt” and the “Threefold Law”—where there is the belief that the consequence or outcome of a magical ritual will return three times to the practitioner of that ritual—would conflict with historical understandings of witchcraft and witchcraft practices. For example, the historical practice of love magic mentioned above would be at variance with the moral codes of Wiccans, since such love spells would involve interference with the Will of another person, and in Wicca, the “will” has specific meaning as “a person’s ability to desire, think and act—it is a person’s agency. Will is much more than a person’s desire or emotions”.<sup>38</sup> The practice of love magic akin to that found in the historical record could potentially embroil the practitioner in doing harm by magic, which counters the “harm none” part of the Wiccan Rede.

There are also differences in understandings of the source of magical knowledge and powers in contemporary and historical contexts. Magical events and influences, in traditional Irish worldview, are often associated with an otherworldly realm, one that is in Ireland most often described as the world of the *Sidhe* (fairies). Indeed, “the curative powers of the wise woman”, as Nancy Schmitz states, “are directly related to the fairy world”<sup>39</sup> and there are legends of the wise woman dealing with ailments arising from otherworldly contact.<sup>40</sup> Historically, there are accounts and recorded beliefs in cunning-folk creating protective charms against the fairies and otherwise dealing magically with supernatural aggression: “In early modern (and beyond), Gaelic-Irish culture, cunning-folk, along with specific rituals and magical protective devices, were often used to counter fairy attacks.”<sup>41</sup> Contemporary Pagan conceptualisations of fairies are influenced by a number of sources, including Romantic writings, fantasy art and literature, Theosophy, and other esoteric traditions. It is more likely that Wiccans would claim healing as the result of intervention by deities or knowledge as resulting from communication with ancestors, while they have a more animistic conceptualisation of fairies as nature spirits indwelling in the land.

It is common for Pagan witches to try to communicate with fairies and to involve them in ritual practices—sometimes inviting them into the magical circle to take part—or sometimes to associate them with elementals. It would therefore seem offensive to the Pagan mindset for practitioners to make charms to use against the fairies or to act in ways antagonistic to the fairy folk. Modern Irish Pagans’ conceptualisations of the fairies or *sidhe* as analogous to elementals are similar to the linking, in the Victorian imagination, of fairies to the elementals and other understandings of spirits within various esoteric traditions. This is an aspect Carole Silver remarked upon in her discussion of Victorian societal fascination with fairies: “The fascination with the fairies manifests itself in other ways, as well. It is evidenced in the society’s concern with the ‘occult beings’ found at séances; with the spirits, poltergeists, and elementals of Spiritualist, Rosicrucian, and Theosophical belief; and the attempts to connect these creatures to the elfin species known to folklore.”<sup>42</sup> Again, images and symbols—fairies, megaliths, wilderness, and being out in nature—generated during the Romantic movement, and the conflation of different understandings of the spiritual realm, and of discrete spirit-beings, permeate Paganism still and modern witches continue to engage with these symbols and ideas, albeit mixed together in a new meaningful framework.

## Romantics, Megaliths, and Celtic Wicca

As Earth-based spirituality, the various forms of Paganism rely heavily on nature—understood as landscape, cosmic forces, and changing seasons—as the basis for their spiritual expression through ritual, art, and story. Depending on the individual or group, rituals may be held in homes or out on the

<sup>38</sup> Brandon J. Harwood, “Beyond Poetry and Magick: The Core Elements of Wiccan Morality,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 22, no. 3 (2007): 379.

<sup>39</sup> Nancy Schmitz, “An Irish Wise Woman: Fact and Legend,” *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 14, no. 3 (1977): 172.

<sup>40</sup> *Ó Cruaíaoich*, Book of the Cailleach, 94.

<sup>41</sup> *Sneddon*, *Witchcraft and Magic*, 15.

<sup>42</sup> Carole G. Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 4.

landscape at sacred sites. Locations deemed to be sacred sites by Ireland's witches and other Pagans include the ancient mounds of sites like the Hill of Tara in County Meath and megalithic structures such as stone circles and standing stones. These sites are hyper-symbolic, associated with ancestral peoples, "Celtic spirituality", mythic narratives and local stories, as well as contemporary ritual practices and the "energies" said to be felt at these places.

The practices themselves are sometimes described by Pagan witches as "Celtic ritual" or as part of a "Celtic spiritual practice". The notion of Celtic spirituality, developed within a particular context—the peak of the Romantic era in the nineteenth century and the images and symbols (including the association between Celts and megalithic monuments)—still find resonance today in various new religious movements and have merged with other popular conceptions of the Celtic to be found in areas of popular culture, including fantasy art and comic books. The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Celtic Revival movements placed most emphasis on the languages, landscapes, and lifeways of the so-called peasantry as being Celtic-infused as part of the co-association of language and place with a distant culture, as pointed out by Diarmuid Ó Giolláin when he notes that "with Romanticism the ancient Celts were idealised as were the landscapes inhabited by the modern speakers of Celtic languages".<sup>43</sup>

The Romantic-era notion of language containing some kind of spiritual essence also influences modern Paganism. Using the Irish language, rather than English, is believed to help people to connect spiritually to place, and there exists an emphasis on place-names associated with druidic practices or the deities of the Pagan religion. Among a multitude of examples are the place-name Kildare, an anglicised form of *Cill Dara* interpreted as meaning "church of the oak" (from *cill*, "church" and *daoire*, "oak") and the connection of these trees with druids or as "oak forest" (from *coill*, "woods"); the longest river in Ireland, the Shannon, an anglicisation of a goddess's name, Sionnan, and the River Boyne or *an Bhóinn* (from Old Irish *Bóand*) named for the goddess Bóann. Another common idea among Pagans is that the deities communicate in older languages, or at least that it is respectful to communicate in the "language of the land", which in the case of Ireland would be Old Irish. The Irish names for festivals, or variants of them, are used by Irish Pagans—*Samhain*, *Imbolc*, *Bealtaine*, *Lughnasadh*—but are described by Pagans as part of the Wheel of the Year or eight Sabbats observed by witches and other Pagans. Some ritual actions also place emphasis on Irish words, whether consciously by using Irish words in ritual practice, or words that seem to be derived from the Irish language.

One example is the word "deosil" used by Wiccans and other Pagans to denote moving—usually circling or casting a circle—in a clockwise direction. The word deosil is an anglicised form of the Gaelic word *deiseal*, meaning "clockwise". *Deiseal* has the meaning of turning to the right, and derives from the word *deas*, which also has connotations of "positive", "appropriate", and "pleasant". In the practice of folk magic in Ireland and elsewhere, there are many ritual actions that involve clockwise rotation in order to attain positive outcomes and, conversely, counter-clockwise motions when attempting to hex or curse someone or something. Since to move clockwise is to turn in accordance with the sun's trajectory as perceived in the sky, it has associations with the progression of the cosmic order and *deiseal*, according to Stiofán Ó Cadhla in his discussion of popular religious practices such as circumambulation at holy wells, is "movement in harmony with the sun's diurnal course and was thought from ancient times to be auspicious".<sup>44</sup> Wiccans tend to favour the term *widdershins* (or *withershins*), the Scottish term for anti-clockwise, for example,<sup>45</sup> when "closing" the magic circle by retracing the steps used to cast it and so to undo it, rather than the Irish language term, *tuathal* or *ag dul tuathal*, to go counter-clockwise.

While Romantic intellectuals and artists identified the Celtic strands, as they saw them, in the contemporary world around them, with their focus on language and land, there is a different process at work with modern Paganism and other Celtic Revival movements of our age; what is clearly discernible today is the confident self-identification as a Celt and the efforts made to engage with Celtic languages,

<sup>43</sup> Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, *Locating Irish Folklore: Tradition, Modernity, Identity* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000), 25.

<sup>44</sup> Stiofán Ó Cadhla, *The Holy Well Tradition: The Pattern of St. Declan, Ardmore, County Waterford, 1800–2000* (Maynooth Studies in Local History, No. 45, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), 11.

<sup>45</sup> M. M. Banks, "Widdershins; Irish *Tuaithbheal*, *Tuathal*," *Folklore* 38 (1927): 86–88.

lands, and associated mythologies. This phenomenon extends to the religious sphere in how people are deliberately engaging in practices they understand as being Celtic, as Lewis acknowledges when he states that “an aspect of the present [Celtic] revival that sets it apart from its predecessors is the extent to which Celtophiles are appropriating Celtic identities and, as part of this appropriation, engaging in religious practices perceived to be Celtic”.<sup>46</sup> The contemporary religious interest in the Celts is relatively new and “while there have been various periods of fascination with Celts”, as Marion Bowman remarks, “they have not had such spiritual significance as we are witnessing now”.<sup>47</sup>

The type of religiosity demarcated as Celtic is nature-based and gentle, with a focus on attuning to the natural world and cosmic rhythms. Donald Meek, in his study of the new religious movement of Celtic Christianity, discusses the “sentimentalisation” of modern society in people’s perceptions and thinking about the past and remarks on the moods of “retrospection and nostalgia”.<sup>48</sup> There is a yearning among contemporary Pagan communities for a more intimate connection to the land and an awareness of humans’ disconnection from nature. Idealised pictures abound on Pagan forums—websites, popular literature, artwork—of witches gathering herbs for their potions, of goddess-worshippers assembled outside under a full moon. Symbols and images of the witch figure from different time periods, cultures, and formats (literature, religious belief, film and television) blend together and form a new fabric of meaning into which modern Pagan witchcraft is placed.

Of special interest in terms of identity formation and maintenance is the relationship between self-identifications as being a follower of religious witchcraft and the cultural canon of symbols and motifs of the witch figure in history. Caricatures, fairytale hags, Halloween decorations, and traditional charmers are all referenced within the sphere of modern witchcraft but distinctions are clear as to what is the “serious” practice of the Craft and what is a pop-culture stereotype on show for light relief.<sup>49</sup>

In the preface to *The Triumph of the Moon*, Hutton says that “the unique significance of pagan witchcraft to history is that it is the only religion which England has ever given the world”.<sup>50</sup> As an English tradition that was “imported” into Ireland, it is interesting to observe the political and cultural dynamics of its incorporation into the Irish context. One way of wedding Wicca to the local setting is to embed it into Ireland by creating a place among multifaceted associations—historical witch figures and local healers who used magic, language, landscape, sacred sites, festivals, and so on—until it is interwoven in that web of meaning and in-extractable from it. Another way is to create a sub-type of Wicca that connects directly to the Celtic by way of mythology and ancient religious symbols. A member of a coven based near Dublin explained her view that the tradition her group follows can be regarded as “Celtic Wicca” because it venerates deities across the Celtic pantheon:

The Celtic part is more that we take account of the energies of this land here, which are quite specific; they’re quite different from what you get on the Continent or say, in the States, and also some of the traditions in both worship and belief. We also only worship the Celtic deities. We wouldn’t worship Egyptian deities or Norse deities. [...] We worship all of them [Celtic deities] and not just the Irish ones. Also, say, Welsh deities. For example, our Coven goddess is Arianrhod who’s a Welsh deity of rebirth. But my personal patron deities are Brigit and Herne the Hunter.

---

<sup>46</sup> Lewis, “Celts, Druids,” 480.

<sup>47</sup> Marion Bowman, “Cardiac Celts: Images of the Celts in Paganism,” in *Pagan Pathways: A Complete Guide to the Ancient Earth Traditions*, ed. Charlotte Hardman and Graham Harvey (London: Thorsons, 2000), 242.

<sup>48</sup> Donald Meek, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 2000), 23.

<sup>49</sup> For a discussion of how such distinctions are made, in Pagan discourse and use of symbol, between light-hearted references to the witch figure and sincere indication of cultural elements significant to practitioners’ identities and practices, see my chapter, “Neo-Pagan Celebrations of Samhain,” in *Treat or Trick? Halloween in a Globalising World*, ed. Malcolm Foley and Hugh O’Donnell (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 67–82.

<sup>50</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), vii.



The insistence on a Celtic form of Wicca may be a way of transcending the issue of Wicca as an “English religion”. Even if Wiccan practitioners do not self-identify as Celtic Wiccans, their discourses and popular literature are influenced by Romantic ideas of the Celtic world and by those concepts of Celtic cultures that persist in the folklore collections that contemporary Pagans tend to utilise as an information resource.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Now a global religion and practice, Wicca always manifests local inflections, taking in some of the cultural context and historical traditions of those places in which it finds itself. Perhaps as a way of side-stepping Ireland’s colonial history and the continuing issues around indigeneity, ethnicity, and identity politics, Irish Pagan witches place emphasis on idealised images of a past—specifically, the world of the Celts—mixed with symbols from an agrarian pre-modern world. To connect with nature, these witches place importance on both the land itself and its built heritage, especially the “sacred sites” which lend further symbolic significance and associations of spiritual lineage. Together, these dynamics serve to create a niche for Ireland’s modern Pagan witch identities to fit neatly into.

## 6. The Taming of the Fae: Literary and Folkloric Fairies in Modern Paganisms<sup>(6)</sup>

Sabina Magliocco<sup>1</sup>

In his essay, “The Making of the Early Modern British Fairy Tradition”, Ronald Hutton shows how between the twelfth and the seventeenth centuries, a proliferation of literary works about a category of folkloric beings led to a systematisation of popular knowledge about fairies, as they came to be called, such that by the 1600s, the fairies of popular imagination owed at least as much to literature as they did to oral tradition.<sup>2</sup> Ronald’s paper raises important questions about the relationship between literary and oral tradition—questions that lie at the heart of folklore studies, my own field of specialisation.

Here, I want to extend this discussion by examining more closely how folkloric and literary traditions about fairies influenced their revival in modern Pagan subculture. Because modern Paganism is essentially a twentieth- and twenty-first-century movement, I will be looking at literary and film depictions from the Victorian era to the first decade of the twenty-first century, as well as contemporary oral traditions as they exist among modern Pagans. I will argue that modern Pagan conceptualisations of fairies owe a great deal to the ways Victorians and Edwardians re-imagined them and to how they came to be a part of children’s literature and films. This should not surprise us in the least, because it fits well with a theme that Prof. Hutton has explored at length in *The Triumph of the Moon*<sup>3</sup> and *Blood and Mistletoe*<sup>4</sup>: the Pagan revival is part of a British romantic movement that expressed itself through the art and literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I argue further that the reason Pagans feel comfortable interacting with fairies to the extent that they do is that the fairies have undergone a significant process of “taming” that began in the twelfth century and found its apotheosis in the work of folklorists, literary fiction authors, and filmmakers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Of course, the folk tradition also plays a significant role in Pagan conceptions of fairies and how to interact with them. However, as in the case of folktales, the literary and oral traditions are not completely separate, nor have they ever been. Fairy lore stands as a case study of how legend traditions exist simultaneously in both oral and written (and now also cinematic and digital) form; all these forms exist in an ongoing dialogue and continue to influence one another. Even spiritual and mystical experiences are perceived through the lens of culture: my subjects’ encounters with the fae reflect broader cultural notions about them that are also expressed in literature and visual representations. Yet the mysterious phenomenological nature of fairy encounters guarantees that fairies behave a bit like cats: they both are and are not domesticated, dwelling perpetually in a liminal state at the edge of human society, interacting intimately with humans yet belonging to a seemingly separate and at times unpredictable and potentially dangerous order.

---

<sup>1</sup> University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada

**Email:** sabina.magliocco@ubc.ca

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Hutton, “The Making of Early Modern British Fairy Tradition,” *The Historical Journal* 57 (2014): 161–178.

<sup>3</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Ronald Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe: A History of the Druids* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

<sup>(6)</sup> © The Author(s) 2019  
Shai Feraro and Ethan Doyle White (eds.)  
Magic and Witchery in the Modern West  
Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15549-0\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15549-0_6)

My findings come from a mixed methods study based on a large survey with over 500 respondents from English-speaking areas of the world, plus some European nations; 20 interviews with modern Pagans chosen because of their specialised knowledge of relationships with fairy beings; and a survey of popular literature and films regarding fairies, selected on the basis of survey and interview responses.

## Pagans and Fairies

Modern Pagans are interested in fairies because they belong to a category of beings that the dominant Christian culture was never fully able to digest and assimilate. As such, they can more easily be “filtered out of it and recombined to develop a modern Pagan identity”.<sup>5</sup> Fairies first entered modern Paganism through the works of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century folklorists, who collected fairy legends from rural areas of Britain and synthesised earlier legend material on the fairies found in witch trial documents, memoirs, and what were then called “popular antiquities”, making it available to a general readership.<sup>6</sup> Among those readers was Gerald B. Gardner, the founder of Gardnerian Wicca. In *Witchcraft Today*, Gardner drew from the racialised “pygmy theories” popular at the turn of the twentieth century that explained the origin of fairies as the remnants of a small, dark race which had inhabited Britain before the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons. As these “Little People” were pushed into marginal areas by each successive new invader, some remained on friendly terms with their neighbours, helping them with crafts and occasionally coupling and intermarrying with them.<sup>7</sup> Witches, he asserts, were the product of these unions, as they were especially known to have fairy blood.<sup>8</sup> This explained the close association of witches and fairies in witch trial transcripts, where the accused sometimes reported learning aspects of their craft from the fairies.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the Little People continued to practice their own pre-Christian religion, which featured deities analogous to Diana and Aphrodite.<sup>10</sup> This argument bolstered Gardner’s claim that witches were practising an ancient pagan religion—one preserved from antiquity by the Little People. Later Pagan authors, notably Victor Anderson, also took up this narrative; being American, he extended the Little People argument to indigenous peoples of the Americas and Hawai’i.<sup>11</sup>

More broadly, Victorian interest in fairies was part of the same cultural gestalt that resulted in the birth of the modern Pagan movement: a romantic revival that idealised the rural, the traditional, and the untamed as an antidote to the increasing urbanisation and industrialisation of Europe, locating authenticity in the customs of rural and indigenous peoples. The discipline of folklore studies also sprang from this impulse and resulted in collections of fairy lore, especially in Britain but in other regions of Europe as well. So widespread and pervasive was this interest in fairies that in the period between 1820 and 1920 it gave rise to hundreds of literary and artistic works, including novels, paintings, children’s literature, and book illustrations. It began a trend in fantasy literature for adults and eventually became linked to the Spiritualist and Theosophical movements.<sup>12</sup>

Fairies have therefore come to play a central role in modern Paganisms. Several traditions, or denominations, of modern Paganism claim to derive from fairy teachings, and a number of Pagan authors continue to receive revealed wisdom from fairy interlocutors.<sup>13</sup> More broadly, many traditions recognise

---

<sup>5</sup> Ronald Hutton, “Afterword,” in *Fairies, Demons, and Nature Spirits: ‘Small Gods’ at the Margins of Christendom*, ed. Michael Ostling (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 352.

<sup>6</sup> See Richard Dorson, *The British Folklorists* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968) and Carole G. Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 117–147.

<sup>7</sup> Gerald B. Gardner, *Witchcraft Today* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1973 [1954]), 56–57.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>9</sup> For a full discussion of witches and fairies in British witch trials, see Ronald Hutton, *The Witch: A History of Fear* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 231–242.

<sup>10</sup> Gardner, *Witchcraft Today*, 62.

<sup>11</sup> Victor Anderson and Cora Anderson, *The Heart of the Initiate* (Portland, OR: Acorn Guild Press, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 4.

<sup>13</sup> Morgan Daimler, *Pagan Portals: Fairy Witchcraft* (Moon Books, 2014; electronic resource) and *Fairycraft: Following the*

fairies as nature spirits or spirits of the land, and venerate them in that capacity, often using techniques from folk tradition, such as leaving offerings for them. In my sample, 56% of respondents said that fairies were important in their spiritual practice and 46% worked with them as part of their spiritual tradition. That work can take the form of reciprocal relationships maintained through regular offerings, rituals invoking the fairies, ecstatic experiences of communion or communication with fairies, and sharing stories (legends and personal narratives) about the fairies. Seventy-six per cent of respondents felt that fairies could be real and 57% reported having personally seen or experienced a fairy.

In current Pagan discourse, fairies have taken on the role of protectors and guardians of nature and the land at a time of unprecedented environmental crisis. They re-enchant the world, animating it and creating personal links between practitioners and nature. They should be understood as part of a larger set of cultural responses to environmental crisis that attempt to persuade humans to engage in more sustainable practices.<sup>14</sup> They also appear as comforters and protectors, often of specific places, but not infrequently of individuals, as well. A number of respondents reported having special fairy friends as children; these friends provided support in difficult personal circumstances. Respondents who reported working closely with fairy interlocutors described relationships of patronage, guardianship, and even partnership, such as fairy marriages, that involved a degree of intimacy between humans and the fae. In the folk culture of modern Pagans, fairies use their magical powers and greater-than-human wisdom to assist their human companions.<sup>15</sup>

Yet these fairies differ substantially from the ones in traditional folk legends and memorates. In the traditional European legend corpus, fairies, elves, and similar beings are ambiguous at best, and at worst, downright dangerous. The damage they can do ranges from mischievous tricks, such as stealing or hiding household objects, to kidnapping infants and leaving a sickly, demanding changeling in their stead. They can be angry if crossed or if certain rules of social engagement are not assiduously followed and retaliate by bringing bad luck to the culprits.<sup>16</sup> They can even be responsible for illness: “elf-stroke”, the source of the common term “stroke” to mean cerebrovascular accident or ischemic attack, was once believed to be caused by the fairies. Even when they confer magical gifts upon humans to whom they have taken a liking, the results are not always purely positive. In the ballad “Thomas Rhymer”, True Thomas is taken into the realm of Faery for seven years by the Queen of Elfland, who gives him several gifts, including a “tongue that could never lie”. Thomas is not entirely pleased with that and complains that he will now find it impossible to engage in commerce, speak to his rank superiors, or court a woman.<sup>17</sup> Most people tried to avoid contact with fairies, going as far as using euphemisms for them such as “the Good People” or “Good Neighbours”. They certainly did not seek them out intentionally, as modern Pagans do.

Where, then, do modern Pagan conceptions of fairies come from? How did they transform from baby-snatchers into babysitters, from punishing characters to protective ones, from figures to avoid to spirits who are called upon in ritual and sought out for their environmental and spiritual knowledge? In the following sections of this essay, I will explore some of the roots of fairy concepts in modern Paganisms.

---

*Path of Fairy Witchcraft* (Moon Books, 2016; electronic resource); John Matthews, *The Sidhe: Wisdom from the Celtic Otherworld* (Traverse City, MI: Lorian Press; electronic resource); Orion Foxwood, *The Faery Teachings* (Arcata, CA: R. J. Stewart Books, 2007); R. J. Stewart, *The Well of Light: From Faery Healing to Earth Healing* (Arcata, CA: R. J. Stewart Books, 2007); R. J. Stewart, *The Living World of Faery* (Toxaway, NC: Mercury Publishing, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> Sabina Magliocco, “‘Reconnecting to Everything’: Fairies in Contemporary Paganism,” in *Fairies, Demons, and Nature Spirits: ‘Small Gods’ at the Margins of Christendom*, ed. Michael Ostling (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 239.

<sup>15</sup> See Dennis Gaffin’s similar findings based on his research in Ireland in *Running with the Fairies* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 105–111; his interlocutors argued that there are no bad fairies and that any fear or unease felt as a result of contact with fairies is due to human projection of negative thoughts and emotions.

<sup>16</sup> See Conrad Arensberg, *The Irish Countryman: An Anthropological Study* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1988; originally published 1937) and Barbara Rieti, *Strange Terrain: The Fairy World in Newfoundland* (St. Johns, NL: ISER, 1991).

<sup>17</sup> Francis James Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (New York: Dover, 1965; [1882–98]), #37C.

## Learning About Fairies

Folklore and oral tradition continue to play a role in the transmission of fairy legends and memorates; a surprising 32% of my sample first learned about the fairies from oral tradition, usually stories told by family members or friends.

Elves/fairies lived in our home, according to dad. In 1980s and 90s he said the sauna elf will be mad if we are loud in the sauna. The house elf also manifested occasionally as knocking on the wall if we were loud with my brothers. It felt magical back then since dad was very clever on when and how he used the knocking to shut us down “because elves don’t like it”.

A relative cut down a faery thorn tree in an earlier generation. The family did not thrive after that. This generation it has been necessary to make reparation by gifting land and a new tree.

Growing up on a farm in a family of Irish ancestry part of my education was about how to get along with “the little people”, including such actions as sharing a bit of the milk from the morning milking to avoid having them make the cow go sour if you refuse to share.

A Pagan friend from Newfoundland tells of seeing what he believes to be a fairy some time in his teens in the mid 1990s. He was ... out walking by himself after dark, and saw a blonde and pale-skinned girl his own age, apparently naked, walking along the dirt road ahead of him and darting come-hither looks over her shoulder at him. He found this bizarre and unreal as well as too good to be true, and turned back rather than approach her. He says he did not come to think of her as a spirit until later reflection, and now wonders if he would have ‘gone missing’ had he followed her.

[I] first heard about the fairies on the Isle of Man from my grandmother in 1960s. ... [She] would tell me about the different fairies and we would visit the places she had seen them—I have a vague memory of seeing something that shined brightly and moved away in the long grass at one of these spots—I must have been about 7 or 8 years old. My grandmother’s stories included ones about fairies taking away children, helping people who deserved it and making sure we always greeted them at special places—fairy rings, mounds, a particular bridge on the island. She did not refer to them as fairies—they were always the Little People or the Good People.

The preponderance of these narratives come from areas where fairy legends have been documented well into the twentieth century, such as Ireland, the Isle of Man, Newfoundland, and Iceland, though some continue to exist in immigrant diasporas. The stories illustrate the continuing vibrancy of oral tradition about the fae in specific cultures and geographic areas. These narratives adhere to the pattern of fairy-human relationships already reflected in the folkloric corpus: the Good People are ambiguous figures who can snatch children, sour milk, blight an entire family for cutting down a tree, and punish noisy children. They must be propitiated properly through offerings and kind treatment. Direct contact should be avoided, even when they seem alluring, because it can result in misfortune.

Yet the majority of respondents, 54% of my sample, first learned about fairies through reading, and 52% report that most of their current knowledge about fairies comes from literature. That means that literary fairies, and their later film adaptations, have played a greater role in shaping how modern Pagans think about fairies than have folklore and oral tradition. When pressed for examples of fairy stories that they particularly remembered, a large number of respondents cited James Barrie’s *Peter Pan* and its Disney adaptation, Disney’s animated adaptation of Carlo Collodi’s classic children’s novel, *Pinocchio*, and Grimm’s fairy tales such as *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* and their Disney adaptations.<sup>18</sup> Some also mentioned the Flower Fairies of Cicely Marie Barker’s popular picture books from the 1920s, reprinted in the 1970s and thereafter, and now transformed into a series of decorative figurines. Together,

---

<sup>18</sup> J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1965 [1911]); Walt Disney, “Peter Pan” (RKO Radio Pictures, 1953); Carlo Collodi, *Le avventure di Pinocchio* (Firenze: Felice Paggi, 1883); Walt Disney, “Pinocchio” (Walt Disney Pictures, 1940); Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Complete Grimm’s Fairy Tales* (New York: Pantheon, 1944 [1812]); Walt Disney, “Cinderella” (RKO Radio Pictures, 1950); Walt Disney, “Sleeping Beauty” (Buena Vista Distribution, 1959).

these constituted the most frequently mentioned (though not the only) fairies in narratives respondents remembered.

## Fairies as Protectors

In modern Pagan narratives, the fae often play a protective role, either towards the narrator or towards the environment more broadly. Leaving aside, for now, the question of fairies and the environment, I want to begin by examining the idea of fairies as protectors, especially of children and young people. This theme is striking in many of the narratives I collected.

I ... had a personal spirit guide I called “The Green Man” tho [sic] his gender was neutral. He came in dreams to comfort and watched over me. His nature is hard to pinpoint: angel? faery? my needful imagination? I summoned him directly only once when I was in my early 20s. I think of him often but have not seen him since then[.]

The most memorable [experience involving fairies] is being saved from being killed by a train when crossing the railroad tracks in upstate New York. I couldn’t see or hear the train coming round [sic] a bend and a bridge above me, when suddenly a hand was pushed against my chest to keep me from moving forward and I saw or sensed a faerie presence.

In 1989, when I was six years old, I wandered into the small wood at the end of our street. ... I left the path and followed the little girl I saw, and was led to a small pond, with a gorgeous waterfall. There were beautiful ladies there in the water, and I wanted to go in. The girl wouldn’t let me. Suddenly something startled me, and when I turned around to look back at the pond, I was standing right on the crumbling edge of a large pit, filled with rusted metal, trash, and dead animals.

I was on a moorland at twilight approximately 4 years ago when I had my first and only experience. It was a pretty rough time in my life and I’d gone up to the moors to be alone with my thoughts and contemplate leaving my physical form behind me when I was suddenly filled with warmth and a complete sense of calm. A dragonfly (or what I now believe to be a fairy) came flying over to me and landed on my shoulder and told me to look at what was around me and to appreciate the beautiful place I was in. It was like the world suddenly became much more beautiful and filled with light and I felt like I was able to see the very air particles filled with sunlight.

Back in 1987 I had a workshop in the Greenfield valley, North Wales—there was a path which led past my workshop through the woods and down to the coast. One day my partner and I were walking home from work when we met an old woman—her face and hands were exceptionally brown (weathered) and wrinkled, she asked us for directions to Mostyn (a village further west on the coast), which I gave and offered to carry her bags (which looked extremely heavy) she declined, thanking me for the kind thought—offered us her blessing and carried on walking, she left us standing looking at each other (I mean who says Blessed be in 1987?) and when we rounded the bend in the path—expecting to see her ahead of us, she’d gone. There was nowhere for her to leave the path and we could see clearly for at least a mile. For ages after I could do no wrong, my artwork was the best it had ever been, and I’ve always felt blessed.

While the fae in these encounters bear some similarity to those of an older folk tradition—appearing and disappearing at will, able to take on a variety of appearances—they are in many respects quite different. They seem to take a personal interest in the narrator, providing comfort, bringing them artistic inspiration and success, and saving their lives from physical and psychological dangers. Yet while the fairies of tradition occasionally do gift people with good luck or special powers, we can be reasonably certain that their behaviours in the memorates above and many similar ones in my corpus of responses do not derive directly from folkloric sources. Instead, they seem more similar to fairies as portrayed in literature and film, media that derive in great part from a different narrative genre: the folktale. When fairies appear in folktales, they usually offer a magical way for the protagonist to attain a desired end.

There can be little doubt about the importance of the Grimm's fairy tales (*Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, 1812; first published in English in 1823) on the burgeoning Victorian interest in fairies.<sup>19</sup> The Grimm tales established two important parameters in modern fairy conceptualisations: they anchored them definitively in a pre-industrial rural landscape and they associated them with children. In these tales, magical figures played a central role as helpers and protectors.

Both Cinderella's fairy godmother and Pinocchio's *Fata dai capelli turchini* (Fairy with turquoise hair, in Collodi's novel) or Blue Fairy (in the Disney animated film) play protective, maternal roles. Cinderella's fairy godmother comforts her and provides sumptuous clothing and transportation so her goddaughter can attend the royal ball, all as a means of helping her escape her unhappy situation as a drudge in the household of her stepmother. Pinocchio's Turquoise Fairy rescues him after he has been hanged as a thief, reviving him and providing healing and advice, which Pinocchio repeatedly ignores. It is she who gives him a nose that magically grows each time he tells a lie, as a way to encourage him to be truthful. Appearing in various guises throughout the story, she leads the hero towards his better impulses and promises to end his life as a puppet if he can earn the reward by studying, working hard, and being generous and thoughtful. Pinocchio is repeatedly led astray, but the Turquoise Fairy is always forgiving, and in the end, makes good on her promise and transforms him into a real boy. In Disney's animated version of the story, the Blue Fairy, who is depicted as a blonde woman wearing a blue gown, is responsible for animating Pinocchio and therefore bringing him to life. She provides him with Jiminy Cricket to act as the voice of his conscience and a father substitute, once again fulfilling a maternal function. Both Cinderella's fairy godmother and Pinocchio's Blue (or Turquoise) Fairy play protective parental roles towards their charges. They appear at moments of crisis and use magic to help the protagonists escape difficult circumstances. Taking on the role of the absent parent, they nudge their charges towards maturity through a series of challenges.

Likewise, the fairies in Disney's "Sleeping Beauty" act as protectors towards Aurora, bestowing gifts and attempting to mitigate Maleficent's wicked spell and raising her away from the castle to avoid the curse. More active and involved than either Cinderella's fairy godmother or Pinocchio's Blue Fairy, their magic is essential to the development of the plot as well as to its dénouement: the rescue and marriage of Aurora.

The fairies in these children's stories behave much more like the magical helper or fairy godmother of folktales than like the ambiguous and sometimes frightening fairies of legends and memorates. As Diane Purkiss points out, the magical helpers and fairy godmothers of folktales are a child's idealised, fantasy versions of adults: they appear only when necessary and hand out assistance freely, without scolding, admonishing, or expecting much in return.<sup>20</sup> More to the point, the fairies in these works specifically help young people in the process of maturation and the attainment of social status.

It is evident that some modern Pagan notions of fairies as protectors and helpers derives from literary and film models in which fairies take a personal interest in the protagonist, deflecting dangers and helping them achieve their goals and desires. These helpers are in a parental role vis-à-vis the protagonists; they have greater knowledge and powers, which they use to the benefit of the main characters. Modern Pagan notions of the fae as helpful, quasi-parental guardians, and protectors towards humans, especially children and young people, owe a debt to the fairies of the Grimm tales and their Disney adaptations.

## Fairies as Childhood Companions

The link between children and fairies began with the Grimm tales, adaptations of traditional *Märchen* edited with an audience of children in mind. But it didn't end there; it was the beginning of an important thread in the development of literary and film fairies that has continued throughout the nineteenth and

---

<sup>19</sup> Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 5; Diane Purkiss, *At the Bottom of the Garden: A Dark History of Fairies, Hobgoblins, and Other Troublesome Things* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 224.

<sup>20</sup> Purkiss, *At the Bottom of the Garden*, 222.

twentieth centuries and into the twenty-first. The emergence of Edward B. Tylor's theory of unilinear cultural evolution in the mid-nineteenth century, which posited a developmental hierarchy of world cultures from the "savage" or "primitive" to the "barbarian", and finally to "civilisation", the apotheosis of which resembled Victorian England, had a very strong influence on the conceptualisation of fairies.<sup>21</sup> According to this paradigm, belief in spirits other than a monotheistic god were characteristic of earlier stages of human cultural development; when they persisted in civilised cultures, they were nothing more than survivals from an earlier stage of evolution. Seen through this lens, fairies were survivals of earlier, pre-Christian belief systems. Moreover, cultural evolutionists such as British folklorist and author Andrew Lang, creator of the famed coloured "Fairy Books" (collections of world folktales and legends, each one a separate colour, published between 1889 and 1910) believed that individual human development mirrored cultural evolution, such that children were very much like primitives. Childhood was thought to be a primitive state of being that was lost to adults, one characterised by innocence and imagination, and thus particularly suited to belief in fairies.<sup>22</sup>

Fairies thus duly began to appear in literature for children, dominating what has come to be called the "Golden Age of Children's Literature" from the 1860s to the 1920s.<sup>23</sup> We have seen above how the parental fairy godmothers featured in *Pinocchio* and the Grimm tales influenced modern Pagan notions of the fae as protectors. Children's books of this period also featured a different kind of fairy character, one that was childlike itself, and thus a perfect companion, counterpart, and model for Victorian and Edwardian children. The fairies of J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* and Cicely Marie Barker's "Flower Fairies", mentioned as influential by many of my respondents, belong to this category.

Tinkerbell of J. M. Barrie's play *Peter Pan* (1904) and novel *Peter and Wendy* (1911) is a literal tinker (metalsmith) for the fairies and is portrayed as having a crush on Peter. In the play, she appears only as a twinkling, flitting light; her speech sounds like tinkling bells and is intelligible only to those who speak fairy language. The idea of fairies as tiny, flickering lights or orbs is pervasive in modern representations, both within and outside of the Pagan community. Influential as that is, however, most respondents were more familiar with her appearance in the Disney adaptation. Here, she is a tiny, curvaceous, blonde, blue-eyed woman with wings, her hair in a topknot, wearing a skimpy green dress—a sort of fairy Barbie. She loves Peter and is helpful to him when she feels like it, but can also be capricious and vindictive, like her folkloric fairy counterparts. She is more companion, or even fantasy sexual partner, than parent; her relationship with Peter depends wholly on his childlike qualities and the fact that he will never grow up. In her discussion of how the relegation of fairies to children's literature helped to trivialise them out of existence as subjects for adults, Carole G. Silver argues that *Peter Pan*'s theatrical ritual of having audience members signal their belief in fairies by clapping to keep Tinkerbell alive created "an early twentieth century fairy cult for children".<sup>24</sup> J. M. Barrie made numerous analogies between fairies and children, including the idea that "There are fairies wherever there are children"; that people lose the ability to see fairies as they become adults; and that fairies are so diminutive they can "camouflage themselves as flowers".<sup>25</sup> This last characteristic no doubt inspired the artist Cicely Marie Barker (1895–1973) in her creation of the "Flower Fairies".

Cicely Marie Barker's Flower Fairies are depicted as ordinary children with butterfly wings dressed in clothing that recalls the colour and shape of the flower or plant with which they are posed. Barker, whose sister ran a kindergarten in their shared home, used the pupils as models, dressing them in costumes she made from fabric scraps, twigs, and natural materials.<sup>26</sup> The children's faces, expressions, and poses are realistic, in contrast to the fancifulness of their clothes and their implied diminutive size. Between the 1920s and 1950s Barker published numerous Flower Fairy books that were reprinted after

<sup>21</sup> Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958 [1871]), 8–19, 80–86, 444–447.

<sup>22</sup> Dorson, *British Folklorists*; Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 5.

<sup>23</sup> Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 186.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>25</sup> J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan* (1902), 160, in Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 188.

<sup>26</sup> Jane Laing, *Cicely Mary Barker and Her Art* (London: Frederick Warne & Co., 1995), 11.



her death in 1973, influencing several generations of children, including respondents to my survey from many English-speaking nations. Children who grew up with these images could easily see the Flower Fairies as children just like them—friends and companions in the world of nature, dressed in the colours of flowering plants.

The influence of *Peter Pan* and the Flower Fairy books is evident in a number of narratives provided by respondents. In the following memorates, diminutive fairies are associated specifically with flowers, trees, and gardens, where children see and sometimes interact with them.<sup>27</sup>

As a child I had access to playing in pine forests. At 6 I would often hear soft voices coming from the trees and around forest flowers. I wasn't usually alone and my friend would hear whispers too.

My first experience with a fairy was when I was five or six years old at my grandmother's farm. Playing in a field alone in the height of summer at noon, just outside the house, I saw a strange looking man, it was generally just a glimpse of a man who was not a man. He was about three feet tall, had green skin and looked as though what he was wearing was 'growing' from his body.

I was about six and was playing in a park where there was a lot of portulaca [a type of flower]. I saw, or strongly imagined, little purple beings wandering in and out of the portulaca. I went home and wrote a story, 'The Portulaca Fairies'.

I came across a group of fairies in a park in London, UK, in the 1960s and had contact with them for at least ten years, intermittently. I would have been about 5 when I first saw them and about 15 or 16 the last time, before I moved away to another area. They inhabited a patch of low scrub and trees through which generations of children had weaved paths. Following these paths I often came across a fairy I called Mr Moonbeam. He was humanoid, no more than 3 feet tall and dressed in a variety of green-dyed clothing; trousers, boots, a jerkin and a beanie-style hat. I would talk to him as we walked these paths. Every now and then another of the group would pop out of a bush or from behind a tree. They were a variety of sizes, from a tiny one, dressed in blue, who could comfortably sit on a tree leaf, through a very traditional looking winged fairy dressed in yellow who was about a foot in height, to Mr Moonbeam who I considered my special friend. They sometimes brought a hedgehog or a rabbit for me to pet and talked to me about the trees and plants they considered important. It was always a peaceful, joyful experience, but they would vanish instantly at the sound of an adult voice.

Fairy-child interactions are positive and helpful; the fairies cheer lonely or sad children, show them the wonders of nature, and teach them about animals and plants. They can be mischievous and fun-loving, like Tinkerbell, or very like ordinary children, like the Flower Fairies. But only children can see or hear them; they "vanish instantly at the sound of an adult voice". The idea that children are gifted with the ability to see and hear fairies which vanishes at puberty is captured in the following narratives:

My daughter has been seeing them since she was a small child. She called them "pokies" and we still refer to them this way. They visit her room at night, usually more than one at a time, and seem curious or protective. They have been in our previous and current house and simply seem to live alongside us, like the birds outside, rather than interacting.

I used to be able to see fairies when I was a child; this ability stopped when I hit puberty. I interacted with them on multiple occasions; we often just played together, and sometimes when I was very depressed (I was trapped in an abusive home) they would try to encourage me to persevere—they would say that I should not kill myself, because things would get better someday. ... I interacted with them from about the age of seven to eleven years old, mostly during the days of the warmer seasons. ... They were my dearest friends and it was always a positive experience. I was very distressed when I lost the ability to see them.

---

<sup>27</sup> For a study of children's experiences with fairies, see Simon Young, "Children Who See Fairies," *Journal for the Study of*

We have seen how characters such as Tinkerbell and the Flower Fairies, and others like them who have appeared in children's literature since the early twentieth century, have influenced modern Pagan notions of fairies as children's diminutive, magical playmates. In addition, the Flower Fairies and their imitators cemented a growing relationship between fairies and plants that was to lead to another important development in their conceptualisation: the idea of fairies as guardians and protectors of the environment.

## Fairies as Environmental Guardians

One of the foremost roles of the fae in the discourse of modern Paganism is as guardians and protectors of the environment. Eighty-five per cent of survey respondents, when asked to categorise fairies according to a taxonomy of different types of spirits, classified them as "nature spirits or spirits of place". This connection to the land is further elaborated in the literature of modern Pagan authors. John Matthews, in his book *The Sidhe: Wisdom from the Celtic Otherworld*, reports on his encounter with a *sidhe* (fairy-like being) in a prehistoric burial mound (one of the Gaelic meanings of the word *sidhe*). The being explains that the *sidhe* have lived alongside humans since ancient times, watching as they warred among themselves and despoiled the environment. He warns Matthews that a new age is dawning in which humankind will face great new environmental challenges. The *sidhe* will re-emerge, and humans must be prepared to face them and the new trials that lie ahead by embracing an ethos of connection, not one of separation. "You must seek to become reconnected to everything", he explains.<sup>28</sup> Following his contact's advice, Matthews begins a practice of meditating to reconnect with nature. Soon, he begins to experience things differently:

It was as though the growing things that were all around me—trees, grass, flowers in their carefully tended beds, suddenly became aware of me—and that I was listening, really looking, really sensing their own unique signatures. And they were glad, very glad indeed, and sent back their own response by seeing me!<sup>29</sup>

A similar argument is presented by Orion Foxwood in *The Faery Teachings*. He writes: "Working with the Faery tradition allows the human to reconnect with the land and basic principles of life and to glean visions of the inner pattern of the workings of the natural world and where we, as humans, fit in".<sup>30</sup> The author presents techniques readers can use to create a portal into Faery from which they can receive messages from fairy interlocutors, and perhaps even travel to the Faery realms in search of wisdom and reconnection.

In these narratives, the fae represent both the guardians of nature and ways humans can reconnect with it, re-enchanting the world with a sense of ensoulment that has been lost. Implied is the idea that current environmental and political woes such as global climate change, warfare, and social inequality are due to that loss of enchantment that Max Weber identified as characteristic of the Enlightenment, and necessary for capitalism.<sup>31</sup> As in the case of fairies as parental figures and fairies as children's playmates in the natural world, the idea of fairies as guardians of an enchanted environment did not originate with Pagan authors. Rather, it is an extension of a development which began along with the rekindling of interest in fairies in the early nineteenth century.

Fairies were already linked to natural areas through medieval romances, which created a shared notion of forests, lakes, and liminal places as the dwelling-places of the fae.<sup>32</sup> Through children's literature

---

*Religious Experience* 4 (2018): 81–98.

<sup>28</sup> Matthews, *The Sidhe*.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Foxwood, *Faery Teachings*, 37.

<sup>31</sup> Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* (Tübingen: Verlag von J.C.B. Mohr, 1923).

<sup>32</sup> Hutton, "Making of Early Modern British Fairy Tradition."

in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the link between fairies and gardens, flowers, and plants was even more firmly cemented. By the 1900s, fairies were viewed as the antidote to industrialisation and all its ills. As urbanisation and industrialisation proceeded to claim more of the landscape, a number of English authors began to use the trope of the fairies' disappearance as a form of social critique.<sup>33</sup> In Rudyard Kipling's "Dymchurch Flit" in *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906), Puck links the departure of the Pharisees (fairies) to the demise of "Merry England" as a result of the Reformation and the spread of Puritanism.<sup>34</sup> In a similar vein, "Titania's Farewell", a novella by William Besant and James Rice, tells the story of how Oberon and Titania, the fairy king and queen, plan to leave England due to a litany of complaints: a decline in fairy belief under the diffusion of rationalism and materialism; the increasing social inequalities as a result of unbridled capitalism; and the despoiling of the earth caused by pollution from industrialisation. Puck complains that

[T]he smoke of factories poisons us; there are hardly any forests where we can lurk; no rivers but are foul with refuse; hardly any commons but are enclosed by the Lord of the Master. They've stolen great slices of Epping Forest, and wanted to build over Hampstead Heath.<sup>35</sup>

The same theme is echoed in a satirical novel entitled *That Very Mab*, by folklorist Andrew Lang and May Kendall (1885), in which progress is identified as the principal cause of the fairies' flight. As in Kipling's novel, the fairies first leave England because of Puritanism, but here, they flee to Polynesia, where they interbreed with local fairy folk. But the arrival of the missionaries forces them to relocate again, and they return to England, only to find it a very different place from the one they left. The spoils of industrial capitalism have left their mark, leading to disbelief and environmental pollution. Upon seeing litter left in the woods by picnickers, their owl guide muses that the English trash the environment in spite of worshipping nature.<sup>36</sup> In the end, Queen Mab leads the fae to depart once again, this time for the distant Admiralty Isles, in hopes of finding an environment that has not been wrecked by industry, rationalism, and capitalism.

The idea of environmental destruction being inimical to the fae is very widespread in the folklore of modern Paganism. A survey respondent described how fairies departed from a wooded place once it had been spoiled by a neighbourhood boy:

There were nature fairies who lived along a quiet woodland stream with lilies of the valley, wild violets, ferns, jack-in-the-pulpit, and skunk cabbage. My older sister may have told me about them because she visited there too. One year one of neighborhood boys got a hatchet for a gift and cut down the trees and damaged the stream. After that, there were no more fairies.

Caroline Kenner, a witch and shamanic practitioner from Maryland, bluntly described how humans have been harming the fairies by damaging the earth since ancient times:

We're harming them. We're harming them horribly. They used to have a better relationship with us, when we didn't have so many of us. ... They really dislike everything about the industrial revolution on forward. ... [T]he spirits that are trapped in a place, ... they can't leave, they're spirits of THAT place. So if a mining operation comes and removes the top of the hillside like they do in Appalachia, those spirits are fucking screwed. And quite frankly it pisses them off hugely, the more we do activities like this, the more angry the fae get at

---

<sup>33</sup> Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 202.

<sup>34</sup> Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 188–189.

<sup>35</sup> William Besant and James Rice, "Titania's Farewell," in *The Case of Mr Lucraft and Other Tales* (London: Sampson & Low, 1876), 115, quoted in Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 201.

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Lang and May Kendall, "*That Very Mab*" (London: Longmans Green, 1885), quoted in Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 201.

us. ... It was when we started domesticating animals and practicing agriculture, they didn't like the changes in the wild species that domestication brought about. We took away the agency of the animals and made them into the slave races and they despise it some of them. And they hate us for doing it.

In addition to the literary thread contributing to the construction of fairies as protectors of the environment, a separate but related theory, emerging out of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century attempts to rationalise the fairies, also shaped Pagan notions. The “biological-psychical” theory of fairy nature, as Silver calls it, first emerged from attempts to understand fairies and related spiritual phenomena from a scientific perspective.<sup>37</sup> The emergence of the photographs of the Cottingley fairies in 1917 at first appeared to provide irrefutable proof of the reality of the fae, as numerous experts asserted that the photos had not been altered in the printing process. The photos came to the attention of Spiritualists and Theosophists, who proposed a new explanation about the nature of fairies: they were nature spirits explicitly tied to vegetation without whom the entire plant kingdom, and therefore life on earth, could not exist.<sup>38</sup> This interpretation gained ground as a result of the “magic of Findhorn”, a commune in northern Scotland where residents were able to grow vegetables of fabulous proportions and vigour despite the harsh climate, allegedly with the assistance of Pan and a legion of devas and nature spirits dedicated to the fertility of plants.<sup>39</sup> According to this theory, fairies are beings with “light bodies” composed essentially of coloured light, not unlike the darting Tinkerbell of Barrie’s play, who can appear in forms that meet the viewers’ cultural expectations.

A similar approach is taken by Dora van Gelder in *The Real World of Fairies*, allegedly written in the 1920s, but only published in 1977. Here, the author borrows from Hinduism and Buddhism the notion of devas, a term meaning “shining ones” that refers to a variety of supernatural beings, from deities to other spirits, and amalgamates it with European notions of fairies, creating hierarchy of spiritual beings beginning with the devas, who are highly intelligent and “aware of the Divine Plan”, to fairies, who are spirits associated with the Aristotelian elements (air, fire, water, and earth).<sup>40</sup> It is the earth fairies that are in charge of plant life. In the final chapter, the author outlines the effects of “Conditions Today”, by which she means environmental pollution, on the fairies, explaining that while angels can escape environmental destruction, the pollution of land, air, and water is devastating to elementals.<sup>41</sup> Yet she expresses hope that humans are becoming more aware of the divine unity underlying all natural phenomena and will form an alliance with spiritual beings to save the environment from destruction.<sup>42</sup>

The ideas of fairies as biological-psychical entities linked on both the physical and spiritual planes to the earth and its processes presage the ones expressed both in current Pagan literature and in Pagan personal narratives on fairies as environmental guardians. We can see the seeds of the concept that humans must forge an alliance with these beings to save the planet; what Pagan authors are providing is the means to do so through meditation and other imaginative practices that allow them to summon fairies, develop intimate relationships with them, and even travel to their realms without suffering negative consequences.<sup>43</sup>

The reason that many modern Pagans feel attracted to and comfortable with working so closely with fairies is that the fae have undergone a significant process of “taming” through the work of folklorists, literary fiction authors, and makers of animated films. They have transformed from ambiguous and potentially dangerous “Good Neighbours” to protectors, comforters, children’s companions, and environmental guardians and allies. These transformations are part of the process of romanticisation to the

---

<sup>37</sup> Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 207.

<sup>38</sup> Marshall Dowling, *The Dark Star* (London: Museum Press, 1951), 36–37, in Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 207.

<sup>39</sup> Paul Hawken, *The Magic of Findhorn* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

<sup>40</sup> Dora van Gelder, *The Real World of Fairies* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1977), 118.

<sup>41</sup> Van Gelder, *Real World of Fairies*, 112–117.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>43</sup> See Magliocco, “Reconnecting to Everything.”

disenchantment of the world that followed the Enlightenment. Paradoxically, however, that disenchantment of the world makes possible a closer congress between humans and fairies, because the latter are no longer objects of fear. As modern Paganisms allow their adherents to work alongside goddesses and gods and to become deities temporarily through the process of embodiment, it also has allowed closer congress between Pagans and fairies, arguing from its inception that some Pagan witches actually *are* fairies, because they carry fairy blood. The distance between humans and the world of spirits is thus blurred. Yet this very disenchantment necessitates a re-enchantment of the world, one in which that world is imagined as significantly pinker in tooth and claw than the pre-Enlightenment world that gave rise to the darker, more ambiguous legends about the Good People.

## Feral Fairies

The idea that environmental degradation leads to the death or permanent departure of the fairies plugs into one of the most persistent cultural narratives about them: that they are disappearing. The fairies are perpetually disappearing; since the beginning of folklorists' study of fairy narratives, narrators have insisted that the fairies were more active, more prevalent, and more palpable in earlier times.<sup>44</sup> But are they? My survey results and those of other scholars show that encounters with fairy-like figures are no less rare today than in previous ages.<sup>45</sup> They are not *terribly* common and are more common among a religious subculture in which these beings play significant spiritual roles, but that is a long way from disappearance.

One reason these stories persist is that some (though not all) are linked to phenomenological events that are difficult to interpret: what David Hufford calls "core experiences", somatic experiences with a stable perceptual core that occur cross-culturally regardless of pre-existing belief. Core experiences are similar cross-culturally because they likely have a physiological cause; that is certainly the case for the "mara" experience, a form of sleep paralysis in which the subject awakens from sleep aware of their surroundings but unable to move and has the impression that an entity in the room is the cause of the paralysis.<sup>46</sup> Cultures develop different explanations for core experiences that draw from their spiritual and religious registers; in turn, these cultural expectations likely shape how individual experiencers interpret their experiences.

The following memorate has all the hallmarks of the "mara" experience:

I was 16 and awoke to a small man sitting on my dresser. He was using his fae magick to hold me down and bind me. Then he disappeared and I could move again.

In this recollection, the narrator attributes their temporary paralysis to a little man sitting on the dresser and concludes that he is a fairy who is using magic to cause the experience. The following rudimentary memorate is not dissimilar, though the "mara" element is absent:

Age 7 at night hovering in bedroom about 8 of them. Green grey ... very long and thin ... not the pretty things of folk lore.

Here, the fairies appear as unattractive, creepy, and faintly threatening. They recall folkloric descriptions of aliens, for example in Whitley Strieber's *Communion*; in fact, some scholars have argued that aliens have replaced fairies in modern supernatural narratives; for all intents and purposes, they play

<sup>44</sup> Michael Ostling, "Introduction: Where've All the Good People Gone?" in *Fairies, Demons, and Nature Spirits: 'Small Gods' at the Margins of Christendom*, ed. Michael Ostling (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 11–15; Rieti, *Strange Terrain*, 51, 181.

<sup>45</sup> Gaffin, *Running with the Fairies*; Simon Young's "Fairy Census 2014–2017" is discussed in various chapters of *Magical Folk: British and Irish Fairies 500 AD to the Present*, ed. Simon Young and Ceri Houlbrook (London: Gibson Square Books, Ltd., 2018).

<sup>46</sup> David Hufford, "Beings Without Bodies: An Experience-Centered Theory of Belief in Spirits," in *Out of the Ordinary: Folklore and the Supernatural*, ed. Barbara Walker (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1995), 11–45.

many of the same roles and have a number of characteristics in common.<sup>47</sup> Ironically, the grey-green, lithe figures hovering in the bedroom above the sleeping child bear a much closer resemblance to beings of folklore than they do to literary fairies.

But many fairy encounters reported in my corpus bear no real resemblance to any core experience; they are just weird and do not fit the parameters of other supernatural experiences in the Western cultural register, such as aliens or ghosts. “Fairy” is thus something of a catch-all cultural classification for encounters with beings that are neither angelic nor demonic, neither ghostly nor properly human.

[I] was driving home late one night when I slowed to avoid hitting a fox in the road. It stood up on rear legs like a human and walked into the nearby field indicating I should follow. ... I didn't.

[I] was on a last minute dash to the store on Thanksgiving Day. At 40 mph I passed a grove of eucalyptus trees, and standing among the tree trunks was a very short man, perhaps 3 feet tall. He was completely dressed in one shade of brown from head to toe. Even his skin was the same brown. His ... clothes were reminiscent of the 1940s. I could not stop the car right there, but crawled along slowly on the way back, searching for him when I should have been home making gravy.

In contrast to the tamed fae of Pagan literature, rituals, and visualisations, this category of being remains true to the folkloric essence of fairy beings preserved in traditional oral narratives. The following narrative explicitly contrasts the fae as they appear in modern Pagan culture and encounters with mysterious creatures that occupy liminal spaces, both geographically and ontologically:

Over the same time span and locales, I have had several encounters with fairy beings while riding my mountain bike in green and relatively wild spaces. These beings ... identified themselves with names including Wheelzipoctli and Omehurtzteotl. Because they acted as fairy beings involved with mountain biking, I took this as an indication that fairy beings (and probably the fairy realm) is dynamic and adapts to circumstances as they arise. ... Fairy beings undertake new endeavors and learn new knowledge and attempt new relationships with human beings. My sense of these particular fairy beings and what they were up to involved playing the part of Tricksters and practical jokers and doers of minor to potentially lethal harm—for their own amusement. Unlike the fairy beings encountered during my visualizations, these beings were not all that well disposed toward human beings. I did nothing much to make any contact with them, and I suppose that they allowed me to become aware of their activities and nicknames mostly to unsettle me as I rode my bike.

There is some evidence that folkloric fairies, with their ambiguous relationship to humans and unpredictable natures, are making a comeback on the literary scene, as well. We find them in a number of recent fictional works aimed at both children and adults. Among works written for children and young adults, Holly Black and Tony di Terlizzi's *Spiderwick Chronicles* and the film of the same name portray fairies as part of a complex world that includes more hostile characters than helpful ones. A posse of unfriendly fairies comes after twins Jared and Simon Grace and their older sister, Mallory, after they move with their mother into a dilapidated family home, where they find an ancient book: *Arthur Spiderwick's Field Guide to the Fantastic World Around You*, an illustrated guide to the fairies. The children are warned that the book itself is dangerous and was never meant for human eyes. They have a number of encounters with a mischievous brownie who lives in the walls of their house, with whom they eventually make friends. Their adventures continue in four subsequent volumes in which the attacks of the fairies and goblins become increasingly aggressive, culminating in the kidnapping of their mother,

---

<sup>47</sup> See Thomas E. Bullard, “UFO Abduction Reports: The Supernatural Narrative Returns in Technological Guise,” *Journal of American Folklore* 102 (1989): xx–xx; Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 211; Purkiss, *At the Bottom of the Garden*, 317–322.

whom the children must rescue.<sup>48</sup> A similar seamy, rotting, dangerous fairy underworld is the subject of the animated film *Epic*, adapted from William Joyce's children's novel *The Leaf Men and the Brave Good Bugs*. Here, the teenaged Mary Katherine ("M. K.") moves in with her eccentric entomologist father, who claims to have discovered Leaf Men, human-like beings who protect the processes of regeneration in the woods. Sceptical at first, M. K. becomes caught up in the epic struggle between the fairy queen, Tara, and the evil Mandrake, leader of the Boggans, the forces of decomposition and decay. She shrinks to diminutive size and is entrusted with the pod that contains the heir to the throne and the key to the continuation of forest life. In the process of fighting off the Boggans to save the pod, M. K. comes to understand the importance of the Leaf Men in the processes of regeneration and becomes convinced of the veracity of her father's scientific observations.<sup>49</sup> While fairy-like beings play a relatively minor role in J. K. Rowling's "Harry Potter" series, they are nonetheless present among the many magical creatures with which young witches and wizards must become familiar. Rowling draws heavily from British folklore in her depiction of house elves, boggarts, and pixies, which run the gamut from annoying to truly malevolent.

In sum, we have seen how modern Pagan concepts of fairies as protectors, children's companions, and guardians of nature draw significantly from Victorian and Edwardian literary fairies—representations which are tamer than their folkloric counterparts from oral tradition. Pagan legends and personal narratives of interactions with fae are informed by literary, film, and folkloric representations. This demonstrates that oral traditions in complex societies are never separate from literary ones; rather, the two categories are complementary and inform one another continuously. Literary and film representations shape our concepts of the world and become reflected in mystical and spiritual experiences. Yet for all the taming of the fae which has permitted them to become close companions to some modern Pagans, on another level, the fae can never be fully tamed due to the phenomenological nature of the fairy encounter itself. Try as we might, there is a side of them that will always revert to untamed behaviour.

---

<sup>48</sup> Holly Black and Tony di Terlizzi, *The Spiderwick Chronicles* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003–2009); *The Spiderwick Chronicles* (Paramount Pictures, 2008).

<sup>49</sup> William Joyce, *The Leaf Men and the Brave Good Bugs* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996); Chris Wedge, *Epic* (Blue Sky Studios, 2013).

## 7. “Wild Nature” and the Lure of the Past: The Legacy of Romanticism Among Young Pagan Environmentalists<sup>(7)</sup>

Sarah M. Pike<sup>1</sup>

In County Meath, Ireland in 2003, a group of contemporary Druids gathered at the Hill of Tara in response to news that a highway might be built through the sacred prehistoric site. Folklorist Jenny Butler witnessed a ritual for earth healing that took place on that occasion, during which a group of about 25 people stood on one of the mounds at the site. The Druids “called the quarters”, summoning the spirits of the four directions: North, South, East, and West. They hummed and chanted before linking hands and winding around each other in a Spiral Dance to “raise energy” for healing and protection of the site. Butler recalled that, “Each person concentrated on visualizing the energy and concurrently focused on sending this energy out of the circle to envelop the group members and the site on which they stood. The intention was for the energy to form a magical barrier around Tara.”<sup>2</sup>

Two years after the ritual that Butler attended, Druids were back at Tara to protest the highway with other Pagan and non-Pagan activists. Protest camps, which some Druids and other Pagans participated in, had sprung up to try to block the road and draw attention to the damage being done, even though there was little hope at that point that the road could be stopped. Druids at the camp and other activists held a Solstice Ritual during which they lit a flame that they intended to keep burning until the Pagan harvest festival of Lammass (1 August).<sup>3</sup> The following year, rituals were once again held at Tara, and the Irish protesters were even supported by a distant group of Druids in New York. Donata, an American Druid, reported that:

Our local pagan group celebrated Samhain [an important Pagan holiday on October 31] together Wednesday night. One woman, born in Ireland, led us in a ritual to save Tara, which was partly in Gaelic, with the rest of us repeating what she said (she also said it in English so we knew what we were saying). It was very moving for us. We also celebrated with a Journey to the Ancestors, including for many of us, ancestors from Ireland.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> California State University, Chico, Chico, CA, USA

**Email:** SPike@csuchico.edu

<sup>2</sup> Jenny Butler, “Druidry in Contemporary Ireland,” in *Modern Paganism in World Cultures; Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Michael F. Strmiska (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 95.

<sup>3</sup> “2 New Protest Camps Urgently Need Help,” *Indymedia Ireland*, 13 July 2006, <http://www.indymedia.ie/article/77224#comment159001>.

<sup>4</sup> Donata, post on “Tara, Ireland—Needs Your Help Right Now,” *The Druid Grove*, 5 November 2007, <http://message-board.druidry.org/viewtopic.php?t=21773>.

<sup>(7)</sup> © The Author(s) 2019  
Shai Feraro and Ethan Doyle White (eds.)  
Magic and Witchery in the Modern West  
Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15549-0\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15549-0_7)



Both on site and afar, a number of other ceremonies were held to protect Tara over the years before the road was completed.<sup>5</sup>

Like many eco-activist and Pagan ritual techniques shared between the U.S. and U.K., the Spiral Dance travels. Across the ocean from the Druid Spiral Dance that Butler witnessed in 2003, American Pagans and activists had been using the Spiral Dance in protest contexts as well.<sup>6</sup> One American Pagan community, Reclaiming, was particularly active in eco-activism in California from the 1980s, protesting against the Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant and against logging. Starhawk, one of the founders of Reclaiming, was a prominent presence at some of these protests.<sup>7</sup> In 2013, Starhawk led a climate action workshop and community Spiral Dance ritual in Los Angeles to “rebirth our selves and our world”.<sup>8</sup> Many years earlier she invoked a spiral at an anti-logging protest ritual in northern California. In her account of this protest, she explains:

We gather in the woods to claim this forest as sacred space, to charge our letters, our petition, our phone calls, with magic, that extra something that may shift the structures just a bit, create an opening for something new. We sing, we chant, we make offerings, we claim this land as sacred space ... we intend to conjure back the salmon, the ancient groves, the community of those indigenous to this place. We draw spirals in the dirt. Starhawk and the other activists then released a rattlesnake that had showed up that morning in the driveway of a friend: “She is beautiful, the scales on her back glistening in diamond shape, her tail crowned with many rattles. ... When we go, she will coil her body into a spiral and remain, a fitting guardian for this land.”<sup>9</sup>

The spiral, drawn or danced, connects these ritualists to the land they hope to protect and at the same time inscribes their protective intentions on the land. Whether at the Hill of Tara, in front of a nuclear power plant, or in a northern Californian forest, environmental protection rituals work to affirm Pagans’ and activists’ connections to the earth and construct the earth as sacred and of value.

This essay builds on Ronald Hutton’s discussion of the ways in which early nineteenth-century English Romanticism shaped views of the divine in nature, and especially the opposition of an earth-identified goddess to modernity that influenced the development of modern Paganism.<sup>10</sup> This opposition of a divinised earth to modern, Western “civilisation” has remained central in many radical environmentalist milieus in the U.S. and the U.K., whether Pagan or not. From the 1970s through the 1990s, past-oriented environmentalists in North America and the U.K. (both those who identified as Pagans and those who did not) drew on the legacy of Romanticism in their idealisation of a historical past in which nature was primal, pristine, and, usually, nurturing. By reclaiming the notion of “Mother Earth”,

---

<sup>5</sup> For example, The *Irish Examiner* reported that among the rituals performed were “a full moon ceremony, which is credited with giving protection; the creation of a healing circle and the symbolic lifting of the blanket of darkness followed by a spell-casting ceremony called An Geis Triarach and a formal Celtic Druid’s blessing”. “Druids Gather on Cursed Tara,” 22 June 2005, <http://www.friendsoftheirishenvironment.org/eu/12-papers-today/archaeology/7282->. Although they failed to stop the road from being built, protesters managed to bring widespread public attention to the sacredness of Tara as part of a living religious world.

<sup>6</sup> The first Spiral Dance was held in 1979 in San Francisco, the same year James Lovelock published *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*. Central to the Spiral Dance organisers’ initial purpose was an “attempt to integrate a political vision and a spiritual vision” that came in part from Bay Area Pagans’ involvement in anti-nuclear politics. The first Spiral Dance was also held to celebrate the publication of *The Spiral Dance : A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (1979), by well-known American witch and activist Starhawk. “It was 20 Years Ago...” An interview by Georgie Craig with Kevyn Lutton, Starhawk, and Diane Baker, *Reclaiming Quarterly*, <http://www.reclaimingquarterly.org/web/spiraldance/spiral4.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Reclaiming emerged from Goddess-based feminist spirituality and grassroots activism in California and on the East Coast. For more information, see Barbara Epstein, *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution: Nonviolent Direct Action in the 1970s and 1980s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Lois, “Climate Action Workshop & Community Spiral Dance with Starhawk at Fais Do Do in Los Angeles Sunday, December 7, 2014 from noon to 7pm,” *Los Angeles Ecovillage*, 17 November 2014, <http://laecovillage.org/2014/11/17/starhawk-at-fais-do-do-in-los-sunday-december-7-2014-from-noon-to-7pm/>.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah M. Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 159–160.

<sup>10</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

which figured prominently in environmental actions of the 1970s through the 1990s, they contributed to a particular style of environmentalism that is nostalgic for earlier eras, childhood, and a past lived closer to nature, in which humans are imagined to feel at home on the earth.

However, there are two competing images that have circulated among radical environmentalists in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: the earth as nurturing Mother who takes care of her human children and wild nature as unknowable and unconstrained by human categories, a nature unconcerned about human life. These competing ideas about nature were evident in environmental protests that Pagans participated in during the 1990s and 2000s, the period of my research in radical environmentalist communities in both the U.S. and U.K.<sup>11</sup> These two ways of imagining “nature” circulated among Pagan environmental activists and played an important role in the broader environmental movement’s conflicted attitudes towards the appropriate relation between humans and the more-than-human world.

## Environmental Activists’ Implicit Paganism

Many American eco-activists involved with forest activism have self-identified as Pagan (or “pagan” with a lower-case “p”) and included ritual magic in their activist practice, even if they did not belong to a particular Pagan tradition such as Wicca or Druidism, though some did. For example, the most prominent radical environmentalist publication, the *Earth First! Journal*, publishes issues correlated to the Wheel of the Year, the cycle of seasonal festivals that is followed by many Pagans and revolves around the solstices, equinoxes, and the four cross-quarter holidays: October 31 (Samhain), February 2 (Brigid), May 1 (Beltane), and August 1 (Lughnasad).<sup>12</sup> In the *Journal*, the seasonal festivals frame ongoing news items about actions and conversations about strategies to save the earth.

More typically, many activists have been “culturally” Pagan or implicitly, rather than explicitly Pagan, thus the lower-case “p”. Embracing Paganism, especially among young activists, often came about as part of a wholesale rejection of what they deemed the oppressive forces of imperialism, capitalism, and Christianity: Paganism could be for them what the status quo was not. An activist named Currant explained to me that Paganism served as “a cultural replacement for Western rationalism and Christianity”, a view shared by other activists I encountered during my field work from 2009 to 2014, although there were certainly critics of any kind of religious commitment, especially among the more politically anarchist activists. Currant recalled that in American forest activist circles of the 1990s, there was a widespread “reverence for nature”, including practices such as “keeping a special stone from a favorite wild place, maybe placing it on a shelf as a kind of altar”.<sup>13</sup>

Environmental activists like Currant developed their beliefs and practices within a cultural and historical context in which Paganism influenced environmental activism (especially anti-logging forest activism) on the West Coast of the U.S. before and throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. Similar developments were taking place at the same time in the U.K.: Pagans expressing their beliefs by protesting and conducting rituals in protest camps to protect trees, sacred landscapes, and the earth more generally.

In the U.S., contemporary Pagan involvement with direct action anarchist movements has its origins in anti-nuclear campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s. According to Reclaiming’s online booklet, *Campfire Chants*, “In the late 1970s, anti-nuclear protests on both US coasts began to create a new political culture based in consensus, feminism, and small group (‘affinity group’) process”.<sup>14</sup> Some of those who helped

---

<sup>11</sup> Sarah M. Pike, *For the Wild: Ritual and Commitment in Radical Eco-Activism* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Nettle, an Earth First! activist who worked on the journal, explained to me that the journal collective originally decided to follow this practice because they did not want to orient publication around a Christian calendar cycle. Interview by author, 1 October 2014. On the development of the Wheel of the Year, see Ronald Hutton, “Modern Pagan Festivals: A Study in the Nature of Tradition,” *Folklore* 119, no. 3 (2008): 251–273.

<sup>13</sup> Letter to author, March 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Starhawk, “Song 9: We Are the Power in Everyone,” *Camp Fire Chants*, <https://campfirechants.wordpress.com/2016/08/>

organise Reclaiming participated in Pagan affinity groups during these protests and held rituals in jail and at protests. Around the same time period, modern witches and other contemporary Pagans were also active in the Livermore Action Group (LAG) protesting nuclear weapons development at Lawrence Livermore Laboratory in northern California.<sup>15</sup> LAG was feminist, anarchist, ecologically concerned, and included both Christians and Pagans working together against nuclear arms.<sup>16</sup>

In their search for alternatives to Christianity and Judaism, 1980s feminist activists involved in the direct action movement were drawn to theories of ancient pre-Christian matriarchal goddess-worshipping cultures. This interest shaped their commitments to environmental issues as part of a radical feminist magical politics.<sup>17</sup> They invoked a feminised nature and divinised earth in response to the eco-feminist critique that oppression and exploitation of nature and women go hand in hand.<sup>18</sup> Starhawk's influential book, *The Spiral Dance : A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*, published in 1979, offered important resources to Pagans, feminists, and activists during this time and since.<sup>19</sup> According to historian Barbara Epstein, "the polytheism of Paganism has been attractive to anarchists and others around the direct action movement as an alternative to cultural imperialism that tends to be associated with Christianity or other monotheistic world religions".<sup>20</sup> *The Spiral Dance* and other works politicised modern witchcraft and, as a result of the presence of Starhawk and other Pagans, many West Coast direct actions were imbued with a Pagan sensibility. Starhawk, for instance, participated in the Livermore Action Group, Abalone Alliance, and Earth First! protests, among others, including protests in the U.K., such as that at the 2005 G-8 summit in Scotland.<sup>21</sup> In Starhawk's activism and writing, feminism, Paganism, and environmentalism are intertwined concerns, expressed in the twenty-first century through her work as a permaculture teacher.<sup>22</sup>

Spiritually inclined eco-feminist approaches like Starhawk's assume that women have a special relationship to the earth, which is identified with their central deity: the Goddess. In *The Spiral Dance*, Starhawk asserts that "the Goddess is first of all earth, the dark, nurturing mother who brings forth all life" and the "soul of nature".<sup>23</sup> Yet she also makes clear that the Goddess/earth has another side: "She is the light and the darkness, the patroness of love and death." The connection of the goddess to the seasonal cycles suggests one way of thinking about the tension/balance between dark and light, dangerous and nurturing, as in the following parallel between a green bud and the myth of Persephone and Demeter:

Green Bud Leaf/Bud Leaf Bright/Leaf Bright Flower/  
Bright Flower Grow/Flower Grow Fruit/Grow Fruit Ripe/  
Fruit Ripe Seed/Ripe Seed Die/Seed Die Earth  
Die Earth Dark/Earth Dark Waken/Dark Waken Green  
Waken Green Bud.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> song-9-we-are-the-power-in-everyone/.

<sup>15</sup> Starhawk provides one example in the opening of *Truth or Dare: Encounters with Power, Authority, and Mystery* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 4–5. In *Truth or Dare*, she identifies "the cosmos" as the "living body of the goddess" (7).

<sup>16</sup> In *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution*, Barbara Epstein describes the prominent role of contemporary Paganism in the anti-nuclear movement on pages 157–194.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 170–175.

<sup>18</sup> One of many examples was Susan Griffin's eco-feminist book, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2016 [1978]).

<sup>19</sup> It has gone through three editions and has been translated into multiple languages.

<sup>20</sup> Epstein, *Political Protest*, 191.

<sup>21</sup> David Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> For an example of Starhawk's involvement with creating a ritual at an anti-logging protest, see Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions*, 159–160. In Spring 2018, Starhawk's website included several permaculture events led by her: <http://starhawk.org/schedule/>.

<sup>23</sup> Pages 94 and 98. The reference to the "soul of nature" is from Starhawk's version of the "Charge of the Goddess" written by Doreen Valiente (91).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 100.

While the Goddess may have a dark side, in *The Spiral Dance* it is the God, more than the Goddess, who embodies “wildness” and “untamed” nature.<sup>25</sup> He longs for union “with the prime, nurturing force”, through union with the Goddess, “whose mother-love knows no bounds”.<sup>26</sup> As the object of the God’s longings, the Goddess becomes more of a nurturer, even if she is theoretically imagined to encompass opposites. This understanding of Goddess/Mother Earth/nurturer has been significant for many American Pagans and eco-activists. Most eco-activists who identify as “pagan” do not speak of the God of the witches, in part because of the influence of feminism, especially among West Coast activists in the U.S. The God has faded in the context of eco-activism, while the earth as Goddess has become prominent.

In *The Triumph of the Moon*, Ronald Hutton traces contemporary Pagans’ identification of the earth as goddess to classical Antiquity, an identification revived during the decades around 1900, and especially evident in the works of Romantic writers such as John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley.<sup>27</sup> When the goddess appears as a major figure in Romantic poetry, she is sometimes identified as the Roman goddess Diana but also as a generalised female deity: “Mother Earth” or “Mother Nature”. The Romantics described the sublimity of “wild nature” and also personified the earth as “Sacred Goddess, Mother Earth”, in the words of Keats.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, in Romantic literature she becomes both a creator figure and a redeemer. To be redeemed, humans had to reconcile with her.<sup>29</sup> This intimate identification of the earth as goddess continued into the twentieth century. By 1910, according to Hutton, there was a general consensus among scholars that a Great Goddess ruled in European prehistory, a consensus that reached its fullest expression in Robert Graves’ *The White Goddess* (1948).<sup>30</sup> This understanding of the Goddess, as a countercultural deity identified with the earth, is the context from which contemporary Paganism and spiritually informed, feminist eco-activism emerged.

The ways in which the history of contemporary Paganism and eco-activism are linked in the U.S. are complex, but two strands are particularly significant, at least in the context of 1990s West Coast forest activism, which influenced later eco-activism in the U.S. In addition to the work of Starhawk and Reclaiming, other early Pagan traditions that revere the earth as a goddess shaped expressions of environmental activism in the U.S. during the late twentieth century. The Church of All Worlds (CAW), a Pagan organisation inspired by Isaac Asimov’s science-fiction novel, *Strangers in a Strange Land* (1961), drew on the same historical context of Paganism and Romanticism as Starhawk and other modern witches. The historian of Wicca Chas S. Clifton observes that “Gaian Nature”, a phrase he borrows from CAW co-founder Oberon Zell-Ravenheart’s 1970 article on “deep ecology”, is a common variety of contemporary Paganism. Clifton describes Pagans who follow this type of Paganism as likely “to speak of the spirit of nature and, as heirs of the Romantic Movement, to see humanity as suffering from its spiritual divorce from nature”.<sup>31</sup> One of the ways that the earth imagined as a goddess works redemptively is through the restoration of this earlier imagined intimacy of humans with the rest of nature, a central concern of many eco-activists.<sup>32</sup> This sense of the earth as redemptive also informs later Pagan and activist views of the earth as a nurturing mother that should be defended, resulting in some activists’ commitment to being eco-warriors participating in a sacred crusade for the earth.

CAW’s northern California nature sanctuary, Annwn, played an important role in West Coast forest activism during the 1990s. Activists engaged in the “Redwood Wars”, for instance, retreated to Annwn to “recharge”, according to Darryl Cherney, one of the leading radical environmentalist organisers on the West Coast during the campaign to prevent logging of ancient redwoods. Cherney recalled that some

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>27</sup> Hutton, *Triumph*, 32–42.

<sup>28</sup> Written sources from Antiquity speak of the earth as feminine, an image picked up in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by English Romantic poets like Keats; see Hutton, *Triumph*, 34.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 41–42.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in S. Zohreh Kermani, *Pagan Family Values: Childhood and the Religious Imagination in Contemporary American Paganism* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 30.

<sup>32</sup> Pike, *For the Wild*, 104–136.

participants in actions organised by the radical environmentalist group Earth First! went to Annwn for gatherings and spiritual restoration.<sup>33</sup> While many Earth First!ers did not formally identify with Wicca or CAW, they were very much in conversation with these Pagan traditions, especially in the way they invoked “Mother Earth”.

At the 1993 Earth First! Rendezvous, eco-activists joined Native Americans protesting plans to construct an observatory on the San Carlos Apache’s sacred mountain, Mount Graham in eastern Arizona. They sang songs such as “Ancient Mother”, which usually includes chanting the names of goddesses from around the world accompanied by the refrain:

Ancient Mother, I hear you calling.  
Ancient Mother, I hear your sound.  
Ancient Mother, I hear your laughter,  
Ancient Mother, I taste your tears.<sup>34</sup>

Religious studies scholar Bron Taylor reported that at the same protest one young Pagan activist who had grown up in CAW, “spoke about how the consciousness of the tribe [meaning Earth First!] comes from the Goddess”.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, Earth First! protesters also demonstrated at the University of Arizona against the observatory that the university wanted to build, singing songs such as “The Earth is Our Mother”.

The Earth is our Mother, we must take care of her  
The Earth in our Mother, we must take care of her  
Chorus: Hey Yanna Ho Yanna Hey Yon Yon, Hey Yanna Ho Yanna Hey Yon Yon  
Her sacred ground we walk upon, with every step we take  
The Earth is our Mother, she will take care of us.<sup>36</sup>

The anti-observatory campaign is one of many examples of how by the 1990s, Paganism was the implicit religious worldview of Earth First! and focused on defending Mother Earth.

The Church of All Worlds found other ways to promote images of the planet Earth as a goddess, blending an environmental ethic with Pagan values. CAW’s co-founder and high priest, Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, designed a figurine called “Millennial Gaia”, a mother goddess that embodied the Pagan view of Earth as a nurturing mother. Zell wanted to create a figure that would be “a sermon in stone”, exemplifying the Gaia thesis put forward by scientists James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis in the 1970s. Zell even corresponded with Lovelock, “comparing their world views”.<sup>37</sup> In their writings about Gaia, Lovelock and Margulis hypothesised that Earth is a self-regulating, single organism that helps maintain conditions for life on the planet. Lovelock named this planetary organism after the Greek goddess Gaia and described “Her” as “alive”. In response to criticism from other scientists, he later claimed that he did not intend to represent Gaia as a sentient entity and meant it to be metaphoric: “Nowhere in our writings do we express the idea that planetary self-regulation is purposeful, or involves foresight or planning by the biota” he insisted.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, his original suggestion that the earth is living and identified with a goddess found traction among Pagans and environmentalists.

Designed in green and blue, Zell’s Millennial Gaia was still available for purchase online in 2018. She is a voluptuous female figure with flowing hair and a full belly in the shape and colours of the

---

<sup>33</sup> Interview by author, 17 February 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Credited to Robert Gass at “Chants and Music,” Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans, <http://www.cuups.org/resources/chantsmusic.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Bron Taylor, “Resacralizing Earth: Pagan Environmentalism and the Restoration of Turtle Island,” in *American Sacred Space*, eds. David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 136.

<sup>36</sup> Attribution is often given as “Native American” or “Hopi traditional,” or even “Hupa tribe of northern California” (<http://farfringe.com/stj1073-the-earth-is-our-mother/> and <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/song-goddess-and-god-earth-our-mother-lyrics.html>).

<sup>37</sup> Hutton briefly discusses the link between Zell and Lovelock in *Triumph*, 352. Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers and Other Pagans in America Today* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986 [1979]), 303.

<sup>38</sup> “The Gaia Theory,” Planetary Philosophy, <https://www.planetaryphilosophy.com/philosophy/philosophy-of-consciousness/the-gaia-theory/>.

planet Earth. In order to market Millennial Gaia, Zell and his partner, Morning Glory, founded Mythic Images, a company that distributed statues of deities and other sacred art. One marketplace listing in 2018 describes Zell's creation as follows: "This exquisite figurine, The Millennial Gaia, brings our new evolving consciousness of the Earth into a physical form. She is an invitation to each and every human being to enter consciously into the myth and story of the living Earth and to respond to Her as our Mother, as the larger being of which we are all part."<sup>39</sup> Earth, mother, and goddess are all linked in the figure of "Millennial Gaia" and exemplify CAW's view of the earth, a view that shaped Pagan attitudes among some radical environmentalists.

In this way, alongside the legacy of Romanticism, a significant Gaian spirituality movement developed out of Lovelock's and Margulis' theory, promoted by CAW and others, that influenced both Paganism and radical environmentalism. From its founding in 1980, Earth First! adopted the slogan "No Compromise in Defense of Mother Earth", linking a Pagan view of the earth as mother with radical direct action. This slogan attests to activists' understanding of their role in the larger redemptive scheme of things in which they draw closer to the earth as "her" defenders.

In protests such as those at the Hill of Tara in Ireland and Diablo Canyon in California, an immanent view of the earth as goddess was linked to what Earth First! founder Dave Foreman called a "sacred crusade to save the Earth" by opposing everything industrialised civilisation stood for.<sup>40</sup> The targets of Earth First!'s actions, such as logging and hydro-fracking, are always positioned in contrast with and in opposition to "The Wild", "Mother Earth", Pagan religions, and indigenous cultures. In the twenty-first century, Earth First! has continued to put the "No Compromise" slogan at the centre of its work, as one way to distinguish radical environmentalism from more mainstream approaches that are willing to compromise and do not necessarily see the earth as "Mother". Certain emphases characterised both activists who identified with Pagan traditions and those who were more implicitly Pagan: nostalgia for a purer past (both one's own childhood and a cultural pre-Christian past, when humans are imagined to have existed more harmoniously with the nonhuman natural world), a countercultural emphasis "against civilization" and the desire to re-enchant and "rewild" nature.

## Emblems of Enchantment in a War for the Wild

In addition to perceiving the earth as a goddess, some activists looked to past cultures and to childhood for models of enchanted nature. Many of the activists I interviewed during my fieldwork among eco-activists were between 18 and 26 years of age and usually had become involved with activism when they were teenagers. For them, looking backward meant remembering and reconstructing childhood experiences that were not that far in the past. A number of these activists became interested in Paganism as teenagers, even if they did not tend to join Pagan organisations. Sometimes their involvement with Paganism lasted into their adult years, sometimes not. Regardless, Pagan perspectives continued to have some influence on how they expressed and experienced activism and how they imagined their relationship to other species and the earth.

For most Pagans, re-enchantment of nature, which they tend to see as disenchanted by the forces of Christianity and industrialisation, is a central concern.<sup>41</sup> The young activists I came to know during my research, whether or not they identified as Pagans, shared this concern and worked actively to re-animate and re-enchant nonhuman nature. Young activists' attitudes towards and interactions with fairies and trees are two examples of re-enchantment strategies that work against "civilisation". When I interviewed Nettle, who was involved with Earth First! and influenced by Paganism and feminism

<sup>39</sup> "Millennial Gaia Statue crafted by Oberon Zell," *Spiritual Treasures*, 2 March 2016, <https://spiritualtreasures.org/2016/03/02/millennial-gaia-statue-crafted-by-oberon-zell/>.

<sup>40</sup> Susan Zakin, *Coyotes and Town Dogs: Earth First! and the Environmental Movement (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1993)*, 399.

<sup>41</sup> Examples of children and re-enchantment strategies are offered by Susan Greenwood, *The Nature of Magic: An Anthropology of Consciousness* (New York: Berg, 2005), 159–166.

during her early years in college, she described to me the fairies she had seen at one of the Earth First! gatherings we both attended. Nettle recalled that many people told her she was an “old soul” when she was young, but that now she was like a “young kid obsessed with fairies, identifying with fairies”.<sup>42</sup> For activists like Nettle, interacting with fairies is not something to grow out of. Childhood delight in such spiritual beings is one of many ways to engage in wonder-filled interactions with the nonhuman world.

Activists in both the U.S. and U.K. draw on the image of the fairy, pixie, or elf as a mischievous and/or magical figure. In his essay, “There’s Bulldozers in the Fairy Garden”, activist and scholar of Paganism Andy Letcher describes a “Pixie Village” that was part of the Newbury Bypass anti-road protest in England in the 1990s.<sup>43</sup> Letcher suggests that it is in part the intention of setting aside protest spaces and action camps as liminal spaces in opposition to the broader society that encourages the notion of enchanted lands where fairies and elves are accessible, either literally or as metaphors for the spiritual energies of particular places. But discussions about fairies and elves were not common at the Earth First! gatherings I participated in between 2009 and 2014, except in a metaphorical sense when referring to mischief-making. Nevertheless, even the more anarchist and less explicitly spiritual Earth Liberation Front and Animal Liberation Front describe activists as “elves” committing sabotage and other forms of misbehaviour.<sup>44</sup> By invoking fairies and elves, Pagans and activists remind us that mischief and magic are alive and well in nature and in the imagination. With humour, they suggest that the nonhuman world can fight back. Becoming elves means taking part in that fight against those who would destroy the natural world in the form that activists want to find it—as untouched by humans as possible.

One of the main sources young activists draw on for experiencing and imagining enchanted nature is childhood experience.<sup>45</sup> Some Pagan activists recall childhood encounters with fairies or talking to trees as teenagers. Tush, an activist I met at an Earth First! Rendezvous, grew up in a rural area, near an apple orchard, and remembered spending most of her time “climbing trees and playing in creeks”. Because of her childhood connections to the other-than-human world, she explained that as an adult she tries to “live my life thinking about everything being sacred”. She remembered being outdoors a lot as a child and interacting with the land as though it was enchanted: “I think I grew up with a sort of ecologically-minded worldview, or at the very least an imagination that was based on playing in the woods. I used to sometimes bake tiny cookies and leave them in special spots for faeries or other spirits that I felt connection with (I was kind of a funny kid).” Her mother placed a little “toadstool house” in her garden where Tush liked to play. “I had a huge imagination”, Tush recalled. In addition to fairies, special trees in her childhood landscape helped imbue her surroundings with a sense of magic.<sup>46</sup> Activists like Tush recreate childhood experiences and childhood landscapes during protests, when they build tree houses and interact with fairies or represent themselves as elves. They refer to a childhood world that seems truer and more real to them, that represents an appropriate and desired way of living on Earth.

An even more common emblem of enchantment than encounters with fairies is activists’ interaction with trees as sacred beings. When activist Julia Butterfly Hill, who spent two years in a redwood tree called Luna, first encountered redwoods, she was moved by their grandeur: “When I entered the great majestic cathedral of the redwood forest for the first time ... my spirit knew it had found what it was searching for. I dropped to my knees and began to cry, because I was so overwhelmed by the wisdom, energy, and spirituality housed in this holiest of temples.”<sup>47</sup> In a similar fashion, when describing how

---

<sup>42</sup> Interview by author, 1 October 2014.

<sup>43</sup> Andy Letcher, “‘There’s Bulldozers in the Fairy Garden’: Re-enchantment Narratives within British Eco-Paganism,” in *Popular Spiritualities: The Politics of Contemporary Enchantment*, ed. Lynn Hume and Kathleen Phillips (Aldershot: Ashgate), 180.

<sup>44</sup> “Earth Liberation Front,” Anarchy in Action, [https://anarchyinaction.org/index.php?title=Earth\\_Liberation\\_Front](https://anarchyinaction.org/index.php?title=Earth_Liberation_Front).

<sup>45</sup> Pike, *For the Wild*, 71–103.

<sup>46</sup> Interview by author, 2014.

<sup>47</sup> “The Butterfly Effect,” an interview by Leslee Goodman, *The Sun* (April 2012): 5.

he became an activist, Jeff Luers, who spent 12 years in prison for setting two SUVs on fire at a car dealership, remembered the awe he felt on first encountering stands of old-growth trees: “Standing before them is a humbling experience ... like standing before a God or Goddess.”<sup>48</sup> Although most activists value forests for their intrinsic worth as biological species, for others like Hill and Luers, forests are sacred sites, populated by spiritual beings, gods and goddesses, and so their desecration must be prevented.

Luers described himself to me as “a pagan and an animist”, someone who believed that “all life is interconnected, that it is this connection that allows life to flourish. The web of life keeps the earth in balance and creates a symbiotic relationship between us and our planet.”<sup>49</sup> Luers was a Pagan teenager before he joined Earth First! campaigns. Central to his developing activist commitments was his relationship to the natural world that existed in contrast to the Los Angeles suburb in which he grew up. Luers recalled that as a teenager, he and his high school friends “embraced the occult. It was not uncommon for us to practice magic or talk to trees. We saw the underlying spirit in things. I became very in tune with the energy around me.” Because his friends were also Pagans, if he mentioned that he had a great talk with a tree, “I didn’t get laughed at”. Through his later teenage years, he continued to talk to trees and other nature spirits: “I’ve talked to trees nearly all my life ... the hardest part about being a pagan is overcoming all you have been taught. I mean people think I’m crazy when I say I can talk to some trees. Because the idea is so foreign. And yet it is totally acceptable to talk and pray to a totally invisible god.”<sup>50</sup>

Their personal relationships with trees and their reverence towards trees as sacred beings helped further Hill’s and Luers’ commitments to protecting forests as places of value and enchantment. In “How I Became an Eco-Warrior”, an essay written in 2003, Luers explains his motivation for becoming involved with eco-activism. A few years before the arson that would put him in prison, he and some activist friends travelled to Oregon’s Cascade Mountains to help save an old-growth forest of ancient Douglas Fir, Western Hemlock, and Red Cedar.<sup>51</sup> During the campaign, he found himself alone in the woods and became acquainted with a young tree called Happy. Although he had communicated with trees and other nature spirits for years, this was the first time a tree talked back to him. A storm blew in and he soon realised how unprepared he was to stay in the tree:

As I shivered around my pathetic fire the temperature dropped even further. The sleet had turned to full on snow. For the first time in my life I wondered if maybe I wouldn’t make it through the night. I knew that I needed to stay awake, not so much because I was worried about my body temperature, but I was worried about the storm and my tarp. To pass the time I talked with my favorite tree. I spoke out loud to hear my voice, but I was speaking with my heart. Now, for some people this may sound crazy, to me I’ve spoken with trees and animals all my life. I’d never gotten an answer until that night.

Luers felt the tree ask why he was scared: “It was like this sensational feeling like instinct. You just feel it and if you ignore it, it goes away. If you pay attention a whole new world opens up.”<sup>52</sup> The world that opened up for Luers and Hill was an enchanted woodland realm of fairies and talking trees, beings that had their own interests and desires.

But opening up also meant listening to and feeling the suffering of trees: both Luers and Hill recalled the moments when they felt the pain of their tree friends. In her memoir about her two years in Luna, Hill remembered what she experienced when trees fell around Luna: “Each time a chainsaw cut through those trees, I felt it cut through me as well. It was like watching my family being killed. And just as we

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Letter to author, 5 November 2006.

<sup>50</sup> Communication to author, 5 March 2007.

<sup>51</sup> Jeffrey Luers, “How I Became an Eco-Warrior” (Fall 2003), <http://freefreenow.org/index.html>.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.



lose a part of ourselves with the passing of a family member or friends, so did I lose a part of myself with each friend.”<sup>53</sup>

In addition to understanding the natural world around them to be inhabited by sentient trees and fairies who lived under threat, some activists also enchant the world by borrowing from fictional sources such as J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. In 2012, a hundred miles east of Dallas, Texas, activists participating in the Tar Sands Blockade posed for a photo in a tree village above a banner that read “You Shall Not Pass”, illustrated with a painting of a giant hand in a “stop” gesture. They called the tree village and its surrounding forest “Middle Earth”. Middle Earth’s tree village was established by Tar Sands Blockade activists to prevent energy giant TransCanada from clearing land for a pipeline to carry Tar Sands oil from Alberta, Canada, to ports on the Gulf of Mexico.<sup>54</sup> According to filmmaker Garrett Graham’s documentary film, *Blockadia Rising*, the area to be cleared for the pipeline included some of the oldest trees in Texas. The area was also home to armadillos, cougars, bobcats, white-tailed deer, tree frogs, catfish, luna moths, an endangered woodpecker, and many other species.<sup>55</sup>

At Tar Sands Blockade, references to Tolkien’s fictional world were used to infuse the campaign with a sense of a greater struggle between good and evil. One activist who participated in the Tar Sands Blockade Middle Earth camp recalled that, “We would often compare ourselves to the Ewoks of *Return of the Jedi* or the Ents of *Lord of the Rings*”.<sup>56</sup> In order to create a contrast between heroic activists and an evil corporation, Graham included “Mordor-like” images of the Alberta Tar Sands in his film, invoking Tolkien’s despoiled fictional land ruled by the dark lord Sauron and his terrifying armies. Graham wanted his film to tell a story: “Luckily, the Tar Sands already look like Mordor, so all I had to do was make sure that I took the time to record the forest before and after the destruction as well as recording the machinery in action”.<sup>57</sup> *Blockadia Rising* shows trees in Middle Earth being cut down by chainsaws and bulldozers and falling just 20 feet away from activists. For activists, the greed that characterised TransCanada’s violation of the landscape was countered by activists’ defence of a wonder-filled sacred landscape and their commitment to a holy war for the wild.

For activists, trees may be gods and goddesses, but they are also vulnerable beings that must be defended. This tension exists throughout many environmental campaigns: reverence for sacred beings alongside a sense of their vulnerability. Such vulnerability is most clearly expressed through images of absence and desecration, such as stumps and clear-cuts. It is these images of desecration that contribute to the sense of being in an important struggle against the forces of an out of control industrial civilisation. Rabbit, an Earth First! activist, witnessed a tree-sit eviction near the tree he was sitting in. He heard chainsaws and the sound of a tree falling to the ground, a 200-year-old oak that he had “totally fallen in love with. ... It sounds horrible when a tree is hitting the ground. It is the moment when you realize it is too late—that you cannot make this unhappen—and that the tree, which you know so well and which has become your friend, is now dead.”<sup>58</sup> For Rabbit, the vulnerability of the woods he had come to protect and the loss of a tree friend he had come to know further confirmed his commitment to forest protection.

In Middle Earth, tree-dwelling elves/activists confronted the powers of Mordor embodied by TransCanada, a multinational corporation, and its hired bulldozers. In the U.K., a majority of activists involved with the Newbury bypass protests had read *The Lord of the Rings*.<sup>59</sup> The U.K. activists were

---

<sup>53</sup> Julia Butterfly Hill, *The Legacy of Luna: The Story of a Tree, a Woman, and the Struggle to Save the Redwoods* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2000), 66.

<sup>54</sup> Priscila Mosqueda, “The Keystone XL Battle Comes to East Texas,” *Texas Observer*, 29 October 2012, <http://www.texasobserver.org/east-texas-showdown/>. The tree village in Middle Earth lasted for 85 days before it was dismantled after pipeline construction was rerouted around it.

<sup>55</sup> *Blockadia Rising: Voices of the Tar Sands Blockade*, directed by Garrett Graham, 2013.

<sup>56</sup> Aaron, interview by author, 24 July 2013.

<sup>57</sup> “Interview: Film Maker Garrett Graham on the Tar Sands Blockade,” *Earth First! Journal*, 23 October 2013, <http://earthfirstjournal.org/newswire/2013/10/23/interview-garrett-graham-and-blockadia-rising/#more-26230>.

<sup>58</sup> “The Hambach Forest Occupation,” *Earth First! Journal* (Samhain 2014): 24.

<sup>59</sup> Letcher, “There’s Bulldozers,” 181.

also inspired by C. S. Lewis' Narnia books, as well as the legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood.<sup>60</sup> These examples reveal the stark contrast activists make between an enchanted woodland realm of talking trees, animals, and fairies and logging and extraction industries. As Roderick Nash suggests in *Wilderness and the American Mind*, this kind of opposition of modern, industrialised life to wild nature and an idyllic past was a common trope among early nineteenth-century Romantics as well.<sup>61</sup> If Pagans inherited this view to some extent, it found full expression in eco-activist communities influenced by Paganism, where a struggle between good (the wild) and evil forces (capitalism and industrial civilisation) is the context in which most eco-actions take place. Activists and some Pagans share this sense of being at war with the broader culture and finding better models for the future in fiction and the past.

## The Lure of Which Past?

Activists construct binary oppositions between the destructive practices of civilisation and the liberating promise of "the wild". Their visions of a primal future, their nostalgia for an earlier time when they imagine humans lived more harmoniously with the more-than-human world, and their need to defend Mother Earth against everything they identify with civilisation, have been forged through direct experience with sacred beings: individual trees or Mother Earth writ large. Their re-enchantment strategies (Mother Earth, fairies, sacred trees) enhance the value of the sites they fight to protect and underscore why they are compelled to stand for the wild against civilisation. Because they associate nature with childhood, an idealised past, spiritual beings, and fictional worlds, activists' enemies, such as logging and resource extraction companies, are always positioned in contrast and opposition to "The Wild", "Mother Earth", Pagan religions, and indigenous communities.

For activists, restoring humans' past relationships with forests and nonhuman animals plays a redemptive role. By saving trees from logging, activists engage in a sacred crusade for "the wild", doing their best to reverse the domestication of nature. Yet in doing so, they reveal an important tension: the earth is wild and unknowable or she is like a nurturing mother, whose children must protect her. The difference here is between the accessibility of anthropomorphised images of Mother Earth and the sense of a wild unknown by humans that can shape our destiny in mysterious ways, according to primitivist activists who want to rewild the planet.

As eco-activism in the U.S. became increasingly infused with anarchist perspectives after the 1999 WTO demonstrations in Seattle, Washington, less enchanted and non-anthropomorphised views of nature became increasingly emphasised in activist communities, though these earlier views did not disappear, as the Middle Earth tree village in Texas demonstrates. In addition, Paganism became less prominent at activist gatherings and camps. Anarcho-primitivists in particular came to be seen and to see themselves as understanding nature in a different register than other eco-activists.<sup>62</sup> All activists emphasised connection and kinship, but differed in how they defined and understood "the wild" especially in relation to their expectations for the future.

Many activists' primal future is a reaction against technological progress and a return to the past. It is the hoped-for ultimate outcome of their holy war for the wild. One aspect of this return to the past is rewilding, a way to address the ills of domestication. In the zine "reclaim, rewild: a vision for going feral & actualizing our wildest dreams", Laurel and Skunk argue that "There's another way to live ... another, older world beneath the asphalt of what's mistakenly referred to as the 'real world'. ... Humans can belong as certainly as any forest, worm or wolf. The trouble is we've forgotten who we are, what we're for, and where we came from." These eco-activists seek a reversal of everything that has

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>61</sup> Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974 [1967]), 44–66.

<sup>62</sup> Anarcho-primitivism is an anti-civilisation movement, often earth-based. Two of the most influential anarcho-primitivist thinkers for contemporary radical activists are John Zerzan and Kevin Tucker: see Zerzan's website at <http://www.johnzerzan.net> and the "Black and Green Network" Tucker founded at <http://www.blackandgreenpress.org>.

been domesticated; they hope that vegetation and nonhuman animals will take over the planet. Activist Rod Coronado imagines the future in this way:

It's going to be a dark time, but I think there will be pockets of people, nature and animals that will survive. ... We will rediscover the value of loving the world around us when our survival is inseparable from it. The intimate relationship we create with the natural world will reawaken a relationship with nature that will be a new enlightenment ... the memory of consumerist worldviews will seem as crazy as our concepts of past societies who believed the earth was flat.<sup>63</sup>

Activist music, poetry, and art work clearly express these kinds of future visions that entail the undoing of civilisation and celebrate the triumph of the wild. In “A Handful of Leaves”, a poem by Sean Swain published in the *Earth First! Journal*, the poet imagines the future as a return to the “Stone Age”:

A prayer for the children of the next Neolithic,  
That we leave to them  
A field of lilies where a Walmart once stood,  
Salmon upstream from the ruins of a dam,  
Kudzu vines embracing skeletons of skyscrapers,  
Cracked and overgrown ribbons of nameless super-  
Highways.<sup>64</sup>

As these primitivist visions of societal collapse suggest, there is no simple mapping of Paganism onto eco-activism. While Pagans are also sometimes nostalgic for pre-industrial civilisation, most of them do not wish for the downfall of civilisation and triumph of the wild as many eco-activists do.

While referring to Mother Earth, making over the woods into a Tolkienesque tree village, interacting with fairies, and naming trees suggest that anthropomorphising enchantment strategies continue, the sense of a wild nature that escapes human conceptualisation necessitates a different kind of turn to the past. Some anarcho-primitivists critique Pagans who deify the nonhuman world, as in these comments by an anarchist writing under the by-line of Autumn Leaves Cascade:

place your hands in moss and soil. Feel a river's flow. Watch the dance of dragonflies. Behold the wonder of thunder and lightning. Speak with birds, hear their song. Conjure fire by friction. Feel the movement of wind. Practice tracking and botany. Chant and sing and dance together around campfires! Forage! ... Whatever you do, do not adapt to the cage of the city with rituals of alienation. To rust metallic gods means to resist that which eradicates wildness and vitality. Free your feral heart, and find kinship among the bonfires. For ruins, not runes.<sup>65</sup>

Cascade notes that they were inspired by anarchist Comrade Black's essay, “Neo-Paganism is not the Answer—Climb a Fucking Tree”, in which Black points to a more ancient, *pre-pagan* past, before “polytheistic religions that worshiped symbolic gods of the harvest, war, fertility, or death”. In this view there was an older, nontheistic nature religion. If you want to worship nature, argues Black, “you don't need a sunwheel, pentacle, or a goddess to do so—go out and climb a fucking tree, sit in its branches, learn ecology, listen to the wind rustling the leaves through the branches, watch the squirrels, strip naked and swim in the river as the sun sets. Then do whatever it takes to stop those fuckers who wanna

---

<sup>63</sup> Letter to author, 9 November 2006.

<sup>64</sup> *Earth First! Journal (Brigid 2013): 72.*

<sup>65</sup> Autumn Leaves Cascade, “To Rust Metallic Gods: An Anarcho-Primitivist Critique of Paganism,” *Hasten the Downfall*, 26 March 2015, <https://hastenthedownfall.wordpress.com/2015/03/26/to-rust-metallic-gods-an-anarcho-primitivist-critique-of-paganism/>.

cut that tree cause all they see is dollar signs.”<sup>66</sup> For Black, wild nature is a far cry from the earth as goddess; to conceptualise nature as deity is to project human views and categories onto nature, which should remain undomesticated by humans. This post-Pagan anarchist nature spirituality has re-shaped eco-activist approaches in the first decades of the twenty-first century.

Primitivist eco-activists are not outliers, simply existing on the radical fringe. Rather, these communities and protest events are important sites for contesting and negotiating the relationships between humans and the other-than-human world. The “wild” that is being fought for is an experience *and* a discursive place where the meaning of human and nonhuman identities are constructed and negotiated within the context of serious environmental change and mass extinction. The lure of the past is complicated in the intertwined history of contemporary Paganism and eco-activism. There have been different versions of the past competing in eco-activist communities in the beginning of the twenty-first century and these understandings of particular ways of being in the pre-Christian European past are present in broader movements, such as campaigns to rewild Europe, for example by reintroducing predators.<sup>67</sup> Which kind of past is being protected or restored in the context of which imagined future is being invoked varies considerably in direct action environmentalism and related movements. How we define “the wild” and what kind of wildness we are talking about will fundamentally shape how we imagine human and nonhuman nature relationships into the future.

---

<sup>66</sup> Comrade Black, “Neo-Paganism is Not the Answer—Climb a Fucking Tree,” *Profane Existence*, 6 July 2014, <https://profanexistence.com/2014/07/06/neo-paganism-is-not-the-answer-climb-a-fucking-tree/>.

<sup>67</sup> For example, see Rewilding Europe, <https://www.rewildingeurope.com>.

## 8. The Blind Moondial Makers: Creativity and Renewal in Wicca<sup>(8)</sup>

Léon A. van Gulik<sup>1</sup>

This chapter is an adapted version of the summary of the studies that was featured at the end of my PhD dissertation (see note 5).

The academic study of Wicca as a new religious movement gained momentum with Tanya Luhrmann's *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft* in 1989, and Ronald Hutton's *The Triumph of the Moon* published ten years later.<sup>2</sup> Both studies have been labelled controversial in Wiccan circles—the first because of the unsubstantiated claims that Luhrmann did not disclose herself as a researcher prior to her fieldwork, and the second because of Hutton's elaborate refutation of Wicca's foundational myth as a pre-Christian fertility cult. More than anything else, such emic sentiments indicate that these studies honoured a critical, non-partisan engagement with Wicca. The quality of the works helped to show that contemporary Paganism may be regarded as a topic worthy of scholarly attention, resorting neither to normative dismissal nor to apologetic pleading.

Be that as it may, to me their true legacy lies with their implicit understanding of spirituality and religious systems as dynamic processes, rather than static phenomena. Luhrmann, for instance, understood conversion to Wicca as the outcome of an interpretive drift: “the slow, often unacknowledged shift in someone's manner of interpreting events as they become involved with a particular activity”.<sup>3</sup> Hutton, in turn, stressed that “ancient paganisms were characterized primarily by propitiation, [whereas] modern pagan witchcraft is characterized primarily by consecration, of people, places and objects”.<sup>4</sup> Taken together, these statements imply the interdependence of religion and its adherents: people are changed by their engagements, but these, in turn, impact on the religious system itself and the way religion represents the sacred. In this regard, Hutton states that the “most powerful effect [of contemporary Paganism] is to enhance the sanctity, mystery and enchantment of modern living”.<sup>5</sup>

I have taken my cue from these efforts for my own study of Wicca<sup>6</sup>—based on research undertaken in the Low Countries—even though as a cultural psychologist ultimately my academic concerns do not lie with any particular tradition or even religion *per se*. Still, I believe that the focus of my work may have merits for the study of contemporary Paganism, and therefore I am honoured to have been asked to offer a contribution for this commemorative volume. In this chapter I summarise my enquiry

---

<sup>1</sup> Leiden University, Leiden, Netherlands

<sup>2</sup> Tanya M. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*, 312.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald Hutton, “Modern Pagan Witchcraft,” in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Twentieth Century*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (London: Athlone, 1999), 74.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Léon A. van Gulik, “Moongazers & Trailblazers: Creative Dynamics in Low Country Wicca,” PhD diss., Tilburg University (2017).

(8) © The Author(s) 2019  
Shai Feraro and Ethan Doyle White (eds.)  
Magic and Witchery in the Modern West  
Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15549-0\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15549-0_8)

into creativity and change in Wicca. The following pages may be read both as an introduction to my scholarly publications on Wicca and as a showcase of the subtle, if pervasive influence of Hutton's ground-breaking study in the work of others.

In what evolved into my cumulative dissertation, *Moongazers & Trailblazers*, I aimed to understand both the structures and processes that carry the renewal of religious practice and beliefs, and through my observations and interpretations of these in Wicca I constructed a transactional theory of religious creativity, which emerged from an adapted version of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's systems model (see Fig. 8.1).<sup>7</sup> In that model, a creative enterprise is understood as the product of three aspects or "subsystems": a creativity generating *person*, a configuration of cultural elements called the *domain*, and a collective of gatekeepers and stakeholders of the domain that is referred to as the *field*. In my research, I infused the model with the tensions, reciprocities, and interactions within and between each of the three aspects that I observed in Wicca. These internal and external foci informed the two overarching questions I answered in my studies and form the outline for this chapter, together with the model.

## Structures in the Wiccan Movement

The first of my research questions—*what are the contents and structures of the subsystems of the domain, the field, and the person with regard to religious creativity in Wicca?*—is mostly descriptive and points to the given elements of change I found in the Wiccan environment. Through inductively analysing my data, I reached the conclusion that in each subsystem in Wicca two opposing motives are active. In fact, when envisioning the subsystems as layers, each duality can be understood as similar to the other two but manifesting itself on a different level.

## The Domain

The *domain* of Wicca is a cultural repository of *objects* like athames, wands, taper candles, pentacles, cords, and so forth; *symbols*, for example, the typical way in which the God and Goddess are represented, but also the phases of the moon, the four elements, and sigils; *rituals*, for example, the sabbats, the esbats, and initiations; various *techniques*, for example, pathworking and guided meditation, and the talking stick, but also trance inducing group activities; *cosmological elements*, such as particular deities, trees, animals, and planets; and *general characteristics and practices* that belong to the belief system, such as the use of magic, the employment of secrecy as an institutionalised feature of concealment,<sup>8</sup> the custom of copying the Book of Shadows by hand, preferably on the lap of the high priest or high priestess, the notion of mystery, and ethical considerations around exchanges with the divine order.

This vast array of elements that the Wiccan domain consists of can be characterised by the two potentially conflicting motives of *traditionalism* and *pluralism*, or rather, *eclecticism*.<sup>9</sup>

*Traditionalism* as a basic attitude perhaps most fundamentally represents the charismatic mission to restore a lost world in which humanity lives in harmony with nature.<sup>10</sup> This attitude is played out through the association with ancient cultures that are emphatically displayed as purer and closer to the "source of life" than disenchanted contemporary society. Authenticity is strongly desired in traditionalism; the pedigree of its objects, rituals, and symbols all but equals the value and respectability of this branch

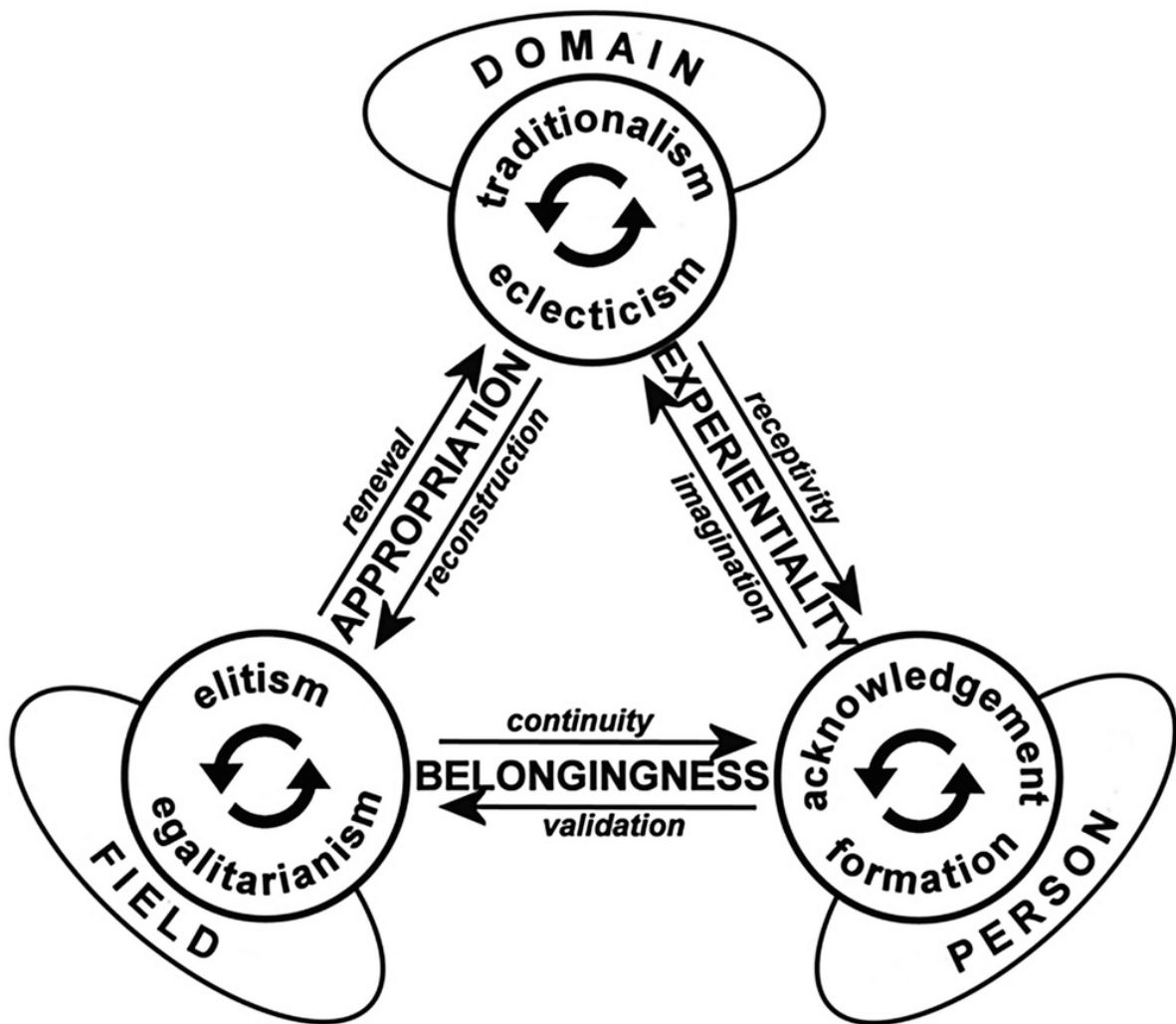
---

<sup>7</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Implications of a Systems Perspective for the Study of Creativity," in *Handbook of Creativity*, ed. Robert J. Sternberg (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 327–332.

<sup>8</sup> Léon A. van Gulik, "Cleanliness is Next to Godliness, but Oaths are for Horses: Antecedents and Consequences of the Institutionalization of Secrecy in Initiatory Wicca," *The Pomegranate* 14, no. 2 (2012): 235–236.

<sup>9</sup> Léon A. van Gulik, "On the Pagan Parallax: A Sociocultural Exploration of the Tension between Eclecticism and Traditionalism as Observed among Dutch Wiccans," *The Pomegranate* 12, no. 1 (2010): 51.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.



*Fig. 8.1* The adapted systems model as applied to Wicca. Note that the three subsystems—person, field, and domain—and their internal tensions are discussed as dynamic structures, whereas the three sets of double arrows pertain to the creative processes in Wicca. Each label is discussed at some length in the text

of Wicca. Still, existing traditions are rarely accepted as mere givens; their appropriation implies their alteration, as I will argue below.

Paradoxically, traditionalism understood as authenticity simultaneously opens the doors to many old religions, practices, teachings, and cultures, and thereby gives rise to *pluralism*. Just as in contemporary Paganism in general, Wicca accepts many paths as valid, and the generic way in which, for instance, the God and Goddess are represented, leaves open the possibility for a personalised version taken from a pantheon of one's liking. Since the development of a spiritual self is so important, both individual adherents and groups are empowered to put the cultural repository of Wicca to use for their particular ends. I have called this *eclecticism*.<sup>11</sup>

If pluralism is the acceptance of different elements in themselves, then *eclecticism* is the motive and practice of combining these elements as one sees fit.<sup>12</sup> In individual eclecticism, artefacts, symbols, and concepts take on new layers of meaning, as they become the mediators between the religious and the personal. Such personal usage of cultural material can be contrasted with a second take on eclecticism, in which groups recombine images and techniques from the repository in order to build new rituals or even a new cosmological structure.<sup>13</sup> The embodiments and impact of both personal and collective eclecticism are discussed at the end of the chapter.

Individual and collective eclecticism are not mutually exclusive, however, as demonstrated by the case of Gerald Gardner, the British pioneer of Wicca. Although he cannot but be described as an individual eclectic *par excellence*, he ultimately gave rise to a movement that embraced eclecticism on a collective scale. Yet in the overlapping of the two, traditionalism and eclecticism may come into conflict. Problems mount when unrelated material is combined in ritual, when canonical elements are altered, replaced, or removed on the mere basis of personal preferences, or when self-proclaimed Wiccans who lack initiatory credentials develop a new tradition.

For these reasons, many traditionalists frown upon the term 'eclecticism' or at least point out that the meaning initiatory Wiccans attach to it differs from that which is implied in the practice of non-initiatory Wiccans and outsiders. Traditionalists, especially Gardnerians, look upon "proper" eclecticism as an inspired improvisatory attitude—the willingness to "work with what is available", as some would put it. Renewal, then, while not ruled out, should proceed in small steps, each subject to vehement scrutiny.

This interpretation of eclecticism is wholly different from the haphazard tinkering with misunderstood techniques and symbols that traditionalists associate with non-initiatory Wiccans. In addition, even well thought-out, but pervasive attempts at reform are suspect. Because of their constant attempts at creative renewal even Greencraft, a well-established group led by initiated Alexandrian Wiccans, is sometimes dismissed by traditionalists as not being a proper branch in the lineage of British Traditional Wicca.

## The Field

The Wiccan *field* is made up of the community of practitioners acting as gatekeepers that accept, reject, modify, and (re)distribute the individual input and maintain the cultural repository of the religion. Depending on the context, a gatekeeper may be a *peer* who one may meet in a pub moot, who participates in the same workshop, or who might be a part of one's coven. However, gatekeepers are often the *elite* of the movement. *High priests and high priestesses* belong to that class. The initiators of specific

---

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the distinction between reconstructionist and eclectic Paganism as discussed in Michael Strmiska, "Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives," in *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Michael F. Strmiska (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC CLIO, 2005), 18–22.

<sup>12</sup> Van Gulik, "On the Pagan Parallax," 56.

<sup>13</sup> Léon A. van Gulik, "On the Sticks and Stones of the Greencraft Temple in Flanders: A Case-Study of Balancing Global and Local Heritage in Wicca," in *Contemporary Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Europe: Colonialist and Nationalist Impulses*, ed. Kathryn Rountree (New York: Berghahn, 2015), 220–225.



branches of Wicca obviously act as gatekeepers as well. Famous *founders* include Gerald Gardner, Alex Sanders, Doreen Valiente, and to a lesser extent people like Robert Cochrane and Victor and Cora Anderson. Other gatekeepers are *authors* like Janet Farrar and Gavin Bone, but also others like Vivianne Crowley and Raymond Buckland, or even *scholars* like Ronald Hutton and a host of other scholars of contemporary Paganism.

Like the Wiccan domain, the field is comprised of two leading motives that are at loggerheads with each other and to both of which adherents subscribe: in this case they can be described in terms of *egalitarianism* and *elitism*.

As can best be observed in narratives about the religion itself and in ritual contexts, Wicca sees itself as *egalitarian*. This idea is clearly related to Wiccans looking upon themselves as active practitioners rather than passive believers. For example, the induction process of an aspiring Wiccan being trained as a priest or priestess comes with the gradual acceptance of the personal dignity as one's own ritual diviner. In this context of learning, the coven leader is no more than a "first among equals"—a teacher whose aim is to let neophytes develop until they can hold their own. The learning involves a side-by-side relationship as much as a face-to-face one, in that the coven leader participates in the same rituals as the junior Wiccans and joins in with the interpretation of meaningful experiences.

During my fieldwork with Greencraft, I noticed how on occasion less experienced coven members were asked to assume key roles in rituals, sometimes effectively leading them, and outside of the sacred context, they were just as likely as a senior member to hold an office in the Greencraft organisation. Moreover, initiated Greencrafters have contributed to the development of their rendition of the *Thirteen Treasures of the Island of Britain*, which means that, in effect, regular members, as well as coven leaders, had a hand in adding to the Greencraft cosmology.<sup>14</sup>

Egalitarianism was also obvious in the way many high priests and high priestesses talked about Wiccans in general: although coven members were group participants, ultimately they were each working towards greater self-understanding, perhaps even self-actualisation, and religious activities had to cater to those needs.

In contrast to the principle of egalitarianism, which is openly and actively communicated to outsiders, Wicca also has its fair share of *elitism*.<sup>15</sup> This is not so much swept under the carpet, as rather used as an accusation to put dominant members of the movement in their place. Many Wiccans seem to relate elitism either to the abuse of power by coven leaders or to the haughty way in which well-established initiatory groups voice their disapproval of others who are perceived to show incompetence or ignorance with regard to Wiccan orthodoxy (i.e., misunderstanding symbols, doing away with proper sequences of opening and closing rituals, or breaking oaths of silence).

While these takes on elitism all rely on an emic understanding, an implicit and altogether different attitude can be observed from an etic perspective. Often very subtle and free of the negativity that surrounds elitism-as-accusation, authority-sustaining-elitism, as used by elders, is present in many contexts. Among other places, I found it in narratives about traditionalism, where the elitist acts as a defender of the faith; in controversies regarding intellectual ownership; and in accounts that imply personal entitlement or charisma. Nonetheless, even this "accepted" elitism has caused many Wiccans to start their own groups, rather than undergoing initiation into an established coven.

## The Person

The third and last aspect of the systems approach to creativity is that of the *person*. Important here are elements like motives, beliefs, emotions, cognitions, but also one's background, style, and character. Ultimately, individuals are the only *agents* in the adapted systems model, so one needs to keep in mind

---

<sup>14</sup> Léon A. van Gulik, "Domesticating the Imagination: Acquisition, Exposition, and Validation of Otherworldly Experiences in Wicca," *Religion* (provisionally accepted).

<sup>15</sup> Van Gulik, "On the Pagan Parallax," 64.

that the realm of the person overlaps with both the domain and the field: in the former, the individual is a wielder of culture, and in the latter he may be either a peer or a gatekeeper. In the subsystem of the person, it should be noted, he or she is exactly that: a person—an individual. Although one should understand the drives of the person in each of these guises, we can only begin to do so by taking into account the sociocultural context that created the postmodern self-identity.

In my dissertation, I juxtaposed ethical and existential orientations and argued that contemporary Wiccans, in addition to seeking to maintain a fair relationship with the natural world, want to come to understand themselves through a cosmological lens. This reflectivity constitutes the self-styled mystery aspect of the religion. While ancient mystery cults revealed and ritualised the hidden workings of nature, Wiccans furthermore relate the mysteries to their inalienable personal place in the universe, that is, imagining and celebrating their inner selves as expressions of the divine order. The existential orientation ultimately demonstrates to what extent the Wiccan movement is a product of the social changes evident in Western nations during the 1960s and 1970s.

Those decades brought emancipation and democratisation in art, education, and sexuality, as well as an increase in standards of living. These processes supported the development of *expressive individualism*, a take on the self that implies creativity to be not so much an ongoing cultural process, but something that was for the taking—if not a birth-right; something that demanded development if one was to come to self-realisation.<sup>16</sup> This individualism obviously had a great impact on the personal sphere of everyone involved in Wicca.

I have developed the existential orientation further in another publication and there described how religious imagery assists people in making sense of their identity.<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, religious imagery can help individuals to accept personal characteristics that they recognise but have yet to come to terms with.<sup>18</sup> On the other, certain symbols may help them to visualise themselves in the future by pointing to tacit aspirations and hidden potential.<sup>19</sup> These two functions that religious symbols may have for the self can be construed as actions derived from the conflicting motives of the subsystem of the person: formation and acknowledgement. Here *formation* refers to motives that seek to construct an identity *de novo* with the aid of religious imagery and symbols, whereas *acknowledgement* points to both the need to belong and the need for self-expression.

The dual nature of acknowledgement reveals an oddity: although the subsystem of the person overlaps with that of the other two, unlike these it also exists *outside the creative system*. That is, the conflicting motives of both the domain (i.e., traditionalism vs. eclecticism) and the field (i.e., elitism vs. egalitarianism) are, in fact, particular Wiccan manifestations of the tension between belonging and self-expression that typifies the postmodern individual. The tension between these motives is irresolvable, since they simultaneously require and counter each other. The expressive individual longs for recognition of his qualities, and therefore relies on a peer group that provides such feedback. However, the more enmeshed one becomes in such a group, the harder it gets to maintain autonomy for fear of rejection.

Perhaps in this most straightforward of tensions in the person, reiterated in greater complexity by those in the field and the domain, we can best observe how the conflicting motives that constitute the subsystems also animate them—that is, turn them into *processes*.

## Processes in the Wiccan Enterprise

The second question I posed—*through what processes do these subsystems of religious creativity interact in the Wiccan context?*—aims to develop an understanding of religious creativity and dynam-

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>17</sup> Léon A. van Gulik, “Coining a Name, Casting the Self: Identity Construction Through Name Adoption by Dutch and Flemish Wiccans,” *Nova Religio*, 20, no. 2 (2016): 97–110.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 101–104.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 104–108.

ics on a small scale. Putting into motion the motivational structures of the adapted systems model requires the assessment of what Wiccans think, plan, strive for, or do. Between each subsystem, a complementary pair of processes exists: I have labelled the relationship between the person and the domain *experientiality*. The process between the person and the field is called *belongingness*, whereas I refer to the interactions between field and domain as *appropriation*. In each of these interactive pairs, I will start with a broad description, before identifying and explaining individual strands, and follow by pointing out implicit relationships between these and other featured processes.

## Experientiality

Wicca is foremost an *experiential* undertaking. Although much of the felt quality of being Wiccan derives from group membership, ultimately the movement is about the alleged encounters of a single person with the Otherworld. The success of these experiences relies on the proficiency of the adherent—most notably their techniques for altering consciousness, their ritual fluency, and their command of the symbolic vocabulary of Wicca. Both these skills and this knowledge determine his or her *receptivity*: the extent to which the individual is able to engage with the presented material in their *imagination*. Nevertheless, the multiple engagements of the many experiencing adherents also breathe life into the Wiccan domain; the recurrent performances come to show the quality of ritual techniques, come to determine the meanings of its religious imagery, and perhaps sometimes even come to add to the cultural repository. In other words, the adherent's *projections* and *improvisations* are as crucial to the domain as the other way around. This dichotomy of receptivity and imagination can be compared with centripetal versus centrifugal symbolisation, as described by psychoanalyst Susan Deri,<sup>20</sup> and the formation versus recollection of pioneering experiences as independently suggested by myself.<sup>21</sup>

I found the openness to the material from the domain—another way to define receptivity—to be associated with two distinct kinds of action.

The first, *attunement*, is immediate, occurs mostly in the appropriate setting of a ritual, and deals with the preparations of entering a receptive state of mind, or at least brings to attention the mystery-tradition aspect of Wicca.<sup>22</sup> Attunement, in other words, is about trying to learn about the Wiccan imagery in its own terms. In my fieldwork, I encountered the most elaborate form of attunement during the tree walks with Greencraft. Although walking in the woods at night is, in itself, bound to turn the mind inwards, the instruction to participants to continue in silence after the first leg did even more to that end. This part was followed by an associative narrative that featured the religious imagery that the members were to attune to, which, in turn, gave way to a tree meditation. Attunement, in the end, is more than mere focusing: it is not only the how but also the what. In that sense, it comes close to techniques of divination, where concentration and interpretation take turns.

The second aspect of receptivity, in contrast, is geared towards *self-understanding*. Experiences of this kind are reflective, may happen outside the religious context, and are more deliberate, “cold” cognitive affairs than the ones that are triggered by instantaneous attunement. Furthermore, they might also be seen as the carefully bracketed outcomes of constant exposure to religious symbolism.<sup>23</sup> Even if self-understanding itself is not a part of ritual, some ceremonial episodes may strengthen the effect any religious material may have thereon. The ritual use of geometrical figures like labyrinths, for instance, have organising qualities about them, making any experiences easier to interpret and relate to the cosmological system of a tradition. The mnemonic function of the talking stick is another example.

<sup>20</sup> Susan K. Deri, *Symbolization and Creativity* (New York: International Universities Press, 1984), 75–76.

<sup>21</sup> Léon A. van Gulik, “Het Principe Van De Pionierservaring: Mimesis En Symboliek Der Individuele Conceptie,” *Prana* 25, no. 6 (2000): 77–78.

<sup>22</sup> Léon A. van Gulik, “The Scholar Versus the Pagan on Greencraft Tree Walks: Attunement, Imagination, and Interpretation,” *Traditiones* 41, no. 1 (2012): 58–59.

<sup>23</sup> Léon A. van Gulik, “‘To Know, to Will, to Dare, and to ... Speak Up!’ Development, Self-Disclosure, and Self-Validation of Belief in Dutch-Speaking Pagans,” *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 56, no. 1 (2011): 136–137.

Through the communication with others, it stabilises the interpretations of recurrent imaginations and helps in formulating these meanings in a shared language.

Most of the impact of the Wiccan domain on the person, however, relies on the repository of imagery, symbols, and entities, instead of its techniques. I have explained elsewhere how deities and other entities in the Wiccan domain are adopted as Craft names and subsequently become focal points for the development of their bearers' spiritual selves.<sup>24</sup> I distinguished between how the chosen name either gave an *impression* of the self or was its *expression*. The first dealt about the acceptance of negative or ascribed aspects of the self. It is also concerned with recognising aspects of the self that thus far had not been subject to scrutiny or are hard to understand for lack of words. Both *acceptance*<sup>25</sup> and *recognition*<sup>26</sup> represent the passive experience of surrendering to the meanings of the existing domain. Perhaps counterintuitively, the same holds for the expressive aspect of *aspiration*<sup>27</sup>: adherents might become inspired by the myths and characteristics that are associated with the deities from whom they took their name.

Conversely, the person can also have an impact on the domain. The idiosyncratic fancies of the *autonomous imagination* (which acts outside our conscious control),<sup>28</sup> when repeated often enough, may catch on as collectively meaningful expressions of religiosity. Such *improvisational* experientiality gives room to the individual to *project* their fancy, their fears, their dreams, and even contributes to the raw emotions of their tainted self. Indeed, the self-expressive aspect of *potency* belongs here as well. In contrast to aspiration, where the person looks to deity to learn about the characteristics that they would like to make their own, with the expression of potency he or she looks for the gods whose characteristics best fit the assumptions about his or her abilities and qualities. Here, their nature is leading, and the qualities of deities are reshaped accordingly.

## Belongingness

I have called the second series of processes, those that take place between the person and the field, processes of *belonging*. These actions, derived from the personal motives of acknowledgement and expression, lead to attempts to demonstrate eligibility for membership. I labelled such efforts *validations* and argue that they stand opposite the field-derived actions that seek *continuity*, that is, maintain the status quo for the movement, the peer group, or the division of roles and offices. Interestingly, and perhaps confusingly, both the person-derived and field-derived actions contain aspects of personal expression and submission to group standards.

Undoubtedly the most noticeable aspect of the process of validation is the *self-validation of belief*: the assumed entitlement to judge both the truthfulness and significance of personal encounters with the Otherworld—or any religious experiences for that matter.<sup>29</sup> A prospective Wiccan is likely to claim religious literacy and experiential proficiency, implying their entitlement to be accepted as a peer. Since Wicca endorses both pluralism and egalitarianism, all personal accounts have to be taken at face value. I came across this pattern many times during my fieldwork, but perhaps the immunising function of the talking stick demonstrates best how the set-up of social gathering may serve to strengthen the position of the experience-prone novice.<sup>30</sup>

But there is more to the role of the field with regard to validation. Instead of merely cushioning the input of individual Wiccans against critique by other gatekeepers and different traditions, Wiccans demand genuineness in their peers. These attitudes clash. New practitioners have to handle the delicate

---

<sup>24</sup> Van Gulik, "Coining a Name, Casting the Self."

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 101–103.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 103–104.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 106–107.

<sup>28</sup> Van Gulik, "Domesticating the Imagination."

<sup>29</sup> Van Gulik, "On the Pagan Parallax," 52; Van Gulik, "'To Know, to Will, to Dare, and to ... Speak Up!'," 134–135.

<sup>30</sup> Van Gulik, "Domesticating the Imagination."

business of meeting this *obligation of authenticity*—an outlook that even made it into a ritual text<sup>31</sup>—while preventing their self-expression from becoming too grotesque for sceptic peers to swallow. To complicate matters further, the “stakes in *nonconformity*” in Wicca are high.<sup>32</sup> Since the image that Wicca entertains of itself is one of deviancy,<sup>33</sup> one’s involvement may require extensive (self-)legitimation.

An often successful way of gaining acceptance in the community is by reminiscing about one’s *proto-religiosity*<sup>34</sup>—tales about religious activity in childhood that imply the naturalness of one’s spirituality to justify any ritual mistakes or lack of knowledge. Proto-religiosity therefore is like a *self-validation of practice*. Such narratives often accompany talk about *homecoming*—the way Wiccans prefer to express their conversion to Wicca.<sup>35</sup> Homecoming suggests that Wicca is a natural mode of religiosity, and as a consequence implies that one has an unalienable right to partake in its tradition. In contrast, practitioners may also suggest that their ability to practice Wicca is ingrained in them, implying the inheritance of special powers.

Opposite to all these processes of validation are processes of *continuity*. Just like its counterpart, however, continuity has both aspects that seek to promote individual expression and those that try to preserve group power. The latter aspect is rather straightforward: by being accepted as a *sanctioning* body, the collective continually reasserts its power and preserves its *stewardship* of their branch within the Wiccan movement. Be that as it may, this preservative effort regularly turns into the conservatism of a single gatekeeper or coven. Here stewardship gives way to *ownership*.<sup>36</sup> Religious material, access to it, or the etiquette towards it becomes guarded by introducing practices of secrecy and exclusion.

This conservatism brings me to the most intriguing aspect of the field-based process of continuity: the cultivation of *charisma*. Inasmuch as self-validation is about entitlement, charisma is about proficiency; the novice’s eagerness to learn has been replaced by the expert’s willingness to teach. That is, the elite do not have to bargain for their acceptance as members, but they perpetuate their particular position as coven leaders or luminaries by frequently assuming the role of diviner. Several informants told me during my fieldwork about the way they entered a trance or flow state, and would then produce either inspired stories or interpretations. These *spontaneous exegetical reflections* are central features of charisma. Surely, such improvisatory abilities may quench the thirst for self-expression in some, but in others, charisma is routinised as part of their office as high priest or high priestess.<sup>37</sup>

Without the group, the charisma of some of the advanced Wiccans appeared as a profound ability to make contact with some aspect of the Otherworld. I found this, for instance, in the story about an encounter of Mandragora—one of my informants—with the deity Mórrígan, which was the result of her work on a ritual mask.<sup>38</sup> I also came across this motive in the narrative of another informant, Arghuicha, about his ecstatic dances at the stone circles of Scotland.<sup>39</sup> *Ethical* or *other-centred orientations* such as these, however, were just as likely to be reported as the *existential* or *self-centred* ones. Examples of the latter include an encounter with the Norse gods after seeking them out to ask for help overcoming a serious disease that plagued a close family member, as reported by Phaedrus, a third informant, or a narrative regarding one’s daily “imagination management”, in which Morgana, yet another informant, explained how she deals with the intensified awareness that befalls advanced practitioners. These two examples suggest that in the privacy of their personal lives, apart from the level of implied proficiency—Phaedrus routinely invoked deity, while Morgana displayed her skill of

<sup>31</sup> Van Gulik, “Coining a Name, Casting the Self,” 100.

<sup>32</sup> Cf., *stakes in conformity*, as described in Rodney Stark, and William Sims Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987).

<sup>33</sup> Van Gulik, “On the Pagan Parallax,” 63; Van Gulik, “Cleanliness is Next to Godliness, but Oaths are for Horses,” 238.

<sup>34</sup> Van Gulik, “Coining a Name, Casting the Self,” 104–105.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>36</sup> Van Gulik, “Cleanliness is Next to Godliness, but Oaths are for Horses,” 246–248.

<sup>37</sup> Van Gulik, “Domesticating the Imagination.”

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Van Gulik, “On the Sticks and Stones of the Greencraft Temple in Flanders,” 228–229.

keeping her autonomous imaginations in check—the elite of the field are very similar to the individuals of the subsystem of the person.

## Appropriation

The third pair of creative processes taking place between the field and the domain can best be labelled *appropriation*, regardless of the fact that the term can also be used to denote processes between the individual and the domain. In my understanding of the concept, however, it labels the orchestrated efforts of preparing material to develop a particular branch. Even though the processes of experientiality and belongingness each embody complex interrelations between the subsystems they connect, the two sides of appropriation are perhaps the hardest to tell apart, because they both assume each other to a great extent. As a pair, *reconstruction* and *renewal* present a perfect example of the chicken-or-egg problem. I once suggested that a religion cannot just be started from scratch; it needs to locate a referent in the past or point to some guise of “truth”. The problem here is often that the “continuity with a suitable and pre-existing form” is lacking.<sup>40</sup> Either the past is imaginary, forgotten, or its premises sit uneasily with contemporary life. Reconstruction and renewal are the means to overcome these problems, as they straighten the path between the past and the present.

*Reconstruction* represents efforts to adapt the existing elements of a religion, or their origins, to improve their truthfulness or practicality in usage. In its strictest sense, the term refers to actions that seek to “repair” ancient rituals and religions, like one finds in modern Pagan paths such as Ásatrú and Druidry. In a similar vein, Gerald Gardner portrayed Wicca as a surviving pre-Christian fertility cult in dire need of reconstruction, but eventually most Wiccans had to grudgingly accept that their religion was a recent invention. Refiguring the origins of Wicca as a *mythistory* proved difficult since this discourse, romantic though it may seem, lacked any explanatory power about the often very specific requirements of its religious practice. As a consequence, Wiccans started to legitimise their practice in alternative ways, ranging from *emphasising the efficacy* of ritual<sup>41</sup> and magic,<sup>42</sup> to *shifting the attention* to the ecological relevance of the religion,<sup>43</sup> and *downsizing reconstructive efforts*.

In this last stratagem, practitioners retain claims of authenticity, but instead of salvaging an entire tradition, they now make them about the various objects, customs, and images that were brought together in Wicca. This joint operation bears a resemblance to the narratives of proto-religiosity of the individual adherent. The Greencraft movement presented a striking example of the persuasive qualities of authenticity that come from repetitively recombining downsized reconstructed material. First I traced the development of the tree-of-life/tarot correspondences from the initial attempt at combining them by French occultist Éliphas Lévi.<sup>44</sup> Then, through William Gray the complete reshuffling of the relations between the elements of each,<sup>45</sup> to the slight alterations made by R. J. Stewart,<sup>46</sup> I eventually arrived at Greencraft’s rendition.<sup>47</sup> They proceeded with the reconstruction by including novel correspondences with trees, deities, and power animals. Bit by bit, reconstructive endeavours turn to efforts of renewal.

*Renewal* mostly differs from reconstruction with regard to how much traditional material is retained, to what extent the efforts are judged as literally truthful to the existing traditions, and, in contrast, how much of the novelties eventually make it to the canon of Wicca. An example of the gradual transition between reconstruction and renewal is the difference between mythistory and *mythopoeia*. While the

---

<sup>40</sup> Van Gulik, “On the Pagan Parallax,” 56.

<sup>41</sup> Van Gulik, “On the Pagan Parallax,” 60–61.

<sup>42</sup> Van Gulik, “Cleanliness is Next to Godliness, but Oaths are for Horses,” 240–243.

<sup>43</sup> Van Gulik, “On the Pagan Parallax,” 65.

<sup>44</sup> Éliphas Lévi, *Dogme Et Rituel De La Haute Magie* (Paris: Germer Baillière, 1856).

<sup>45</sup> William G. Gray, *Concepts of Qabalah*, ed. William G. Gray, Sangreal Sodality Series (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1984).

<sup>46</sup> R. J. Stewart, *The Merlin Tarot Handbook* (London: Aquarian, 1992).

<sup>47</sup> René Delaere, *Greencraft Tarot* (San Antonio, TX: New Gaia Press, 2010).

history-turned-to-myth still has credibility as a series of ancient stories (rather than ancient truths), myths themselves can also be invented by liberally re-employing traditional material. A champion of poetic myth-making, Robert Graves created a Celtic tree calendar<sup>48</sup> that Greencraft later incorporated in their cosmological system.<sup>49</sup> His significance for Wicca, however, stretches well beyond this invention.

Graves' work demonstrates how practitioners value religious efficacy over historical accuracy, or, to put it even more directly, how literal truths are trumped by *spiritual truths*.<sup>50</sup> These inspiring renditions of reality no doubt help the empowerment of liberal Wiccans, who feel restrained by what they perceive as a rigid system of tradition. It provides a respectable rationale to start envisaging Wicca as an *open-source religion*,<sup>51</sup> and supports, among others, eclectic endeavours like Farrar and Bone's *Progressive Witchcraft*.<sup>52</sup> In its mildest guise, utilising spiritual truths allows idealism to be expressed; it enables practitioners to talk about "oughts" and "should" as if they were the real thing. Stories and rituals can be judged on the meanings they convey. In addition, spiritual truths allow for the kind of collective eclecticism I observed in Greencraft's project of the wholesale reformulation of the *Thirteen Treasures of the Island of Britain*.<sup>53</sup> The adherents of the movement picked an entirely new inventory to suit contemporary needs, only retaining the core idea of a collection of person-bound magical items.

Endeavours such as these point the way to the last aspect of the processes of renewal: *religious revaluation*. This action refers to the keeping in check of the ethical mentality of the religion: to what extent does traditional practice live up to its standards? Here eclecticism, collectively expressed, holds the moral high ground. The most prominent example from my fieldwork is undoubtedly Greencraft: this tradition was established exactly because of concerns regarding the extent to which traditional Wicca could still be counted as a nature religion.<sup>54</sup> This local development fits in with the greening of Wicca through the emergence of various ecologically sensitive eclectic groups, such as the Reclaiming tradition.

## Change

A recurring difficulty throughout my research project has been to what extent creativity should be seen as a purposeful act, rather than the random outcome of a process of autonomous change—or differently put, mere evolution. This led to a subsidiary question—*what is the relationship between religious creativity in Wicca and religious change?* I will answer it here by offering two substantive interpretations of the nature of the creative process in Wicca, before reaching my ultimate conclusion.

Wiccan practitioners thrive on the novel, the exotic, and the uncertain—the *unknown*—in their religious imagination and practice. Hence, they have become sensitive to the qualities of fancy that I will call *atmospheres*, and they have become proficient in evoking and embracing chance events, outcomes that I will refer to as *intentional non-intentionality*.

## The Nature of Creativity in Wicca

Much of Wiccan practice is specifically designed to furnish Otherworldly experiences and altered states of consciousness. Through their emphasis on the orthopraxy of their religion, adherents have developed ways to talk about the qualia—the "what-it-is-like" properties of experiencing being at a

---

<sup>48</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, Amended and Enlarged ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966).

<sup>49</sup> Van Gulik, "On the Sticks and Stones of the Greencraft Temple in Flanders," 220–222.

<sup>50</sup> Van Gulik, "The Scholar Versus the Pagan on Greencraft Tree Walks," 59.

<sup>51</sup> Douglas E. Cowan, *Cyberhenge: Modern Pagans on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 33–50.

<sup>52</sup> Janet Farrar, and Gavin Bone, *Progressive Witchcraft: Spirituality, Mysteries & Training in Modern Wicca* (Franklin Lakes, NJ: New Page, 2004).

<sup>53</sup> Van Gulik, "Domesticating the Imagination."

<sup>54</sup> Van Gulik, "The Scholar Versus the Pagan on Greencraft Tree Walks," 50–52.

place, encountering a deity, performing a ceremony, and so forth.<sup>55</sup> Thus they have, for example, enabled themselves to gauge ritual quality and personal likeability in terms of perceived “energy”. In my fieldwork, I repeatedly came across this notion, which Wiccans often used in a qualitative (all-or-nothing), rather than a quantitative (more-or-less), sense. Thus a person could have a “dark” energy about themselves, a ritual could sustain “positive” energy, and a sacred place may feel “charged”. I found their use similar to what I have called *atmospheres*: the often unacknowledged experiential envelopments that coincide with or are inherently present in an either acquired or developed conception of objects, be they places, people, or artefacts.<sup>56</sup> When asked if they thought the notion of “atmosphere” was similar to “energy”, they concurred.

As a technique for maintaining a desirable atmosphere in a ritual setting, Wiccans tried to shield off their rituals from outsiders and took great care that all the ritual objects were consecrated.<sup>57</sup> Apart from keeping a high standard of “ritual hygiene”, I also noticed how they tried to charge their ritual space through the extensive use of sensory stimuli: incense for the nose, drumming for the ears, candles for the eyes, and nudity for the skin. In addition, the meaning of the gestures, images, and symbols was often overdetermined, creating an image of the ritual as the only possible performance. This sense of urgency itself lent conviction to the ceremony, contributed to a sense of efficacy, and increased the felt atmosphere. All in all, *experience* itself seemed to become the focal point—a powerful motivator that thus impacted on the creative process.

## Intentional Non-intentionality

Improvisation introduces contingency. Wicca, a very ritualistic and action-driven religion, is prone to become subject to unforeseeable results in its practice.<sup>58</sup> This tendency is further enhanced by creative tensions that exist on the macro level. Take for instance the factors of elitism and egalitarianism I discussed above. In strange and complex ways, they may work together to sustain renewal. Secrecy, for example, in terms of an unequal distribution of knowledge—as opposed to differences in understanding and utility—may not only hamper creativity but induce it as a way around prohibition, or by proposing new structures or rituals to cater for the needs of the uninitiated. Here elitism brings about non-elitism, and thereby fosters both creativity and change.

The most relevant kind of contingency, however, is found on the micro level. Although rituals in themselves present ample opportunity, certain parts in rituals seem designated for the purposeful generation of new material, such as mystery plays, chanting and dancing, and long-winded formulations to honour deity. Other episodes lack a script altogether, like the inspired declamations in which some participants act as mouthpieces for these deities (e.g., *The Charge*). In this ritual episode called ‘drawing down the moon’—in which the great Goddess is believed to enter the body of the high priestess and is supposed to speak through her—the high priestess traditionally has to surrender to divine inspiration and utter words as they come.<sup>59</sup>

It would seem, then, that the defining characteristic of Wiccan practice does not lie in its proneness to contingency, but rather in the attempts at combining the intentional and the non-intentional. Wicca cultivates coincidence. By assigning the imagination an active and constitutive role in ritual, Wicca

<sup>55</sup> Van Gulik, “On the Pagan Parallax,” 66, especially note 29.

<sup>56</sup> Van Gulik, “Het Principe Van De Pionierservaring: Mimesis En Symboliek Der Individuele Conceptie”; Léon A. van Gulik, “What’s the Stuff Religious Experiences are Made of? A Theory on the Management of Atmosphere in Contexts of the Sacred,” in *Religion and Pluralities of Knowledge. Thirteenth Conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions*, ed. Kocku von Stuckrad (Groningen: The Netherlands, 2014).

<sup>57</sup> Van Gulik, “Cleanliness is Next to Godliness, but Oaths are for Horses,” 250–251.

<sup>58</sup> Léon A. van Gulik, “The Goddess Does Play Dice: Creativity and Non-Intentionality in Contemporary Pagan Ritual,” in *The Ritual Year 6: The Inner and the Outer*, ed. Mare Koiva (Tartu, Estonia: ELM Scholarly Press, 2011).

<sup>59</sup> In the interview with Janet Farrar I conducted for my research, she argued that the *Charge of the Goddess* was only supposed to be used as a last resort, if the high priestess could not enter a proper trance state, and thus was not able to prophesise.



seeks to routinise the erratic, and incessantly works towards the creation of a generative cosmological system, that sustains endless rumination and reimagination.

The creative process is fed by both human motivation and the unpredictability that comes with action and improvisation. But there is more. Rather than a sudden burst of flames, intentional non-intentionality may also be a slow burner. I have discussed elsewhere how Wiccans make sense of their personal identity in terms of their religious outlook, by choosing a Craft name.<sup>60</sup> While some names and their original connotations are stumbled upon, people still may opt to take that name. Its unintended features get accepted as fate or embraced as potencies that may only become known or experienced after a long time.

## Creative Change

What, then, sums up the relationship between creativity and change? Although generativity does not equal functionality when creative actions get repeated over a long time, religious creativity eventually turns into persistent religious change: countless reiterations will eventually converge into a number of viable and persistent structures, symbols, techniques, and think tools. Religious creativity, whether triggered by inner need, evoked by ritual techniques, or slowly developing through the gradual intake of symbolic meaning is a never-ending process. The complex interactions between the subjective and the objective, between people, between person and fancy show how creativity and contingency go hand in hand, for the creative process not only intrinsically perpetuates unpredictability, its drives and limits are always a function of the wider context in which it takes place.

---

<sup>60</sup> Van Gulik, “Coining a Name, Casting the Self.”

## 9. “The Eyes of Goats and of Women”: Femininity and the Post-Thelemic Witchcraft of Jack Parsons and Kenneth Grant<sup>(9)</sup>

Manon Hedenborg White<sup>1</sup>

Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) shaped the trajectory of modern witchcraft by influencing early Wicca. Gerald Gardner (1884–1964), generally credited with popularising Wicca in the mid-twentieth century, met with Crowley on several occasions, was initiated into Crowley’s Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO), and borrowed heavily from Crowley’s writings in formulating the early liturgy and rituals of Wicca.<sup>2</sup> Crowley, for whatever reason, does not appear to have taken a reciprocal interest in Gardner’s witchcraft, and an oft-cited anecdote claims this was due to Crowley’s scepticism towards the prominence of women in Wicca.<sup>3</sup> While the historical veracity of this narrative is dubious, it reflects a frequently repeated trope, namely, Crowley as a misogynist.<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere, I have argued that this view is overly simplistic, overlooking both the central role of femininity as a soteriological concept within Crowley’s initiatory system, as well as that of actual women in the religious movement it spawned both historically and today.<sup>5</sup> However, given the frequency with which ideas about Crowley’s sexism are repeated, it is somewhat ironic that his religion Thelema (Greek for “will”) more directly inspired two other heterodox interpreters of witchcraft, who both, in different ways, sought to reconceptualise femininity and the role of women in magic: the American rocket scientist John “Jack” Whiteside Parsons (1914–1952) and the British occultist and writer Kenneth Grant (1924–2011). This chapter, beginning with a necessarily brief overview of how witch-related themes figured in Crowley’s vast *oeuvre*, will analyse and contextualise Parsons’s and Grant’s interpretations of witchcraft, paying attention to how both writers’ engagement therewith can be linked to their concern with revaluating femininity.

---

<sup>1</sup> Södertörn University, Södertörn, Sweden

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Hutton, “Crowley and Wicca,” in *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism*, ed. Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 285–306.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, J. L. Bracelin, *Gerald Gardner: Witch* (Octagon Press, 1960), 174. Cf Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 219.

<sup>4</sup> This idea recurs both in academic literature—see, for example, Hugh B. Urban, *Magia Sexualis: Sex, Magic, and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 135; Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 216—and esoteric texts—as discussed in detail in Manon Hedenborg White, *The Eloquent Blood: The Goddess Babalon and the Construction of Femininities in Western Esotericism* (forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> Hedenborg White, *The Eloquent Blood*.

<sup>(9)</sup> © The Author(s) 2019  
Shai Feraro and Ethan Doyle White (eds.)  
Magic and Witchery in the Modern West  
Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15549-0\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15549-0_9)

## Background

The year 1904 marks the starting point of Thelema. On honeymoon in Cairo with his first wife, Rose (née Kelly, 1874–1932), over the course of three days, Crowley received what he perceived as a divinely inspired text, dictated to him by a discarnate entity named Aiwass.<sup>6</sup> Titled *Liber AL vel Legis sub figura CCXX* (colloquially known as *The Book of the Law*), the text proclaims the advent of a new aeon in the spiritual evolution of humanity, characterised by the maxim: “Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law”. *Liber AL* is divided into three chapters, each ascribed to a separate deity: the goddess Nuit, representing infinite space or the cosmic feminine principle; the god Hadit, epitomising the infinitely condensed life-force of each individual, or the masculine principle; and the god Ra-Hoor-Khuit, their divine offspring, and the ruler of the new aeon.<sup>7</sup>

Although it is unclear whether Crowley and Gardner discussed witchcraft during their meetings, some of Crowley’s early poetry (written decades earlier) engages with the same themes and motifs that inspired witchcraft’s modern emergence: romanticised views of the heaths and hilltops of rural England, the witches’ sabbath, and the god Pan.<sup>8</sup> For instance, Crowley’s poem “The Augur” (1909) alludes clearly to the sabbatic motif, with the narrator of the poem entreating his lover:

Crown ... These brows with nightshade, monkshood and vervain! / Let us anoint us with the  
unguents brown / That waft our wizard bodies to the plain / Where in the circle of unholy  
stones / The unconsecrated Sabbath is at height.<sup>9</sup>

The reference to anointing one’s body with an herbal unguent indicates popular beliefs, present since early modernity, that witches used a magical ointment so as to transport themselves to the sabbath.<sup>10</sup> The poem “The Wizard Way” (1909) also describes a sorcerer attending “the Sabbath of his God”, encountering a “cubic stone / With the Devil set thereon”. Pan, satyrs, and fauns also figure in the poem, and the narrator declares himself to have “faery blood”, having been sired by “a druid, a devil, a bard, / A beast, a wizard, a snake and a satyr”.<sup>11</sup>

Witch-related symbolism recurs in some of Crowley’s significant magical works. The essay “The Wake World” (1907) gives an allegorical account of initiation based on kabbalistic and tarot symbolism, told through the story of the young girl Lola and her Holy Guardian Angel, whom she calls her Fairy Prince. Among other adventures encountered during their journey, Lola and the prince participate in a ceremony akin to the witches’ sabbath, encountering the Devil and partaking in dancing and cannibalism. However, Lola is assured the Devil is actually the saviour of the world, and that their actions are all “good and right”.<sup>12</sup>

References to witchcraft and Romantic literary themes also feature in *The Vision and the Voice*, Crowley’s record of his exploration of the Enochian “Aethyrs”, mostly conducted in 1909 with the aid of his disciple and lover, the poet Victor B. Neuburg (1883–1940).<sup>13</sup> In the twelfth Aethyr, Crowley first encounters the goddess Babalon. Based on a positive reinterpretation of the Whore of Babylon from the Book of Revelation (17), Babalon in Crowley’s system represents the spiritual formula of passionate

---

<sup>6</sup> Crowley’s account of the events leading up to, and including, the reception of *Liber AL* can be found in Aleister Crowley, *The Equinox of the Gods* (London: OTO, 1936).

<sup>7</sup> Aleister Crowley, *The Book of the Law: Liber AL vel Legis: With a Facsimile of the Manuscript as Received by Aleister and Rose Edith Crowley on April 8, 9, 10, 1904 E.v. Centennial Edition* (York Beach, ME: Red Wheel/Weiser, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Hutton, *Triumph*.

<sup>9</sup> Aleister Crowley, *Clouds Without Water* (Des Plaines, IL: Yogi Publication Society, 1974).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Serenity Young, *Women Who Fly: Goddesses, Witches, Mystics, and Other Airborne Females* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 158, 167–169.

<sup>11</sup> Aleister Crowley, “The Wizard Way,” *The Equinox* I, no. 1 (1909), 36–46.

<sup>12</sup> Aleister Crowley, “The Wake World,” in *Konx Om Pax: Essays in Light* (Des Plaines, IL: Yogi Publication Society, 1974), xiii–24.

<sup>13</sup> Incidentally, Neuburg’s poetry shows similar influences. See, for example, Victor B. Neuburg, *The Triumph of Pan* (London: Skoob Books, 1989).

union with existence. She is linked to one of the final stages of initiation, the so-called crossing of the Abyss, wherein the adept must annihilate their ego, metaphorically draining their blood into Babalon's cup.<sup>14</sup>

Babalon's cup is described as filled with the blood of the "saints" who have successfully completed this process of mystical death and rebirth, uniting with the all. Crowley's record of the vision proceeds to identify the blood in the cup as "the wine of the Sabbath".<sup>15</sup> While Revelation describes the Great Whore as "drunken with the blood of the saints", the concept of sabbatic wine does not feature in the text.<sup>16</sup> Although Crowley's usage of the phrase could be interpreted as a reference to Jewish tradition, I propose that the most plausible direct source is Arthur Machen's episodic horror novel *The Three Impostors* (1895), one of whose episodes features a powder derived from the "*Vinum Sabbati*" or sabbatic wine, which is strongly suggested to have sexual components.<sup>17</sup> If this text indeed inspired Crowley's usage of the phrase, this also foreshadows his later association of the sabbatic wine with sexual magic (explained later in the chapter). The "Black Sabbath" is also referenced, more ambivalently, in Crowley's record of the tenth and fourth Aethyrs.<sup>18</sup>

In the second Aethyr, Babalon is described as having "dance[d] in the night, naked upon the grass, in shadowy places, by running streams", and wandered the earth as a nymph. The text partially conflates Babalon and Pan as the gentle woodland god celebrated by the Romantic poets, representing the beauty and splendour of the natural world. In his commentary to the record (written years later), Crowley writes that Babalon appears to be the feminine or androgynous equivalent of Pan, "not merely [his] complement".<sup>19</sup>

In 1912, Crowley was made British head of Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO), an initiatory fraternity that claimed to possess the secret of sexual magic, taught in the order's higher degrees and heralded as the "key" to "all Masonic and Hermetic secrets".<sup>20</sup> Crowley wrote a number of grade-specific instructions for OTO, such as "De Nuptiis Secretis Deorum cum Hominibus" (1914), which pertains to the VIII° (eighth degree). The fifth sub-section of the text, titled "De Sabbato Adeptorum" or "Of the Sabbath of the Adepts", describes a dark age of Christian superstition, during which a select few perpetuated the true mysteries. These adepts would, supposedly, meet clandestinely in rural areas to invoke a deity who was seen as Satan by outsiders, but who was really Pan, Bacchus, Baphomet, or Babalon.<sup>21</sup> While this text suggests the external form of witchcraft as imagined by its opponents really veils a deeper mystery, it nonetheless connects historical perceptions of witchcraft to what Crowley here construes as a sort of predecessor of OTO.

Finally, the instruction "Agape vel Liber C vel Azoth" (1914), written for the IX° of OTO, is subtitled "the Book of the Unveiling of the Sangraal wherein it is spoken of the Wine of the Sabbath of The Adepts". While the term "Sabbath" has multiple possible meanings in this context, the overlap in phrasing with the previously discussed sub-section of "De Nuptiis", combined with the temporal closeness of the texts, suggests similar associations. The OTO's IX° is associated with heterosexual sex magic.<sup>22</sup> The typescript copy of the document begins with a quote equating the sun with wine and the moon with the cup,

---

<sup>14</sup> Aleister Crowley, *The Vision and the Voice: With Commentary and Other Papers: The Equinox, Volume IV Number II* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1998). Babalon's role in Thelema is analysed at length in Hedenborg White, *The Eloquent Blood*.

<sup>15</sup> Crowley, *The Vision and the Voice*, 149.

<sup>16</sup> Rev. 17:6 [KJV].

<sup>17</sup> Arthur Machen, *The Three Impostors, or The Transmutations* (London: John Lane, 1895). However, it is possible that Crowley's usage of the phrase has dual influences, as the record of the twelfth Aethyr subsequently mentions a "Holy Assembly"; a phrase repeatedly used in the Hebrew Bible to reference the sabbath as well as other Jewish holidays. See, for example, Exo. 12:16; Lev. 23; Num. 28, 29 [KJV].

<sup>18</sup> Crowley, *The Vision and the Voice*.

<sup>19</sup> Crowley, *The Vision and the Voice*, 241.

<sup>20</sup> Theodor Reuss, ed., *I.N.R.I. Jubilaums-Ausgabe Der Oriflamme* (Berlin and London, 1912).

<sup>21</sup> Aleister Crowley, "De Nuptiis Secretis Deorum Cum Hominibus" (1914), Gerald J. Yorke Collection OS25, Warburg Institute Library.

<sup>22</sup> Henrik Bogdan, "Challenging the Morals of Western Society: The Use of Ritualized Sex in Contemporary Occultism," *The Pomegranate* 8, no. 2 (2006): 211–246.

stipulating that the sun should be poured into the moon.<sup>23</sup> Given Crowley's frequent identification of the sun with masculine regenerative power, this may imply that the sabbatic wine (at least in this context) is equivalent to semen.<sup>24</sup> Thus, "Liber C" appears to suggest an implicit connection between the sabbath and sexual magic.

A comprehensive review of all occurrences of witch-related symbolism in Crowley's writings exceeds the scope of this article. The purpose of this overview has not been to suggest that witchcraft was a central concept in Crowley's thought; on the contrary, it is ostensibly a marginal theme. The sabbatic symbolism of "The Augur" and "The Wake World" can be read as part of Crowley's broader preoccupation with the idea of spiritual redemption through transgression, or what he described as "justification by sin".<sup>25</sup> This concern with symbolic inversion has numerous expressions throughout Crowley's *oeuvre*, many of which play a far more prominent role than witchcraft in his thought.<sup>26</sup> The references to the sabbath in the OTO degree documents evade easy interpretation outside of the larger context of OTO's initiatory system, but may imply the belief that the order's sexual magic is derived from an older tradition.

## Witchcraft in the Writings of Jack Parsons

Jack Parsons is one of the most mythologised figures in twentieth-century occultism; a mostly autodidact rocketeer, he contributed to the development of the solid rocket fuel that enabled the moon landing. Parsons grew up an avid reader and lover of sci-fi, as well as all tales epic, fantastic, and mythological.<sup>27</sup> Having initially visited the OTO's Agape Lodge in 1939, Parsons and his first wife Helen (née Northrup, 1910–2003) were initiated into the order on February 15, 1941.<sup>28</sup> In autumn 1945, Parsons commenced a succession of magical operations aimed at obtaining an elemental mate—a female magical partner.<sup>29</sup> He was aided in this endeavour by L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986), sci-fi author and later founder of Scientology.<sup>30</sup> When the illustrator and former naval cartographer Marjorie Cameron (1924–1995) arrived on his doorstep, Parsons was instantly smitten. With the assistance of Hubbard and Cameron, Parsons undertook a series of rituals aimed at incarnating Babalon in human form as a revolutionary, female messiah.<sup>31</sup>

On February 28, 1946, Parsons ventured into the Mojave Desert, where he heard a voice dictating a text to him. The narrative "T" of the text declares itself as Babalon, who announces her imminent incarnation on earth. "Liber 49"—as Parsons titled the text—clearly references witchcraft. It is declared

---

<sup>23</sup> Aleister Crowley, "AGAPE Vel Liber C Vel AZOTH. Sal Philosophorum the Book of the Unveiling of the Sangraal Wherein It Is Spoken of the Wine of the Sabbath of the Adepts" (1914), Gerald J. Yorke Collection OS26, Warburg Institute Library.

<sup>24</sup> For example, *Liber AL I:16*; Aleister Crowley, *Magical and Philosophical Commentaries on the Book of the Law*, eds. John Symonds and Kenneth Grant (Montreal: 93 Publishing, 1974), 104.

<sup>25</sup> Aleister Crowley, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley: An Autohagiography* (London: Arkana, 1989), 147.

<sup>26</sup> A prominent example is Crowley's identification with the Great Beast 666, and his reinterpretation of the Whore of Babylon as a soteriological goddess. Crowley, *Confessions*, 44. Cf Hedenborg White, *The Eloquent Blood*.

<sup>27</sup> George Pendle, *Strange Angel: The Otherworldly Life of Rocket Scientist John Whiteside Parsons*, 1st ed. (Orlando: Harcourt, 2005).

<sup>28</sup> Starr notes that the Agape guest registrar, likely erroneously, lists Parsons's first visit as having occurred in January 1938. Martin P. Starr, *The Unknown God: W.T. Smith and the Thelemites*, 1st ed. (Bolingbrook, IL: Teitan Press, 2003), 257. See also Pendle, *Strange Angel*, 134, 172; Starr, *The Unknown God*, 263.

<sup>29</sup> Parsons appears to have derived the idea of elemental mates from "De Nuptiis". "De Nuptiis"; John W. Parsons, "Of Familiars" (n.d.), Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute Library. Contradictory indications as to when Parsons began conducting rituals with this objective in mind are given in Karl Germer, *Karl Germer: Selected Letters 1928–1962*, ed. David Shoemaker, Andrew Ferrell, and Stefan Voss (International College of Thelema, 2016) and John W. Parsons, "The Book of Babalon" (1946), Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute Library.

<sup>30</sup> Starr, *The Unknown God*, 313; Pendle, *Strange Angel*, 261–263; Parsons, "Book of Babalon."

<sup>31</sup> Parsons, "Book of Babalon." The Babalon Working is discussed in detail in Hedenborg White, *The Eloquent Blood*; Henrik Bogdan, "The Babalon Working 1946: L. Ron Hubbard, John Whiteside Parsons, and the Practice of Enochian Magic," *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions* 63, no. 1 (2016): 12–32.

that Babalon's "adept" (likely a reference to Parsons) will be "crucified in the Basilisk abode".<sup>32</sup> The term "Basilisk abode" is seemingly directly derived from Crowley's poem "The Wizard Way" (discussed above).<sup>33</sup> It is said that Babalon's human incarnation or "daughter" shall "wander in the witchwood under the Night of Pan, and know the mysteries of the Goat and the Serpent".<sup>34</sup> Babalon's encouragement to her followers builds on popular witch mythology:

Gather together in the covens as of old, whose number is eleven, that is also my number. ... Gather together in secret, be naked and shameless and rejoice in my name. 66. Work your spells by the mode of my book, practicing secretly, inducing the supreme spell. 67. The work of the image, and the potion and the charm, the work of the spider and the snake, and the little ones that go in the dark, this is your work. 68. ... 70. You the secret, the outcast, the accursed and despised, even you that gathered privily of old in my rites under the moon.<sup>35</sup>

Despite this, witchcraft was not a major theme in Parsons's record of his "Babalon Working", which focused more on Babalon as a revolutionary and emancipatory feminine force. Parsons developed this idea in "Freedom is a Two-Edged Sword", a sexpartite essay written between 1946 and 1950 in which the author expresses his frustration at the increasingly paranoid and anti-communist American government, and critiques religious and sexual repression. Significantly, Parsons devotes a sizeable portion of "Freedom" to critiquing patriarchy, ascribing the oppression of women to Christian sex-negativity, and writing that women must ultimately be the ones to strike back and save all of humanity.<sup>36</sup> He posits Babalon as the epitome of this female revolutionary force, and also draws on notions of pre-Christian matriarchy as an ideal, egalitarian society in which feminine power was celebrated:

It is not a matriarchy as we imagine it, a rule of clubwomen, or frustrated chickens. It is an equality. The woman is the priestess, in her repose the mystery. She is the mother, brooding yet tender, the lover, at once passionate and aloof, the wife, revered and cherished. She is the witch woman. It is coequal.<sup>37</sup>

In the above excerpt, the "witch woman" is presented as the paragon of spiritually and erotically emancipated femininity. Parsons suggests pagan witchcraft has survived in the "dianic cult", and issues a rallying cry to its supposed adherents: "Witch woman, out of the ashes of the stake, rise again!"<sup>38</sup> Female liberation is a central concept in the essay, as in other essays by Parsons from the same period.<sup>39</sup> In this, and by suggesting witchcraft as the descendant of an ancient pagan cult characterised by gender equality, Parsons's writings foreshadow later articulations of feminist witchcraft in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>40</sup> However, as I will return to later in the chapter, Parsons likely derived this association between witchcraft and women's liberation from older sources.

Parsons also explored witchcraft in lyrical form in *Songs for the Witch Woman*, a series of poems mostly written between 1946 and his death in 1952.<sup>41</sup> The collection is dedicated to Cameron, who illustrated several poems. While a detailed discussion of each poem exceeds the scope of this chapter,

---

<sup>32</sup> Parsons, "Book of Babalon."

<sup>33</sup> Crowley, "The Wizard Way."

<sup>34</sup> Parsons, "Book of Babalon."

<sup>35</sup> Parsons, "Book of Babalon."

<sup>36</sup> John W. Parsons, "Freedom Is a Two-Edged Sword," in *Freedom Is a Two-Edged Sword and Other Essays*, ed. Hymenaeus Beta and Cameron (Tempe, AZ: New Falcon Publications, 2001), 9–43.

<sup>37</sup> Parsons, "Freedom," 41.

<sup>38</sup> Parsons, "Freedom," 42.

<sup>39</sup> See John W. Parsons, "The Cup, the Sword and the Crux Ansata" and "The Star of Babalon," both in *Freedom Is a Two-Edged Sword and Other Essays*, ed. Hymenaeus Beta and Cameron (Tempe, AZ: New Falcon Publications, 2001).

<sup>40</sup> As discussed in, for example, Hutton, *Triumph*; Chas S. Clifton, *Her Hidden Children: The Rise of Wicca and Paganism in America* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006).

<sup>41</sup> John W. Parsons and Marjorie Cameron, *Songs for the Witch Woman: With Commentaries from William Breeze, George*

many of their titles—"Witch Woman", "Pan", "The Witch House", and "Aradia"—clearly indicate the central themes and motifs. The poem "Stonehenge" evokes a desolate, rural landscape whose "ancient oaks are shadowy and still", and which awaits "a thaumaturgic tune / That called old gods beneath a younger moon / and will await until the gods come back". Cameron's accompanying drawing depicts a curled-up, feminine figure, floating above a line of standing, long-shadowed dark stones. The poem indicates the idea of an ancient cult, whose gods will reawaken: "They will return, who, going, left the slow / Still circle broken and the altar black".<sup>42</sup> Similar themes are explored in "Merlin":

The hours darken and the years / Grow black with evil things / And mad machines spawn monstrous fears / That follow sleep with sombre wings. / The sword lies dreaming in the stone / Neath waters over Avalon. / I would there were one man to tell / The evil dream, the darkling hell, / To seize the sword, to raise the spell, / Then England's mighty oaks would sing, / The mistletoe, beneath the moon, / Would glow and chant the Druid rune. / The spirit of the corn / Would walk, and greet the morn.<sup>43</sup>

With its references to machines breeding "monstrous fears", "Merlin" appears to critique industrialisation, conjuring a slumbering landscape awaiting the return of old rites. This trope is worth calling attention to, indicating Parsons's ambivalent view of the new aeon, as I shall return to later in the chapter.

In "Sabat", a yellow-eyed goat and a slyly smiling woman convene by moonlight, where "[t]he altar shall be white / As your white body, sister, / The chalice cup be red / As your mouth, sly smiling. / Bright blood and dark desire / Shall feed the altar fire".<sup>44</sup> In the poem, the feminised body of "sister" is juxtaposed with the altar and chalice, rendering an implicit association between feminine embodiment and the physicality of magic. While several of the poems in the collection approach their subject matter somewhat ambivalently, this nonetheless suggests Parsons's continued, associative connection between femininity and witchcraft, as articulated in his essay "Freedom".

Many of the poems blend Romantic and Gothic influences. "The Witch House" mentions gleaming witchfires, demons, "witch queens", and "death, like the tick of a clock in a boarded up room".<sup>45</sup> "Danse" describes a sinister gathering attended by a werewolf and a vampire, who is "fondling a skull". The werewolf sings of the moon as a "bloody promise in the sky", as well as of "black stars and wicked women", and a "serpent woman smiling sinister".<sup>46</sup> Black stars are a recurring verbal image in *Songs for the Witch Woman*, also appearing in *The Black Pilgrimage*, a collection of dark poetry and ink drawings by Cameron.<sup>47</sup> The phrase, and some of the ominous and absurd imagery in Parsons's and Cameron's poetic work, indicates a possible influence from horror writer R. W. Chambers's influential *The King in Yellow* (1895), which repeatedly mentions "black stars" in its descriptions of a mythical city named Carcosa.<sup>48</sup>

Aside from the above-mentioned lyrical treatments, witchcraft is briefly referenced in two of Parsons's magical texts from this period, both chronicling an initiatory, astral journey he called the "Black Pilgrimage" to the city of Chorazin.<sup>49</sup> In "The Book of Antichrist", Parsons describes being shown his

---

Pendle & Margaret Haines (*London: Fulgur Esoterica, 2014*).

<sup>42</sup> Parsons and Cameron, *Songs*, 35.

<sup>43</sup> Parsons and Cameron, *Songs*, 51.

<sup>44</sup> Parsons and Cameron, *Songs*, 46.

<sup>45</sup> Parsons and Cameron, *Songs*, 71.

<sup>46</sup> Parsons and Cameron, *Songs*, 39.

<sup>47</sup> Marjorie Cameron, "The Black Pilgrimage," (n.d.), Cameron Parsons Foundation.

<sup>48</sup> Robert W. Chambers, *The King in Yellow* (F. Tennyson Neely, 1895). Parsons's poem "Bierce" clearly refers to Ambrose Bierce, author of the short-story "An Inhabitant of Carcosa" in which the name "Carcosa" first appeared. Parsons's poem "Bierce" references Pancho Villa, whose army the historical Bierce joined, and "Halpin Fraser", the name of a character in one of Bierce's stories. Parsons and Cameron, *Songs*, 65.

<sup>49</sup> Chorazin, located in present-day Israel and now in ruins, is mentioned in the Bible as one of three villages cursed by Jesus; Luke 10:13 [KJV]. Some medieval theologians also believed the Antichrist might come to be born there. This idea influenced

previous incarnations, seeing himself as Gilles de Rais, attempting to “raise Jehanne Darc [*sic*] to be Queen of Witchcraft”, and “Francis Hepburne, Earl Bothwell, manipulating Gellis Duncan [*sic*]”.<sup>50</sup> Both Duncan and Hepburne are historical figures who were accused of witchcraft in the sixteenth century. In her influential *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921), Margaret Murray claimed that Duncan partook in a witch cult centred around the worship of a horned deity embodied by Hepburne.<sup>51</sup> The manuscript “The Black Pilgrimage”, Parsons’s diary record of the procedure, mentions both “witch lords” and a “witches’ ladder”.<sup>52</sup>

In 1950, Parsons sought to formulate and popularise witchcraft as a religion. Having expressed his frustration at what he saw as the “claptrap” and “indirection” of magic, he desired an “austere simplicity of approach”.<sup>53</sup> In the essay “Manifesto of the Witchcraft”, Parsons claims that humankind requires “a new religion”, to aid in the attainment of “freedom, self-expression, and ability to love and be loved”.<sup>54</sup> Parsons elaborated the underlying philosophy in a longer text, positing a gender-polar cosmology of “the holy graal, the Cup of Babalon, WOMAN, and the eternal force embodied in woman”, united with “[t]he Sword, solar-phallic emblem of the demon-angel—the beast-god that is man”. Combined, these two form “[t]he Crux Ansata ... the child that is the perfect fruit of that union”. Parsons stresses that his religion centres on “the wonder and beauty of sex, and that which lies beyond sex”.<sup>55</sup> He presents witchcraft as “the oldest organization in the world”:

When man was born, we were. We sang the first cradle song. ... Rock drawings in the Pyrenees remember us, and little clay images, made for an old purpose when the world was new. Our hand was on the old stone circles, the monolith, the dolmen, and the druid oak. We sang the first hunting songs, we made the first crops to grow; when man stood naked before the Powers that made him, we sang the first chant of terror and wonder. We wooed among the Pyramids, watched Egypt rise and fall, ruled for a space in Chaldea and Babylon, the Magian Kings. We sat among the secret assemblies of Israel, and danced the wild and stately dances in the sacred groves of Greece.<sup>56</sup>

The text reflects the anti-authoritarian views also voiced in “Freedom”, as seen above. Witchcraft is presented as an anarchic movement “on the side of man, of life, and of the individual”, and opposed to “religion, morality and government”. Parsons equates this aspect of witchcraft with Lucifer. Positing a divine gender polarity as central to his witchcraft, the text construes Lucifer as counterbalanced by the force of Babalon, associated with “love ... joy and laughter and divine drunkenness”.<sup>57</sup> Among the spiritual ancestors of the cult, Parsons lists:

Merlin ... Gawain and Arthur, Rabelais and Catullus, Gilles de Retz and Jehanne d’Arc, De Molensis, Johannes Dee, Cagliostro, Francis Hepburn and Gellis Duncan, Swinburne and Eliphas Levi, and many another bard, Magus, poet, martyr known and unknown that carried our banners against the enemy multiform and ubiquitous, the Church and the State. And when that vermin of Hell that is called the Christian Church held all the West in a slavery

---

Parsons; he calls Chorazin “the city of the Anti-Christ,” and believed that his astral journey there marked his transition into the figure.

<sup>50</sup> John W. Parsons, “The Book of the Antichrist” (n.d., [circa 1948]), Gerald J. Yorke Collection NS110, Warburg Institute Library.

<sup>51</sup> Margaret Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921).

<sup>52</sup> John W. Parsons, “The Black Pilgrimage” (n.d., [circa 1948]), OTO archives.

<sup>53</sup> Parsons to Cameron, January 27, 1950, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute Library.

<sup>54</sup> John W. Parsons, “Manifesto of the Witchcraft,” in *Freedom Is a Two-Edged Sword*, eds. Hymenaeus Beta and Cameron (Tempe, AZ: New Falcon Publications, 2001), 69.

<sup>55</sup> Parsons, “The Cup, the Sword and the Crux Ansata,” 79.

<sup>56</sup> John W. Parsons, “The Witchcraft,” in *Freedom Is a Two-Edged Sword and Other Essays*, ed. Hymenaeus Beta and Cameron (Tempe, AZ: New Falcon Publications, 2001), 71.

<sup>57</sup> Parsons, “The Witchcraft.”



of sin and death and terror, we, and we alone, brought hope to the heart of man, despite the dungeon and the stake [*sic*].<sup>58</sup>

The list of names is clearly inspired by the list of “Saints” in Crowley’s Gnostic Mass, written in 1913, which includes many of the (male) names given in the extract.<sup>59</sup> The addition of Gawain, Gilles de Rais, Joan of Arc, Cagliostro, Francis Hepburne, and Gellis Duncan (all but one of which appear in Parsons’s list of previous incarnations) appears to add a stronger flavour of witchcraft, or even Devil worship, to Parsons’ old-new religion, and it is also notable that Parsons adds female names to the list.

Despite the similarities between Wicca and Parsons’s gender-polar nature religion, there is no real evidence of collaboration between Parsons and Gardner, and the parallels between the two systems are more plausibly explained by both men being inspired by many of the same written works. Firstly, and most obviously, Gardner and Parsons were both indebted to Crowley, although (as I will argue later) less to the latter’s explicit mentions of witches than to his magical system as a whole. Secondly, Parsons, like Gardner, was clearly influenced by late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century writers who suggested witchcraft to be the perpetuation of an ancient fertility cult driven underground by the advent of Christianity. A prominent example, whom Hutton has shown to have been integral for the development of Wicca, is the French historian Jules Michelet (1798–1874).<sup>60</sup> Although its historical accuracy is widely dismissed, Michelet’s *La Sorcière* (1862) is noted for being one of the first sympathetic histories of witchcraft.<sup>61</sup> Michelet argues that medieval witches were rebels against feudalism and the Church, and that their patron deity Satan was a benevolent figure linked to nature, laughter, and the arts. Michelet’s proto-feminist and egalitarian ideas, and the similarities between his and Parsons’s respective interpretations of the anti-authoritarian witch, render the French historian a likely source of inspiration for Parsons.

A similarly influential book for the emergence of modern witchcraft is Charles Godfrey Leland’s (1824–1903) *Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches* (1899).<sup>62</sup> The book details Leland’s alleged findings studying folk traditions in Italy, where he claimed to have uncovered a surviving witch cult of pre-Christian origin. While not explicit Satanists, Leland’s witches nonetheless revered Lucifer alongside the goddess Diana.<sup>63</sup> This resembles Parsons’s notion of Lucifer and Babalon as gods of witchcraft, although Parsons’s affirmation of Lucifer is unreserved (while Leland’s view of the figure is ambivalent).<sup>64</sup> There are strong similarities between Parsons’s and Leland’s work, most importantly Parsons’s association of witchcraft with anti-authoritarianism and gender equality. Combined with the fact that Parsons penned a poem titled “Aradia”, it is reasonable to assume Parsons’s witchcraft was inspired by Leland. Moreover, there are parallels between Parsons’s ideas about Babalon’s human “daughter”, descending to earth to liberate humankind from slavery and repression, and Leland’s mythology around Aradia as a female figure of divine origin, descending to aid the poor in their struggle against their wealthy oppressors. Throughout *Songs for the Witch Woman*, there are references to poisonous herbs such as hellebore, monkshood, and wolf’s bane (the latter two of which denote the botanical genus *Aconitum*).<sup>65</sup> While these botanical names may simply be meant to convey a witchy ambiance, they could also be more directly inspired by Leland’s Aradia, who teaches the witches the art of poisoning.

An accidental explosion claimed Parsons’s life in 1952, and his preserved writings are sparse. As seen above, he may have drawn some inspiration from Crowley’s references to witchcraft; “Liber 49” appears

---

<sup>58</sup> Parsons, “The Witchcraft.”

<sup>59</sup> Aleister Crowley, “Liber XV: Ecclesiae Gnosticae Catholicae Canon Missae,” *Equinox* 3, no. 1 (1919): 247–270.

<sup>60</sup> Hutton, *Triumph*, esp. 138–143.

<sup>61</sup> Jules Michelet, *Satanism and Witchcraft: A Study in Medieval Superstition*, trans. A. R. Allinson (New York: Citadel Press, 1963).

<sup>62</sup> Cf Hutton, *Triumph*, esp. 142–150.

<sup>63</sup> Charles Godfrey Leland, *Aradia: Or the Gospel of the Witches* (London: David Nutt, 1899).

<sup>64</sup> On Leland’s Lucifer, see Fredrik Gregorius, “Luciferian Witchcraft: At the Crossroads Between Paganism and Satanism,” in *The Devil’s Party: Satanism in Modernity*, ed. Per Faxneld and Jesper Aagaard Petersen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 231–234.

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, Parsons and Cameron, *Songs*, 59.

to have borrowed the term “Basilisk abode” from Crowley’s “The Wizard Way”, and the integration of (imagined) historical witchcraft with OTO’s sexual magic in Crowley’s description of the “Sabbath” in “De Nuptiis” may have sparked Parsons’s imagination.<sup>66</sup> Crucially, however, Parsons unlike Crowley promoted witchcraft as a fully fledged religion in itself. Moreover, I contend that Crowley’s explicit references to witch-related symbolism were less important to Parsons’s configuration of witchcraft than the philosophical and magical underpinnings of Crowley’s Thelema in general: the emphasis on individual liberty, gender-polar ontology (altered from the Nuit and Hadit of *Liber AL* to the Lucifer-Babalon coupling of Parsons’s witchcraft), and the notion of sex as a divine sacrament.

While feminist themes are present in some of Crowley’s writings, female emancipation plays a proportionally greater role in Parsons’s *oeuvre*, and his articulation of witchcraft appears linked to his vision of women as spiritual and social leaders.<sup>67</sup> Parsons’s call for the rise of the “witch woman” invokes a proto-feminist, nature-romantic worldview that prefigures the popularisation of eco-feminism in the late twentieth century, albeit with a lesser emphasis on environmentalism. Nonetheless, Parsons’s own description of the new aeon as having a “homicidal and suicidal urge” requiring the balancing force of Babalon,<sup>68</sup> his engagement with Gothic and Romantic themes, and his celebration of nature and irrationality suggest a critical approach towards his own time. Thus, I propose that witchcraft may be interpreted as Parsons’s attempt to fashion Crowley’s teachings into the austere simple religious system he desired, combining the anti-authoritarian creed of Thelema with a stronger emphasis on socio-political transformation, female liberation, and anti-modern critique.

Finally, the immense impact of fiction on Parsons’s worldview exceeds the scope of the present discussion. As indicated in previous studies, Parsons was likely inspired by pulp author Jack Williamson’s 1948 novel *Darker Than You Think* (first published as a short story in 1940), which features a clandestine cult of shape-shifting witches waiting for a dark messiah known as the “Child of Night”.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, the concept of the Black Pilgrimage was partly drawn from horror author M. R. James’s short story “Count Magnus”.<sup>70</sup> As noted above, it is also possible Parsons and Cameron were inspired by Chambers’s *The King in Yellow*. Parsons shared this tendency to draw on fiction in articulating his magical ideas with Kenneth Grant, to whose interpretation of the witch we shall now turn.

## Witchcraft in the Writings of Kenneth Grant

Having first encountered Crowley’s writings at the age of 15, Kenneth Grant later struck up a correspondence with the famous occultist, briefly serving as his secretary.<sup>71</sup> In 1946, Crowley introduced Grant to David Curwen (1893–1984) an OTO IX° initiate and student of Swami Pareswara Bikshu.<sup>72</sup> Under Curwen’s influence, Grant developed a life-long interest in Tantra, specifically what he called the “vama marg”, or “Left-Hand Path”.<sup>73</sup> In 1948, after Crowley’s death, Grant was accepted into the IX° of the OTO, although he was later expelled from the order. Around the same time, Grant was also introduced to the occultist Austin Osman Spare (1886–1956) by his wife, Steffi.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>66</sup> As discussed in a previous note, Parsons was certainly familiar with “De Nuptiis”.

<sup>67</sup> A prominent example of Crowley’s engagement with arguably feminist themes can be found in his so-called New Comment to *Liber AL*, reproduced in Crowley, *Magical and Philosophical Comments*.

<sup>68</sup> Parsons, “Book of Babalon.”

<sup>69</sup> Jack Williamson, *Darker Than You Think* (Fantasy Press, 1948). Cf Pendle, *Strange Angel*.

<sup>70</sup> M. R. James, “Count Magnus,” in *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (Edward Arnold, 1904). Cf Rosemary Pardoe and Jane Nicholls, “The Black Pilgrimage,” *Ghosts & Scholars* 1998, no. 26 (1998).

<sup>71</sup> Kenneth Grant, *Remembering Aleister Crowley* (London: Skoob Books Publishing, 1991), v.

<sup>72</sup> Grant, *Remembering*, 49–50; Henrik Bogdan, “Reception of Occultism in India: The Case of the Holy Order of Krishna,” in *Occultism in a Global Perspective*, ed. Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic (Durham: Acumen, 2013), 177–201; Henrik Bogdan, “Introduction,” in *Brother Curwen, Brother Crowley: A Correspondence*, ed. Henrik Bogdan, Aleister Crowley, and David Curwen (York Beach, ME: Teitan Press, 2010), xviii–xlvi.

<sup>73</sup> Grant, *Remembering*, 49.

<sup>74</sup> Henrik Bogdan, “Kenneth Grant and the Typhonian Tradition,” in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge (Abingdon,

Inspired by the work of amateur Egyptologist Gerald Massey (1828–1907), Grant espoused the idea of a primordial, stellar-lunar cult around the goddess Typhon and her son, Set, emerging in Central Africa and systematised in ancient Egypt. Following the discovery of the role of semen in procreation, Grant contends, the Typhonians were driven underground by devotees of the solar god Osiris, and the Typhonian mysteries subsequently flourished in various Tantras. Grant explicates the Typhonian Tradition in nine volumes known as the Typhonian Trilogies, a dazzlingly intertextual corpus that integrates Thelema and Tantra with, among other influences, H. P. Lovecraft’s horror fiction, Surrealism, Advaita Vedanta, and UFOs (unidentified flying objects).<sup>75</sup>

In his sex-magical instructions for the OTO’s IX°, Crowley posited semen as the magical body fluid *par excellence*, construing the female sex-magical partner as a “shrine indeed for the God, but not the God”.<sup>76</sup> Grant objected, seeing Crowley’s perception of the IX° as limited. Instead, Grant argued that the essence of the Tantric “Left-Hand Path”, with which he himself identified, was its focus on the divine feminine, embodied by a skilled sexual priestess trained to emit *kalas*, female genital secretions “charged with magical energy”.<sup>77</sup> The *kalas* play a central role in Grant’s Typhonian Trilogies, largely replacing semen as the most magically potent sexual fluid. In some texts, Grant juxtaposes the *kalas* with the idea of sabbatic wine. In the essay “Vinum Sabbati”, originally part of the *Carfax Monographs*—a series of essays published between 1959 and 1963 accompanied by artwork by Steffi Grant—Grant links Babalon’s cup to the “wine of the Sabbath”, equated with “the blood of the saints which seethes in the Holy Grail”. He suggests that the figure of the witch is a degradation of the Sophia worshipped by the early Christians, stigmatised after perceptions of biological regeneration shifted to focus on paternity. Grant writes that the symbolism of the sabbath—the “goat or ram ... the cat, toad, basilisk, beetle, serpent, spider, and even the babe whose fat went into the making of the infernal unguent”; the backwards recitation of the Lord’s prayer; and the privileging of female above male, and moon above sun—has esoteric meaning, signifying the principle of “[a]tavistic resurgence”, or the urge to return to “the common source of all”. He also writes that the historical sabbath was conducted on the astral plane.<sup>78</sup>

In “Vinum Sabbati”, Grant identifies the sabbatic wine with a union of “solar and lunar energies”, writing that the sabbath entailed a sublimation of “blood or essence ... so that it might form itself into non-material bodies”.<sup>79</sup> This would suggest the sabbatic wine to constitute a mingling of masculine and feminine sexual fluids; however, Grant’s hints as to the exact components of the substance are partly contradictory. In *Aleister Crowley & the Hidden God* (1973), he identifies the wine directly with the *kalas*, writing that the *Vinum Sabbati* is “the mystical effusion of the Scarlet Woman”.<sup>80</sup> The term Scarlet Woman, derived from Crowley’s writings, is repeatedly used by Grant in reference to the Tantric priestess, and he also identifies this term with the witch.<sup>81</sup> In *Cults of the Shadow* (1975), Grant identifies menstrual blood as “the basis of the *vinum sabbati*”.<sup>82</sup> In *Nightside of Eden* (1977), however, he describes the sabbatic wine as the result of the “solar-phallic energy ... streaking into the mouth, chalice or womb

---

Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 323–330.

<sup>75</sup> Grant’s interpretation of the Typhonian Tradition is explicated throughout the Typhonian Trilogies, especially the first three works. See also Christian Giudice, “From Central Africa to the Mauve Zone: Gerald Massey’s Influence on Kenneth Grant’s Idea of the Typhonian Tradition,” in *Servants of the Star & the Snake: Essays in Honour of Kenneth & Steffi Grant*, ed. Henrik Bogdan (London: Starfire, 2018), 63–74.

<sup>76</sup> Crowley, “Agape vel Liber C.” See also Aleister Crowley, “Liber CDXIV: De Arte Magica” (1914), Gerald J. Yorke Collection NS3, Warburg Institute Library; Aleister Crowley, “Energized Enthusiasm,” *The Equinox* 1, no. 9 (1913): 19–46.

<sup>77</sup> Kenneth Grant, *Aleister Crowley & the Hidden God* (London: Skoob Books, 1992), 81. See also Kenneth Grant, *The Magical Revival* (London: Skoob, 1991), 34; Grant, *Remembering*, 49; Grant, *Aleister Crowley*. Cf Henrik Bogdan, “Evocation of the Fire Snake: Kenneth Grant and Tantra” in *Servants of the Star & the Snake: Essays in Honour of Kenneth & Steffi Grant*, ed. Henrik Bogdan (London: Starfire, 2018), 253–268; Gordan Djurdjevic, *India and the Occult: The Influence of South Asian Spirituality on Modern Western Occultism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 107.

<sup>78</sup> See Kenneth Grant, “Vinum Sabbati,” in *Hidden Lore: The Carfax Monographs*, ed. Kenneth Grant and Steffi Grant (London: Skoob Esoterica, 1996).

<sup>79</sup> Grant and Grant, *Hidden Lore*.

<sup>80</sup> Grant, *Aleister Crowley*, 121–122.

<sup>81</sup> Grant, *Aleister Crowley*, 126.

<sup>82</sup> Kenneth Grant, *Cults of the Shadow* (London: Skoob, 1994), 146.

of the Moon”.<sup>83</sup> He explains that the sabbatic wine is “distilled by the rite of the XI° ... in the cauldron of the Scarlet Woman”.<sup>84</sup> Given Grant’s interpretation of the OTO’s XI° as involving the magical use of menstrual blood,<sup>85</sup> this statement seemingly implies that the “wine of the Sabbath” is menstrual blood, or a combination of the latter with semen.

Grant cautions against “puerile” interpretations of witchcraft conceived by “medieval churchmen, witch-hunters and present-day revivalists”.<sup>86</sup> Significantly, this statement appears to critique both negative witch-hunt stereotypes and modern witchcraft, and Grant posits these interpretations as a “travesty” of the Tantric *Kaula* Circle.<sup>87</sup> He asserts that the traditional number of 13 coven members in a witch coven “represents the true *chakra* or Kaula Circle”, and that 13 is the “lunar number *par excellence*, the number of the female and her periodic manifestations”.<sup>88</sup> He suggests the symbolism of the witch “on the besom or broom handle” indicates “the originally feminine character of the Sabbath”, reflecting its roots in “the African origins of magic, when the female was exalted above the male”.<sup>89</sup> Connecting the witch to the Tantric priestess, Grant writes that the active role of the woman of the Kaula Circle, who physically incarnates the *Kundalini* and “directs the worship”, can be correlated with the active role of women in Spare’s description of the astral witches’ sabbath, where the men took a “peculiarly passive” position.<sup>90</sup> Thus, Grant posits an association between witchcraft and the elevation of femininity, and of female ritual leadership.

Grant links menstruation to anti-witch paranoia, writing that the witch transmits “emanations from the abyss of blood”, identified with the *qliphotic* domain.<sup>91</sup> He contends that taboos against menstruation were rooted in the correct suspicion “that woman and her peculiar mechanism constituted ... a gateway on to the void, through which awful forces could be invoked”.<sup>92</sup> Grant views this ability to manifest unearthly entities as highly desirable, and linked to the “Nightside” of the Tree of Life, a central and important concept in his thought. He writes that witchcraft is presided over by “Hecate, or Hekt, the frog-headed goddess”, construing the frog as a symbol of the leaper between worlds, connected to the formula of the “Voltigeurs”, who can traverse the Nightside of the Tree.<sup>93</sup> In *Nightside of Eden*, Grant recounts accompanying Gardner to a London apartment to conduct a witch-ritual aimed at raising magical energy so as to contact extra-terrestrial intelligences.<sup>94</sup> Witchcraft, via menstruation, is thereby linked in Grant’s writings to a supposedly female-specific biological talent for communing with unearthly forces.

Unlike in Parsons’s writings, witchcraft also has negative connotations in Grant’s work. He describes it as “the degenerate offspring” of the ancient, Typhonian cult, “so distorted and so inadequate that to try and interpret the symbols ... without reference to the vastly ancient systems from which they derive is like mistaking the tip of an iceberg for its total mass”.<sup>95</sup> Despite being originally linked to the Typhonian Tradition, Grant stresses that “centuries of Christian persecution” produced pseudo-witch cults of “perverted religious rites and symbols having no inner meaning” but to express “the witches’ total commitment to anti-Christian doctrine”.<sup>96</sup> However, Grant writes, when interpreted at their true, Typhonian level, the symbols become intelligible and recognisable as a part of the same tradition.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Kenneth Grant, *Nightside of Eden* (London: Muller, 1977), 121.

<sup>84</sup> Grant, *Nightside*, 230.

<sup>85</sup> Grant, *Aleister Crowley*, 106–109; Grant, *Cults*, 12.

<sup>86</sup> Grant, *Nightside*, 172–173.

<sup>87</sup> Grant, *Cults*, 68.

<sup>88</sup> Grant, *Aleister Crowley*, 82.

<sup>89</sup> Grant, *Aleister Crowley*, 126.

<sup>90</sup> Grant, *Cults*, 72.

<sup>91</sup> Grant, *Nightside*, 78.

<sup>92</sup> Grant, *Nightside*, 78.

<sup>93</sup> Grant, *Nightside*, 173; see also Kenneth Grant, *Outside the Circles of Time* (London: Muller, 1980), 174–176.

<sup>94</sup> Grant, *Nightside*, 122–123.

<sup>95</sup> Grant, *Cults*, 195.

<sup>96</sup> Grant, *Cults*, 207.

<sup>97</sup> Grant, *Cults*, 208.

Similarly, Grant suggests that “Salem Witchcraft” links ancient Egyptian magic to Spare’s teachings, contending the Salem witches had contact with Lovecraftian entities.<sup>98</sup>

Unlike Parsons and Gardner, Grant does not recommend witchcraft as a religion in itself. Grant’s witchcraft is not focused on fertility, and unlike both Gardner and Parsons, he repeatedly suggests the sabbath takes place astrally.<sup>99</sup> He interprets the sabbath as hinting at the ancient Typhonian mysteries, but cautions against taking sabbatic symbolism too literally. It is difficult to estimate to what extent Grant’s notions of witchcraft were derived from Crowley. As noted earlier, the term “wine of the Sabbath” appears in *The Vision and the Voice* and “Agape vel Liber C vel Azoth”. As a IX° initiate of OTO, Grant may have derived some of his notions of the “wine” from Crowley. However, Grant’s use of the Latinised term *vinum sabbati*—which I have not encountered in Crowley’s work—also suggests a direct influence from Machen. However, the greatest source of inspiration for Grant’s view of witchcraft is, arguably, Spare, whom Grant frequently cites as the source of his own knowledge of the sabbath. Nonetheless, Grant’s and Spare’s collaboration around witchcraft is a complex topic, and some of Spare’s ideas about witchcraft likely came from Grant.<sup>100</sup>

Grant in his written work dealt considerably less with social power relations than did Parsons, or indeed Michelet or Leland. Thus, a frequently overlooked aspect of the Typhonian Trilogies is Grant’s engagement with tropes prevalent in some branches of second-wave feminism. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, Grant was one of the first writers to offer a systematic critique of perceived androcentrism within Crowley’s sexual magic.<sup>101</sup> This tendency in his writings is partly reflected in some of his remarks on witchcraft. Grant links the central position of women at the witches’ sabbath to the Typhonian Tradition’s focus on the feminine (both in divine form and in the shape of the sex-magical priestess)—a recurrent theme in the Typhonian Trilogies.<sup>102</sup> He also links the sabbatic wine to the *kalas*, a central concept in his work. Grant’s suggestion that the symbol of the witch has been shaped by misogyny parallels interpretations by second-wave feminist authors.<sup>103</sup> There is also evidence of reciprocal influence between Grant and the poets Peter Redgrove and Penelope Shuttle. Redgrove inquired about Grant’s work when writing *The Wise Wound* (1978), the couple’s Jungian-feminist treatise on menstruation, and corresponded with Crowley’s friend Gerald Yorke on the subject of menstruation, Grant, and the *kalas*.<sup>104</sup> Redgrove and Shuttle’s work has, in turn, influenced interpretations of menstruation in contemporary feminist spirituality.<sup>105</sup> Grant’s engagement with what can be seen as feminist notions, and the possible, indirect influence of his ideas on broader feminist discourses, is an aspect of his work I hope to explore further in future publications.

## Conclusion

Despite the dubious historical veracity of the anecdote referenced in the introduction, witch-related themes were not explicitly connected with female liberation in Crowley’s writings. The importance of

---

<sup>98</sup> Grant, *Nightside*, 127–128.

<sup>99</sup> For example, in Grant and Grant, *Hidden Lore*; Kenneth Grant and Steffi Grant, *Zos Speaks! Encounters with Austin Osman Spare* (London: Fulgur, 1998).

<sup>100</sup> Grant and Grant, *Zos Speaks!*; Phil Baker, *Austin Osman Spare: The Occult Life of London’s Legendary Artist* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2014), 245–246.

<sup>101</sup> Grant, *Aleister Crowley*, esp. 42–43; cf. Hedenborg White, *The Eloquent Blood*.

<sup>102</sup> See, for example, Grant, *Aleister Crowley*, 21, 232; Grant, *Nightside*, 84.

<sup>103</sup> For example, Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (London: Women’s Press, 1979); Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*, 20th Anniversary ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1999).

<sup>104</sup> “Redgrove Papers; Letters,” MS171, University of Sheffield Library. The dust jacket for Grant’s *Outside the Circles of Time* (1980) quotes an endorsement from *The Wise Wound*, and Redgrove’s *The Black Goddess and the Sixth Sense* (1987) is reviewed in a 1989 issue of the journal *Starfire*, issued by Grant’s “Typhonian” OTO (later the Typhonian Order). Michael Staley, “The Black Goddess and the Sixth Sense, Bloomsbury, 1987,” *Starfire* 1, no. 3 (1989): 98–99.

<sup>105</sup> Anna Fedele, “Reversing Eve’s Curse: Mary Magdalene, Mother Earth and the Creative Ritualization of Menstruation,” *Journal of Ritual Studies* 28, no. 2 (2014): 23–35.

the convergence of witchcraft with second-wave feminism in the U.S. in the 1970s for the late-modern trajectory of the witch as a cultural symbol is immense, and the connections between witchcraft and female emancipation in Grant's and Parsons's writings are arguably overshadowed by writers such as Starhawk or Monica Sjöö. Nonetheless, the present article has sought to indicate how related ideas were also explored in other contexts, by a pre-Wiccan American occultist, and a British occult writer with a critical view of modern witchcraft. Given the politicisation of occulture in recent years, it is possible that their works will receive greater attention as possible sources of inspiration for modern iterations of witchcraft.<sup>106</sup> Elsewhere, I have discussed how both Parsons and Grant in different ways position femininity as central to their spiritual vision—Parsons through his emphasis on Babalon as saviour of humanity, and on women as religious and socio-political leaders, and Grant through his focus on the *kalas*, the Tantric priestess, and the ontological primacy of the divine feminine.<sup>107</sup> Consequently, though I believe both had multiple reasons for engaging with the symbolism of witchcraft, I propose that Parsons' and Grant's notions of the witch can be linked to their respective engagements with reevaluating femininity.

---

<sup>106</sup> See, for example, Egil Asprem, "The Magical Theory of Politics: Meme Magic, the Cult of Kek, and How to Topple an Egregore," forthcoming.

<sup>107</sup> Cf Hedenborg White, *The Eloquent Blood*.

## 10. Navigating the Crooked Path: Andrew D. Chumbley and the Sabbatic Craft<sup>(10)</sup>

Ethan Doyle White<sup>1</sup>

While researching for *The Triumph of the Moon*, Ronald Hutton communicated with several individuals who, although not Wiccans, practised other occultist traditions they termed “witchcraft”. One of these was the Englishman Andrew Chumbley (1967–2004).<sup>2</sup> Chumbley promoted an occult current that he called the “Sabbatic Craft” and which was formalised through a small group, the Cultus Sabbati (“Cult of the Sabbat”), in 1991. Like Wicca, the Sabbatic Craft drew upon both the iconographical inheritance of European witchcraft beliefs and forms of ceremonial magic, but in other respects stood very much distinct. Rather than sharing Wicca’s Pagan focus, Chumbley’s tradition was more eclectic, for instance drawing upon multiple Luciferian themes. Although Cultus membership has remained comparatively small, Chumbley’s ideas gained a far wider audience through his publications, particularly among the growing number of self-described “Traditional Witches”.

While Hutton’s book included the first reference to Chumbley within the academic study of esotericism, further scholarly discussions of the occultist and his work have appeared over the ensuing two decades. The late Dave Evans (1962–2013) mentioned Chumbley’s attitudes regarding the “Left-Hand Path” in his PhD-cum-monograph on post-Crowleyan occultism, and later Fredrik Gregorius briefly discussed Chumbley’s significance in his chapter on Luciferian Witchcraft.<sup>3</sup> Gordan Djurdjevic considered Chumbley’s understanding of Tantra, while Jimmy Elwing examined his beliefs regarding the oneiric realm.<sup>4</sup> These scholarly studies have been supplemented by a few non-academic discussions of Chumbley and his work.<sup>5</sup> Such pioneering research has set the stage for this present contribution, a biographical account that draws upon both published sources and the testimonies of those who knew Chumbley personally. In doing so, it hopes to advance scholarly understandings of an individual who was perhaps the most interesting British occultist of the 1990s and broaden understandings of the role of “witchcraft” in the modern esoteric milieu.

---

<sup>1</sup> University College London, London, UK

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 306–308.

<sup>3</sup> Dave Evans, *The History of British Magick After Crowley* (n.p.: Hidden Publishing, 2007), 212–214; Fredrik Gregorius, “Luciferian Witchcraft: At the Crossroads between Paganism and Satanism,” in *The Devil’s Party: Satanism in Modernity*, ed. Per Faxneld and Jesper Aa. Petersen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 241–243.

<sup>4</sup> Gordan Djurdjevic, *India and the Occult: The Influence of South Asian Spirituality on Modern Western Occultism* (New York City: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 127–133; Jimmy Elwing, “Where the Three Roads Meet: Oneiric Praxis in the Sabbatic Craft,” in *Hands of Apostasy: Essays on Traditional Witchcraft*, ed. Michael Howard and Daniel A. Schulke (Richmond Vista, CA: Three Hands Press, 2014), 249–271. See also Jimmy Elwing, “Andrew D. Chumbley,” in *Brill Dictionary of Contemporary Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> Anne Morris, “But to Assist the Soul’s Interior Revolution: The Art of Andrew Chumbley, the Cult of the Divine Artist, and Aspects of Sabbatic Craft,” in *Serpent Songs*, ed. Nicholaj de Mattos Frisvold (n.p.: Scarlet Imprint, 2013), 173–187; Dan Fox, “Andrew Chumbley (1962–2004),” in *Ancestors of the Craft: The Lives and Lessons of the Magical Elders*, ed. Christopher Penczak (Salem, NH: Copper Cauldron Publishing, 2013), 262–266.

<sup>(10)</sup> © The Author(s) 2019  
Shai Feraro and Ethan Doyle White (eds.)  
Magic and Witchery in the Modern West  
Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15549-0\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15549-0_10)

## Early Years: 1967 to 1990

Chumbley was a very private person and publicly revealed little about himself.<sup>6</sup> As he told one interviewer, providing personal information to those “whom it does not concern” was merely “an exercise in vanity”.<sup>7</sup> Even his physical appearance, that of a small, dark-haired man with rounded facial features, was kept out of the public eye.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, there was undoubtedly a genuine desire for privacy here; he once asked a friend not to pass-on his address lest it attract “oddballs”.<sup>9</sup> On the other, this extreme privacy helped cultivate an aura of mystery around both him and the Cultus Sabbati, something that no doubt held a certain appeal.

Andrew David Chumbley was born on 15 September 1967 and grew up in Writtle, a rural village located a mile west of the Essex town of Chelmsford. He was close to his parents and remained resident in his familial home, a post-war ex-council property, until 2002.<sup>10</sup> Writtle was an important place for Chumbley. His writings often reference the *genius loci* of nearby woods and fields; he thought their omens aided the Sabbatic seeker in journeying to the dream-world.<sup>11</sup> Chumbley had a difficult time at school. He suffered badly from eczema, commenting that his skin “used to look like a map of Communist Russia on good days; like an Aztec flayed sacrifice on others”.<sup>12</sup> He faced bullying and began experimenting with magic in his teenage years to deal with his tormentors.<sup>13</sup> Chumbley later began to frequent the Prince of Orange, a Chelmsford pub that attracted an “alternative” crowd of hippies, punks, and bikers, visually declaring his membership of this scene by fashioning his hair into dreadlocks.<sup>14</sup> His bedroom similarly reflected his counter-cultural interests, decorated with his illustrations—for which he had a keen talent—and a working altar bedecked in animal bone.<sup>15</sup>

Chumbley made various contacts in the local esoteric milieu. In the latter part of the 1980s, he and two friends attended Andrew Collins’ (b.1957) EarthQuest meetings in Leigh-on-Sea. A “psychic quester”, Collins had recently published *The Black Alchemist* (1988), a book which attracted a cult following in Britain’s occult circles. *The Black Alchemist* recounted Collins’ investigations into an alleged practitioner of black magic leaving sinister markers at churchyards and holy wells in eastern and south-eastern England.<sup>16</sup> Thematically, the work chimed in part with the Satanic ritual abuse hysteria then sweeping the country.<sup>17</sup> Collins suspected that Chumbley wanted to emulate the Black Alchemist, and perhaps because of this, relations between the two became strained. Eventually, Collins asked Chumbley to stop attending the EarthQuest moots. Although sceptical of some of Chumbley’s claims, Collins felt

---

<sup>6</sup> This chapter deliberately avoids revealing too much of his personal or family life, out of respect to Chumbley’s own wishes and to the privacy of his surviving family members.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Fitzgerald, “The Sabbatic Cultus: An Interview with Andrew D. Chumbley,” *Esoterra: A Journal of Extreme Culture* 6 (1996). Republished in Andrew D. Chumbley, *Opuscula Magica Volume II: Essays on Witchcraft and Crooked Sorcery* (Richmond Vista, CA: Three Hands Press, 2011), 101.

<sup>8</sup> Posthumously, photographs of Chumbley have appeared in Gavin Semple and Clive Harper, eds., *From the Peacock Quill: A Bibliography of Andrew D. Chumbley* (Reineke Verlag, 2005); *Eikostos: Xoanon Publishing 1992–2012* (Hercules and Macclesfield: Xoanon, 2012), 12; John Power, *Pagans and Witches of Essex* (Chelmsford: Phoenix of Chelmsford, 2013), 29.

<sup>9</sup> John Power, *Pagans and Witches of Essex* (Chelmsford: Phoenix of Chelmsford, 2013), 36.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 42; Daniel Schulke, personal communication, 2 September 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Fitzgerald, “Sabbatic Cultus,” in *Opuscula Magica II*, 101; Michael Howard, *Children of Cain: A Study of Modern Traditional Witches* (Richmond Vista, CA: Three Hands Press, 2011), 194.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted by Schulke, personal communication, 2 September 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Power, *Pagans and Witches*, 30. In 2003, Chumbley stated that he had been practising magic for “around twenty years,” indicating that he began such practices circa 1983, when he would have been about 16; see Chumbley, “Initiation and Access to Magical Power within Early Modern Cunning-Craft and Modern Traditional Craft,” published in Chumbley, *Opuscula Magica Volume I: Essays on Witchcraft and the Sabbatic Tradition* (Richmond Vista, CA: Three Hands Press, 2010), 115.

<sup>14</sup> Power, *Pagans and Witches*, 30, 32. The Prince of Orange, located at 7 Hall Street, was taken over by O’Connors in 1997.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Jennifer,’ personal communication, 5 March 2013; Schulke, personal communication, 2 September 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Collins, *The Black Alchemist* (Leigh-on-Sea: ABC Books, 1988).

<sup>17</sup> J. S. La Fontaine, *Speak of the Devil: Tales of Satanic Abuse in Contemporary England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).



that they developed a mutual respect despite being “rivals on the same patch”, with both using the same medieval Essex churchyard for various rites.<sup>18</sup>

Chumbley also befriended Mark Harding, convener of a Druidic grove in Saffron Walden. The pair cleared a dried-out pond near Writtle for magical workings, dubbing it “the Hollow”. Initially they practised their rites alone, but gradually invited others to join them. Harding noted that Chumbley brought varied influences to their workings; at one point, the latter developed an interest in Vodou, having attended the sessions of a Vodou drumming group in London, and subsequently began invoking Vodou spirits during their rites at the Hollow. In another instance, Chumbley displayed his growing interest in Yezidism by tying peacock feathers—a likely reference to the “Peacock Angel” Melek Taus—to his dreadlocks.<sup>19</sup> Another attendee at one such rite was amused to find Chumbley dressed as Jesus in a sackcloth and crown of thorns, the purpose of which is unfortunately unknown.<sup>20</sup>

According to Chumbley’s friend and initiate Michael Howard (1948–2015), two of the esotericists whom Chumbley encountered during his teenage years had been members of older folk-magical groups. Although both lived in Essex, neither was native to the county, instead having emigrated from other parts of southern Britain. Howard stated that these individuals belonged to distinct traditions with different origins but that their occult systems had similarities, with both being “matriarchal” in nature.<sup>21</sup>

Chumbley was introduced to the first of these two lineages by an older man named James McNess. A former ballet dancer, McNess was a regular at the Prince of Orange and on a few occasions joined Chumbley and Harding’s rituals at the Hollow.<sup>22</sup> Chumbley and McNess also worked independently in a group apart from Harding, through which the former was brought into the lineage,<sup>23</sup> a tradition allegedly developed in the Oxfordshire-Buckinghamshire borderlands prior to the Second World War.<sup>24</sup> Chumbley claimed that McNess was living in a village there circa 1940 when he was initiated into a group containing four elderly women. He sought to substantiate these claims by showing Hutton notes assembled by McNess that listed magical uses for 26 psalms; Hutton described it as “classic Christian folk magic”.<sup>25</sup> In a 1999 article, Chumbley offered further information on this tradition, terming it “the Red Snake”. He added that—according to McNess—no one requesting initiation would receive it, with the group believing that omens would guide them to potential recruits, who would then be observed for at least nine lunar months. This completed, the group would ask the aspirant to undertake “the Rite of Dedication” which admitted them to a year and a day of formal instruction. Only after this was accomplished was the candidate initiated into the lineage through a process of “passing on the power”.<sup>26</sup> This may have taken place on Halloween 1991; Chumbley stated that he was “formally initiated” into the “Nameless Faith of Witchblood” on this date, to serve in the “Noble Office of the Magister for the Kith and Kin of the Lineage”.<sup>27</sup>

Chumbley noted that McNess informed him that Cain figured prominently in Buckinghamshire folk-magic, a probable reference to the group’s mythology.<sup>28</sup> The term “Red Snake” is an interesting one,

---

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Collins, personal communication, 12 and 14 June 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Power, *Pagans and Witches*, 45. References to Vodou and Yezidism appear throughout Chumbley’s writings.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Jennifer,’ personal communication, 5 March 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Howard, personal communication, 22 February 2012.

<sup>22</sup> Power, *Pagans and Witches*, 30, 45; Power, personal communication, 25 February 2013; ‘Jennifer,’ personal communication, 5 March 2013. Chumbley cited ‘personal communication’ from McNess (by surname) in publications like “The Leader Between” and “Mysticism, Initiation and Dream.”

<sup>23</sup> Schulke, personal communication, 2 September 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Chumbley referred to the group being located in Buckinghamshire in “Hekas,” *The Cauldron* 74 and 75 (November 1994 and February 1995). Republished in *Opuscula Magica*, 53. Howard also refers to Buckinghamshire in *Children of Cain*, 186. Alternately, Hutton places it in Oxfordshire in *Triumph of the Moon*, 306. Hutton has noted that Chumbley described his mentor living on “the Oxfordshire-Buckinghamshire borderland,” personal communication, 24 February 2012. Perhaps generating some confusion is that the borders between the two counties shifted in 1974 due to the enactment of the Local Government Act 1972.

<sup>25</sup> Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*, 306.

<sup>26</sup> Chumbley, “The Golden Chain and the Lonely Road,” *The Cauldron* 94 (November 1999). Republished in *Opuscula Magica* I, 92–94.

<sup>27</sup> Andrew D. Chumbley, *One: The Grimoire of the Golden Toad* (Chelmsford: Xoanon, 2000), 57.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew D. Chumbley, *The Leaper Between: An Historical Study of the Toad-Bone Amulet; Its Forms, Functions and*

paralleling terms used by several occultist groups.<sup>29</sup> It may connect to the Red Dragon of the Book of Revelations, a figure whose influence can be seen in William Blake's "The Great Red Dragon" watercolour series (1805–1810) and *Le dragon rouge* grimoire of early nineteenth-century France.<sup>30</sup> Alternately, it may reference the Red Dragon of Arthurian legend, British folklore, or the Welsh flag.<sup>31</sup> Elsewhere, Chumbley related how one member described a fertility ritual the group performed "only three initiatic generations back"; this took place around the time of the wheat harvest and entailed one member sitting astride a stick that was either forked or topped with a horse's head, upon which they envisioned nocturnal flying among the fields.<sup>32</sup> It is not possible at this juncture to say whether such a practice ever occurred or not, although even if viewed only as a story, it provides evidence for the group's desire to depict itself as being rooted in the agrarian life of a rural community.

The second of these lineages was allegedly hereditary in nature and stemmed from an area in southern or western Wales—likely in one of the modern counties of Neath Port Talbot, Swansea, Carmarthenshire, or Pembrokeshire.<sup>33</sup> Chumbley and Howard stated that it could be traced back to the 1880s or 1890s,<sup>34</sup> while later Cultus leader Daniel Schulke characterised its practices as a folk-magical syncretism between the veneration of Christian saints and the symbolism of the witches' sabbath.<sup>35</sup> Chumbley showed a text that reportedly belonged to this lineage to Hutton, who noted that, on "face value", it appeared to represent a magical tradition predating Wicca. This text contained Latin incantations which Chumbley claimed had been passed down from a mother to a daughter circa 1950. Hutton believed the text was the product of two authors: one unfamiliar with Latin grammar but using an English-Latin dictionary, the other "an accomplished Latinist with a real ear for the music of the language and of its classical metres; and a talent for plagiarism". This individual, Hutton identified, had assembled four incantatory poems using text from the writings of Virgil and Petronius and a medieval poem, "The Cock's Crow is the Herald of Hope".<sup>36</sup> Chumbley may have been referring to this group when he stated that he knew of a family who had collated classical material, "such as might be useful in conjurations of the old gods", as part of their interest in occultism. He added that the family's daughter adopted this material when becoming involved in "more modern witchcraft"—possibly a reference to Wicca.<sup>37</sup>

Although the texts presented to Hutton suggest a broadly Christian orientation to these groups, Chumbley commented that at least one drew upon the diabolist imagery of early modern witchcraft, namely the witches' sabbath. He suggested that many esoteric groups adopted diabolist elements from at least 1890, as evidence citing the private records of groups he claimed were active in Essex, Derbyshire, and Shropshire.<sup>38</sup> There is nothing inherently improbable about this. After all, Romanticist writers like Byron and Shelley had positively reassessed Lucifer and growing literacy allowed Luciferian ideas

---

Praxis in Popular Magic (*Richmond Vista: Three Hands Press, 2012*), 52.

<sup>29</sup> The Cornish Ros an Bucca tradition of "Traditional Witchcraft" promoted by Gemma Gary, for instance, espouses a belief in a spirit force animating the land known as the "Red Serpent" or "Sarf Rûth", see Gary, *Traditional Witchcraft: A Cornish Book of Ways* (Penzance: Troy Books, 2008), 8. In Sweden, Thomas Karlsson's Dragon Rouge group operated from at least 1990, see Kennet Granholm, "Dragon Rouge: Left-Hand Path Magic with a Neopagan Flavour," *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 12, no. 1 (2012): 133.

<sup>30</sup> On *Le dragon rouge* see Owen Davies, *Grimoires: A History of Magic Books* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 104–106.

<sup>31</sup> Jacqueline Simpson, *British Dragons* (London: Batsford, 1980).

<sup>32</sup> Chumbley, "A Scattering of Dust from the Wing of the Moth," *Chaos International* 19 (Autumn 1995), republished in Chumbley, *Opuscula Magica II*, 68.

<sup>33</sup> Chumbley informed Hutton that the group was based in south Wales, see Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*, 307; conversely Howard insisted that its location was west Wales, see Howard, *Children of Cain*, 186 and personal communication, 22 February 2012. The two areas are however continuous.

<sup>34</sup> Chumbley, "Initiation and Access," in *Opuscula Magica I*, 119; Howard, *Children of Cain*, 186.

<sup>35</sup> Schulke, personal communication, 2 September 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*, 307.

<sup>37</sup> Chumbley, "What is Traditional Craft?," reprinted in *Opuscula Magica I*, 85.

<sup>38</sup> Andrew D. Chumbley, "The Magic of History: Some Considerations," in *Hands of Apostasy: Essays on Traditional Witchcraft*, ed. Michael Howard and Daniel A. Schulke (Richmond Vista, CA: Three Hands Press, 2014), 18–19.

to filter more widely among British society.<sup>39</sup> The nineteenth-century Society of Horsemen and the Society of Toadmen both incorporated diabolist and Satanic elements into their magical practices.<sup>40</sup> Even the Theosophical Society launched a magazine titled *Lucifer* in 1887,<sup>41</sup> while a few decades later Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) was playing with diabolist iconography in his Thelemic practices and publications.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, it must be cautioned that simply because a lineage may have late nineteenth or early twentieth-century origins, that does not automatically mean that diabolist elements were present from that point. They could be later additions.

There are certainly voices within Britain’s occult milieu sceptical of Chumbley’s claims regarding his initiations into older folk-magical traditions: one individual characterised it as “pure Wishcraft!”<sup>43</sup> This is to be expected. Wicca in particular has repeatedly seen practitioners alleging hereditary traditions, providing “grandmother tales” that are often demonstrably untrue.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Gerald Gardner’s claims to have obtained Wicca from a pre-existing New Forest coven have come under significant scrutiny, with some scholars suggesting the coven never existed.<sup>45</sup> One could pose the question as to how likely it would be that a teenager in rural Essex would have the opportunity to encounter not one but two occultists with links to separate folk-magical traditions with late nineteenth/early twentieth-century origins. Then again, it is not unusual for people to build networks of like-minded folk in their locality. Howard stated that McNess was also aware of other folk-magical groups in Essex and Suffolk, implying a folk-magical network across Eastern England that Chumbley could have tapped into during the latter half of the 1980s.<sup>46</sup>

The evidence Chumbley presented to Hutton is compelling, but not unequivocal. His claims could only be confirmed if the Cultus revealed further information which historians could verify. Towards the end of his life, Chumbley expressed frustration at how the need for secrecy prevented him from revealing “names, dates and exact locations” pertaining to these occult groups. As he added, “I can only be content to whisper in the wings of academic discourse that there is much more to the story of modern witchcraft than meets the eye”.<sup>47</sup>

## The Cultus and the *Azoëtia*: 1991 to 1992

The Sabbatic Craft is a name for a nameless faith. It is a term used to describe an ongoing tradition of sorcerous wisdom, an initiatory path proceeding from both immediate vision and historical succession. In a historical sense, the Sabbatic Craft is usually set against the background of both rural folk-magic, the so-called Cunning Craft, and the learned practise of European high ritual magic.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Peter A. Schock, *Romantic Satanism: Myth and the Historical Moment in Blake, Shelley, and Byron* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Lee Morgan, “The Romantic Age Roots of Traditional Witchcraft,” in *Hands of Apostasy: Essays on Traditional Witchcraft*, ed. Michael Howard and Daniel A. Schulke (Richmond Vista, CA: Three Hands Press, 2014), 331–356.

<sup>40</sup> Russell Lyon, *The Quest for the Original Horse Whisperers* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2003), 34–35; George Ewart Evans, *The Pattern Under the Plow: Aspects of the Folk-Life of East Anglia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971 [1966]), 218–221.

<sup>41</sup> Ruben van Luijk, *Children of Lucifer: The Origins of Modern Religious Satanism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 145.

<sup>42</sup> Asbjørn Dyrendal, “Satan and the Beast: The Influence of Aleister Crowley on Modern Satanism,” in *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism*, ed. Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 370.

<sup>43</sup> Personal communication, 2012.

<sup>44</sup> Alex Sanders and Jessie Bell (Lady Sheba) are perhaps the best-known examples. Chumbley commented that self-initiates sometimes “suddenly ‘invent’ a history for their own legitimization; curious tales of hereditary teaching or of meetings with nameless strangers may occur.” See “Golden Chain and Lonely Road,” republished in *Opuscula Magica I*, 102.

<sup>45</sup> Namely Aidan A. Kelly and Chas S. Clifton.

<sup>46</sup> Howard, personal communication, 22 February 2012.

<sup>47</sup> Andrew D. Chumbley, “The Magic of History: Some Considerations,” in *Hands of Apostasy: Essays on Traditional Witchcraft*, ed. Michael Howard and Daniel A. Schulke (Richmond Vista, CA: Three Hands Press, 2014), 21.

<sup>48</sup> Andrew D. Chumbley, “Cultus Sabbati: Dream, Providence and Magistry,” *The Cauldron* 104. Republished in Chumbley, *Opuscula Magica Volume II*, 97.

Such was the manner in which Chumbley defined his Sabbatic tradition. He presented it as a combination of practical spell-craft—such as hexing and healing—with a mystical search for gnosis, generating a syncretic blend he called “Transcendental Sorcery”.<sup>49</sup> Although placing little stress on it in his writings, Chumbley referenced a “Godhead”, suggesting that it is encounters with this entity which constitute gnosis.<sup>50</sup> More common in his work are references to spirits, associated with both landscape locations and deceased individuals. Rather than regarding these as Jungian archetypes or symbols, Chumbley portrayed many in a literal manner, for instance referring to “the Elder Gods” as beings which “existed prior to the god-forms fashioned by man”.<sup>51</sup>

Chumbley’s Sabbatic Craft was Luciferian, giving emphasis to Biblical figures like Lucifer, Lilith, and Cain.<sup>52</sup> It drew upon Jewish mysticism by regarding Cain not as the child of Adam and Eve but of Lilith and Samael, and thus as the spiritual progenitor of all subsequent witches; the latter are described as having inherited the “witch-blood” and exhibiting the “Mark of Cain”.<sup>53</sup> In seeking to “convey a gnosis of Luciferian self-liberation”, Chumbley noted, his tradition “employs demonological names and imagery”, none more obviously than the idea of the witches’ sabbath.<sup>54</sup> Of sufficient importance to give the Sabbatic tradition its name, the witches’ sabbath is seen as existing on an astral level, where it can be accessed through a liminal state between waking and dreaming. Once there, the Sabbatic practitioner can commune with the souls of other magicians, as well as “a vast array of spirits, faeries and otherworldly beings”.<sup>55</sup> As Elwing notes, attempts to induce dream-like altered states of consciousness and the interpretation of dreams are “arguably one of the most central aspects of the ritual praxis of the Sabbatic Craft”.<sup>56</sup> One of the ways in which these dream-states are sought is through the entheogenic use of drugs, which Sabbatic Crafters associate with the witches’ salves described in early modern texts.<sup>57</sup>

Although the Sabbatic Craft can be seen as the wider tradition espoused by Chumbley, he referred to his lineaged group as the Cultus Sabbati. He characterised this as the “name adopted for purposes of communication and identity by an otherwise nameless body of Traditional Craft initiates”, a description echoed by Howard in his statement that “Cultus Sabbati” was a “generic name in the outer world for several traditional lineages and covines [that Chumbley] was initiated into”.<sup>58</sup> According to Schulke, this name was adopted at Halloween 1991, at which point it was used by various practitioners Chumbley was working with, including his partner, known within the group as Soror Illithiya Shemhiya (Soror I. S.).<sup>59</sup>

The Cultus refused entry to applicants requesting admission. Membership was by invite only, with the group deciding who to approach through the observance of “signs and portents”, a practice reportedly adopted from the Red Snake tradition.<sup>60</sup> Those invited to join had to first enter the group’s “outer court”, the Companie of the Serpent Cross, and if found suitable were invited to join the “inner court”

<sup>49</sup> Michael Howard and Robert Fitzgerald, “An Interview with Andrew D. Chumbley,” *The Cauldron* (February 2002). Republished in Chumbley, *Opuscula Magica I*, 129.

<sup>50</sup> Chumbley, “Golden Chain,” republished in Chumbley, *Opuscula Magica I*, 110.

<sup>51</sup> Fitzgerald and Chumbley, “Sabbatic Cultus,” republished in *Opuscula Magica II*, 109.

<sup>52</sup> Gregorius thought that despite exhibiting “a strong Luciferian element”, Chumbley’s Sabbatic Craft was not “pure Luciferianism,” see “Luciferian Witchcraft,” 242.

<sup>53</sup> Elwing, “Where the Three Roads Meet,” 258.

<sup>54</sup> Chumbley, “Cultus Sabbati: Provenance, Dream, and Magistry,” *The Cauldron* 104 (2002), republished in *Opuscula Magica II*, 99.

<sup>55</sup> Chumbley, “Cultus Sabbati,” in *Opuscula Magica II*, 98.

<sup>56</sup> Elwing, “Where the Three Roads Meet,” 264–271.

<sup>57</sup> Chumbley, “Golden Chain,” republished in *Opuscula Magica I*, 106–109; Elwing, “Where the Three Roads Meet,” 267.

<sup>58</sup> Chumbley, “What is Traditional Craft?,” republished in *Opuscula Magica I*, 73; Howard, personal communication, 22 February 2012.

<sup>59</sup> Schulke, personal communication, 2 September 2018. Harding’s outsider observations of this period are recounted in Power, *Pagans and Witches*, 46. Illithiya Shemhiya’s magical name within the Cultus is revealed in Andrew D. Chumbley, *Khiazmos: A Book Without Pages* (Hercules, CA: Xoanon, 2017), 86.

<sup>60</sup> Fitzgerald and Chumbley, “Sabbatic Cultus,” republished in *Opuscula Magica II*, 102; Chumbley, “The Golden Chain,” republished in *Opuscula Magica I*, 93.

of the Cultus proper.<sup>61</sup> Within the group were a hierarchy of positions; under the leadership of the Magister were the positions of Elder, Maid, Priest, Priestess, Summoner, Seeress, Verdelet, Chronicler, and Ward.<sup>62</sup> The Cultus contained both men and women, being non-discriminative on the grounds of gender, sexual orientation, or religion.<sup>63</sup> The number of initiates has never been revealed, although Evans speculated that it may never have exceeded 20; as he noted, the Cultus has instead been “very influential in a much broader sense”.<sup>64</sup>

For the historian, a question of central interest is to what extent Chumbley’s Sabbatic Craft continued the beliefs and practices of older magical traditions and to what extent it represents a novel development. On this issue, one of Chumbley’s comments is particularly pertinent:

I can make no claims that this is what my initiator practised or indeed her own teacher. What I do claim is that each generation in our tradition has maintained certain teachings and principles of magical practice, combining the cultural elements of their time and place according to need and deposition.<sup>65</sup>

There are clearly other influences evident in Chumbley’s works. Perhaps the strongest is the work of the occult artist Austin Osman Spare (1886–1956), an Englishman whom Chumbley described as a “direct cultic precursor” to his Sabbatic tradition.<sup>66</sup> Chumbley appeared to accept the claim that, as a child, Spare was instructed in a witchcraft tradition by an old woman named Yeld or Yelda Patterson, a potentially spurious story which Spare propagated in later life.<sup>67</sup> One example of this influence can be seen in the Black Eagle Working, a ritual conceived by Chumbley and Gavin Semple which revolved around the eponymous spirit from Spare’s work.<sup>68</sup> Chumbley had little time for cultural essentialism when it came to magic, stating that one could find “pieces of magical lore and belief from many disparate times and places, but all [could be] brought to function within the trans-historical arena of the sacred dimension”.<sup>69</sup> This eclecticism allowed the Cultus to draw on a disparate array of traditions, including Sufism, Thelema, Vodou, Yezidism, Gnosticism, Tantra, Arabic folk-magic, and the mythologies of several ancient cultures, including those of the Egyptians, Sumerians, and Aztecs.<sup>70</sup> Even Chumbley’s magical name—Alogos Dhul’qarnen Khidir—reflects this interest in non-European traditions. Despite this eclecticism, he appeared to take little interest in England’s home-grown witchcraft tradition, Wicca. According to Howard, when he first encountered Chumbley in 1992 the latter had not read anything by Gardner or Doreen Valiente.<sup>71</sup>

While Chumbley’s writings make his influences and interests apparent, it remains difficult to determine what portion of the Sabbatic Craft derives from older British magical lineages; to satisfactorily answer this question requires greater knowledge of these traditions than is available. A better understanding may be grasped through comparisons with parallels elsewhere in the history of occultism.

<sup>61</sup> Howard, personal communication, 26 February 2012.

<sup>62</sup> Chumbley, “Golden Chain,” republished in *Opuscula Magica I*, 95.

<sup>63</sup> Howard, personal communication, 22 February 2012; Schulke, personal communication, 2 September 2018.

<sup>64</sup> Dave Evans, personal communication, 30 October 2012. In Cultus Sabbati, *Eikostos*, 85–86 it is revealed that each of the 888 copies of *The Psalter of Cain* anthology were “collated by hand by brethren of the Cultus, some 11,000 signatures in all.” The number 11,000 divided by 888 brings us to 12.3, suggesting there may have been about 12 Cultus members in 2012.

<sup>65</sup> Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*, 308.

<sup>66</sup> Chumbley, “Gnosis for the Flesh Eternal,” in *Opuscula Magica II*, 52. This is a revised version of an article first published as “Wisdom for the New Flesh,” *Starfire* 1, no. 5 (December 1994).

<sup>67</sup> Chumbley, “Golden Chain,” republished in Chumbley, *Opuscula Magica I*, 100; Chumbley, “The Cult of the Divine Artist,” *The Cauldron* 77 (August 1995), republished in *Opuscula Magica II*, 75. On the claims regarding Yelda Patterson, see Phil Baker, *Austin Osman Spare: The Life and Legend of London’s Lost Artist* (London: Strange Attractor Press, 2011), 11–12, 239–240; William Wallace, *The Catalpha Monographs: A Critical Survey of Austin Osman Spare* (London: Jerusalem Press, 2015), 35–45.

<sup>68</sup> Fitzgerald, “The Sabbatic Cultus,” republished in Chumbley, *Opuscula Magica II*, 109; Chumbley, “Golden Chain,” republished in Chumbley, *Opuscula Magica I*, 100; Semple, “The Black Eagle Working with Andrew” in Power, *Pagans and Witches*, 47.

<sup>69</sup> Andrew D. Chumbley, “What is Traditional Craft?,” republished in *Opuscula Magica I*, 74.

<sup>70</sup> Howard, *Children of Cain*, 187.

<sup>71</sup> Howard, personal communication, 23 February 2012.

Gardner was clearly influenced to a significant extent by Solomonic magic and Thelema, but Gardnerian Wicca was fundamentally his own. The same is perhaps true of Chumbley's Sabbatic Craft. It may well owe much to a lineage stretching back to earlier British esoteric groups while at the same time representing something genuinely new.

Chumbley described the Sabbatic Craft as one manifestation of "Traditional Witchcraft", "Traditional Craft", "Old Craft", or "Wytcha". As argued elsewhere, a varied array of occultists embraced the term "Traditional Witchcraft" in the 1990s and 2000s, all seeking to claim the appellation of "witchcraft" while rejecting associations with Wicca—despite the fact that many of their traditions evidently derived from the Wiccan model.<sup>72</sup> "Traditional Witchcraft" is thus a problematic term for scholars of religion to use in any analytical sense, but it was a term with great emic value to Chumbley. For him, it was difficult to define but could generally be applied to "pagan magical and religious practices which have been passed down from at least before the beginning of the twentieth century", namely those of Britain and Northern Europe.<sup>73</sup> He identified with these older currents to such an extent that he self-described as a "Cunning Man".<sup>74</sup>

Chumbley was interested in other "Traditional Craft" groups, and stated that he publicly revealed the Cultus' existence to help Traditional Witches discover each other, communicate, and cross-fertilise.<sup>75</sup> Howard added that through publicly acknowledging the Cultus' existence, Chumbley encountered two further esoteric groups, one on the Welsh Border and the other in the West Country, which were subsequently "incorporated into the Cultus with the permission of their surviving lineage holders".<sup>76</sup> When in the Nevern area of Pembrokeshire in 2000, Chumbley later noted, he learned of a family strongly associated with "witching power", although it is not clear if he contacted this family himself.<sup>77</sup> It is perhaps one of these groups that Chumbley referred to when he stated that, of the two Welsh folk-magical traditions he was aware of, one described itself as Christian.<sup>78</sup> There were clearly other self-described "Traditional Witches" active in Britain promoting ideas similar to his own; Nigel Aldcroft Jackson's "Via Nocturna" (The Nocturnal Path) placed similar emphasis on oneiric journeying to the witches' sabbath.<sup>79</sup> Jackson stated that Chumbley contacted him after reading his 1994 book *Call of the Horned Piper* and that they remained in amiable communication during the mid-1990s.<sup>80</sup>

Chumbley's Sabbatic tradition drew heavily upon early modern witchcraft imagery and legitimised itself through appeals to the magico-religious practitioners of past centuries. However, unlike the early Wiccans, Chumbley did not claim an unbroken lineage from the distant past via the (discredited) witch-cult hypothesis made famous by Margaret Murray (1863–1963). Instead, he portrayed the "Witch-Cult" of which he was a part as an "atavistic tradition" stretching back through time in a non-physical, supernatural sense.<sup>81</sup> He explained this by drawing a distinction between the "history of magic", which occurred according to the linear progression of time and which could be subjected to academic enquiry, and "magical history", which took place in an atemporal "magical time". In his view, "magical history" allowed him to gain knowledge of the past through contacts with "the spirits of well, hill and valley"

<sup>72</sup> Ethan Doyle White, "The Creation of 'Traditional Witchcraft': Paganism, Luciferianism, and the Quest for Esoteric Legitimacy," *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism*, 18, no. 2 (2018): 188–216.

<sup>73</sup> Chumbley, "What is Traditional Craft?," *The Cauldron* 81 (August 1996). Republished in *Opuscula Magica I*, 69, 76.

<sup>74</sup> Fitzgerald and Chumbley, "Sabbatic Cultus," republished in *Opuscula Magica II*, 101.

<sup>75</sup> Howard and Fitzgerald, "An Interview," republished in *Opuscula Magica I*, 131.

<sup>76</sup> Howard, personal communication, 22 February 2012.

<sup>77</sup> Chumbley, *Leaper Between*, 25.

<sup>78</sup> Andrew D. Chumbley, "The Magic of History: Some Considerations," in *Hands of Apostasy: Essays on Traditional Witchcraft*, ed. Michael Howard and Daniel A. Schulke (Richmond Vista, CA: Three Hands Press, 2014), 21.

<sup>79</sup> Chumbley discussed Jackson's work briefly in "What is Traditional Craft?," republished in *Opuscula Magica I*, 71–72. See also Nigel Aldcroft Jackson, *Call of the Horned Piper* (Chieveley: Capall Bann, 1994); Nigel Jackson, *Masks of Misrule: The Horned God and his Cult in Europe* (Chieveley: Capall Bann, 1996).

<sup>80</sup> Nigel Jackson, IP 86.138.75.103, comment at "Talk: Andrew D. Chumbley," Wikipedia, 22 December 2007, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Talk:Andrew\\_D.\\_Chumbley&diff=179563788&oldid=162962193](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Talk:Andrew_D._Chumbley&diff=179563788&oldid=162962193). Jackson mentioned Chumbley in the Acknowledgments of *Masks of Misrule*, 1.

<sup>81</sup> Chumbley, "Magick is Not For All," *Chaos International* 12 (1992). Republished in *Opuscula Magica II*, 19.

as well as through “direct spirit-discourse” with long-deceased practitioners like the Essex cunning men James Murrell (c.1785–1860) and George Pickingill (c.1816–1909). He acknowledged that this was not something historians could quantify but insisted on it as an article of faith.<sup>82</sup>

Chumbley took his first steps towards becoming a public figure within the occultist milieu when he wrote a short article for a 1990 edition of the *SKOOB Occult Review*, a magazine issued by London bookseller Skoob Books. He followed this with a series of articles in *Chaos International*, a chaos magick publication launched in 1986. Over the coming years, his articles appeared in other esoteric magazines, among them *Pagan News*, *The Occult Observer*, *Talking Stick*, *Starfire*, *Widdershins: A Volatile Journal of Magic*, and—most prominently—*The Cauldron*. However, Chumbley’s real notability came about in 1992, when he was 24 years old. That year saw the publication of *Azoëtia: A Grimoire of the Sabbatic Craft*, a book illustrated with his evocative symbolist ink drawings that was designed as the first volume in the *Trimagisterion* trilogy. Chumbley had been working on the work since his teenage years,<sup>83</sup> and prior to its publication had authored four (unpublished) grimoires.<sup>84</sup> Whether he approached any publishers is unknown, but ultimately he self-published it in paperback form under his own imprint, Xoanon; he chose the ancient Greek term because it symbolised “the process of reification of spirit into matter, the translation of unseen ‘texts’ to visible books”.<sup>85</sup> Chumbley was never wealthy, at various points relying on state benefits, but financed the grimoire’s publication with an inheritance from a deceased relative.<sup>86</sup> The book was co-designed by Chumbley and Ian Read,<sup>87</sup> a neo-folk musician who then headed the U.K. branch of the chaos magickal Illuminates of Thanateros (IOT). The book established Chumbley’s reputation in the occult scene, where it became—as Gregorius noted—“something of a modern classic”.<sup>88</sup>

## Growing Visibility: 1993 to 1999

Not long after the *Azoëtia*’s publication, in 1993 Chumbley became involved in the Typhonian Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO), forging an affiliation that lasted until 1999.<sup>89</sup> The Typhonian OTO—since renamed the Typhonian Order—is a Thelemic organisation, adhering to the religion founded by Crowley. Accepting the Thelemic premise that the twentieth century marked the birth of the Aeon of Horus, the Typhonians branched off into more unorthodox forms of the religion by accepting the innovations of Crowley’s last pupil, Kenneth Grant (1924–2011). Grant was one of the best-known figures on the British occult scene during the 1990s, having attracted attention for his relationships with both Crowley and Spare and for his Typhonian Trilogies, a book series published since 1972. Chumbley would likely have been enticed by Grant’s connection to Spare and by the eldritch content of his books, something which chimed with Chumbley’s own “dark spirituality”.<sup>90</sup>

Chumbley became involved in the Typhonian OTO after sending Grant a copy of the *Azoëtia*. Impressed by the grimoire, Grant struck up a correspondence, from which the pair agreed to affiliate their respective orders. Together they created the Ku Sebbitu, an occult lodge through which Typhonian Thelemites and Sabbatic Crafters could collaborate on specific magical workings. To enable this, Chum-

---

<sup>82</sup> Chumbley, “Magic of History,” 20.

<sup>83</sup> Howard, personal communication, 23 February 2012.

<sup>84</sup> Schulke, personal communication, 2 September 2018.

<sup>85</sup> Howard and Fitzgerald, “An Interview,” republished in *Opuscula Magica I*, 138.

<sup>86</sup> ‘Jennifer,’ personal communication, 5 March 2013.

<sup>87</sup> Cultus Sabbati, *Eikostos*, 15.

<sup>88</sup> Gregorius, “Luciferian Witchcraft,” 241.

<sup>89</sup> Evans, *History of British Magick*, 339.

<sup>90</sup> On Grant and his Typhonian Thelema, see Evans, *History of British Magick*, 284–329. The term “dark spirituality” is borrowed from Kennet Granholm, “The Left-Hand Path and Post-Satanism: The Temple of Set and the Evolution of Satanism,” in *The Devil’s Party: Satanism in Modernity*, ed. Per Faxneld and Jesper Aa. Petersen (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 212.

bley joined Grant's order, declaring his acceptance of Crowley's Law of Thelema.<sup>91</sup> In 1996, Chumbley stated that although he had studied Crowley's work and that it was not wrong for others to call him a Thelemite, he did not personally do so.<sup>92</sup> Grant himself did not take part in the Ku Sebbitu's workings, but was kept abreast of its activities by his friend and initiate, Michael Staley, who was appointed joint lodge master alongside Chumbley.<sup>93</sup> In 1998, Cultus member Robert Fitzgerald—who had a background in Gardnerian Wicca and Thelema—launched a Ku Sebbitu lodge in Berkeley, California, helping to establish the Cultus' presence in the United States.<sup>94</sup> In 1999, a personal disagreement between Staley and Chumbley led to the latter's withdrawal from the Thelemite order and the dissolution of the union, with the Ku Sebbitu continuing purely as a Cultus Sabbati adjunct.<sup>95</sup>

Grant was not the only prominent name in the British occult scene to receive a copy of the *Azoëtia*. Michael Howard, a prolific writer on occult topics who had edited *The Cauldron* magazine since 1976, received a review copy in 1992. A correspondence ensued, before Chumbley invited Howard to meet him and his partner (later wife), forging a friendship that lasted a decade.<sup>96</sup> In 1999, Howard—who had a background in Luciferian magic and Gardnerian Wicca—was initiated into the Cultus.<sup>97</sup> He later recalled a sense of “coming home” during his initiation, believing that it marked the “completion of a cycle” that began when he befriended the Luciferian astrologer and ceremonial magician Madeline Montalban (1910–1982) in 1967. For Howard, joining the Cultus offered “the fulfilment of a dream of combining Luciferian gnosis with real traditional witchcraft”.<sup>98</sup> In 1995, Chumbley began a correspondence with the California-based editor of *Widdershins*, Daniel A. Schulke, a herbalist involved in Thelemic and Afro-Caribbean practices. Chumbley introduced Schulke to Fitzgerald in 1998, after which Schulke joined Fitzgerald's four-person Companie of the Serpent Cross lodge in Berkeley. In the summer of 2000 and again in 2001, Schulke travelled to England; on the first trip, he underwent a Rite of Dedication and on the second experienced full initiation into the Cultus.<sup>99</sup> Chumbley and his wife then visited the United States in late 2002.<sup>100</sup>

Howard noted that Chumbley could appear to strangers as being “aloof, serious and intense to the point of obsession”, an impression generated by the fact that he did not suffer fools gladly and was contemptuous of “charlatans and mountebanks”. At the same time, Howard added that Chumbley had a “mischievous and sometimes quite wicked sense of humour and a love of life that was infectious”.<sup>101</sup> A similar impression was painted by Semple, who stated that Chumbley had “an enthusiastic willingness to share his knowledge”, adding that “his ready humour (oft times dark) and laughter were as infectious as his wisdom”.<sup>102</sup> That dark sense of humour is abundantly clear from the anecdotes of those who knew him. One noted that when a street collector from the Children in Need charity asked for a donation from Chumbley, the latter responded sarcastically: “Children in Need? Let them bleed!”<sup>103</sup> Another of those who worked with Chumbley's group during the 1990s stated that he could be “ruthless” and “very controlling” in his magical operations, and that he “had put many people's noses out of place” with his actions.<sup>104</sup> Schulke acknowledged this, but noted that this aspect of Chumbley “was rarely displayed, and was usually richly deserved by those who received it”.<sup>105</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Michael Staley, personal communication, 23 February 2012.

<sup>92</sup> Fitzgerald and Chumbley, “Sabbatic Cultus,” republished in *Opuscula Magica II*, 107.

<sup>93</sup> Staley, personal communication, 23 February 2012.

<sup>94</sup> Schulke, personal communication, 24 September 2017.

<sup>95</sup> Staley, personal communication, 23 February 2012.

<sup>96</sup> Michael Howard, “A Seeker's Journey,” *The Cauldron* 135 (February 2010), 11.

<sup>97</sup> Howard, “A Seeker's Journey,” 11; Howard, personal communication, 22 February 2012.

<sup>98</sup> Michael Howard, *The Book of Fallen Angels* (Milverton: Capall Bann, 2003), 13.

<sup>99</sup> Schulke, personal communication, 24 September 2017, 2 September 2018.

<sup>100</sup> Cultus Sabbati, *Eikostos*, 45.

<sup>101</sup> Howard, *Children of Cain*, 190.

<sup>102</sup> Semple in Power, *Pagans and Witches*, 47.

<sup>103</sup> ‘Jennifer,’ personal communication, 5 March 2013.

<sup>104</sup> ‘Arachne,’ personal communication, 21 April 2017.

<sup>105</sup> Schulke, personal communication, 2 September 2018.



There was also a compassionate side to Chumbley's personality. One occultist recalled that Chumbley had been "particularly, significantly and memorably very kind" to them, offering them help when they were mired in family problems. They noted that he exhibited a "strong, intuitive, sense of justice and he was quick to get his hands dirty to help out if someone was facing injustice and distress". In their case, he offered to curse a perpetrator who had harmed them and provided them with a charm to aid their eloquence when testifying in court.<sup>106</sup> One of Chumbley's correspondents noted that although he was "initially confrontational", she later found him to be a "warm, witty, talented, humble, very busy but quite shy individual" who was "very giving and very protective".<sup>107</sup> Evans explained to me that while he had encountered many occultists, including members of the Cultus, whom he regarded as frauds, Chumbley was not among them. Rather, he believed that Chumbley "had a lot of something, and it was very compelling", describing him as "genuinely honest, interested and sincere".<sup>108</sup> Graham King, former proprietor of the Museum of Witchcraft in Cornwall, similarly thought Chumbley to be "a very pleasant, polite, young gentleman".<sup>109</sup>

During the 1990s, Chumbley occasionally attended Talking Stick, a fortnightly esoteric moot in a central London pub.<sup>110</sup> He also travelled further afield, attending events like Mogg Morgan's Thelemic Symposium; Chumbley first appeared at the Oxford event in the early 1990s to sell copies of the *Azoëtia*, although returned at least twice to give well-attended ritual workshops.<sup>111</sup> Locally, he continued to frequent the Prince of Orange and it was there in the first half of the decade that Harding introduced him to John Power (b.1949).<sup>112</sup> Power (Shri Vilasanath Maharaj) was the head of a Tantric order, the Uttara Kaula, having been appointed its leader by Lawrence Amos Miles (Shri Gurudev Dadaji Mahendranath, 1911–1991), an Englishman who studied the Uttara Kaula under Shri Pagala Baba of Ranchi, Bihar.<sup>113</sup> Power established a friendship with Chumbley that lasted for several years. He thought the younger man "the most gifted magician around at the time" and "a talented writer and creative draughtsman", but was concerned by what he saw as Chumbley's fondness for collecting grandiose titles.<sup>114</sup> In November 1994, he initiated Chumbley into the Uttara Kaula, although the latter never proceeded past the first of the nine levels.<sup>115</sup> Chumbley seemed particularly interested by what he described as the "Ophidian energies" utilised within the Uttara Kaula, linking these to similar concepts in his Sabbatic tradition.<sup>116</sup> Another of Chumbley's contacts in the Tantric milieu was the Norwegian Nicholaj de Mattos Frisvold (b.1970), whom he met in 1992. Frisvold had been initiated into the Nath tradition of Tantra through the Arcane and Magickal Order of the Knights of Shambhala (AMOOKOS), and circa 1998 exchanged its *diksha* (initiation) with Chumbley for that of the Uttara Kaula. After Frisvold relocated to Brazil in 2003, he operated a cell of the Companie of the Serpent Cross between 2004 and 2006.<sup>117</sup>

There have also been recurrent rumours that Chumbley was involved in the IOT, and Evans related that in a 2003 conversation, Chumbley acknowledged having formerly been a member.<sup>118</sup> This, however, has yet to be independently corroborated. Peter Carroll, who founded the order and remained active in

<sup>106</sup> Personal communication, May 2012. This individual was not a Cultus Sabbati member.

<sup>107</sup> Shé D'Montford, personal communication, 17 and 18 October 2017.

<sup>108</sup> Evans, personal communication, 30 October 2012.

<sup>109</sup> Graham King, personal communication, 15 February 2013.

<sup>110</sup> Steve Wilson, personal communication, 29 March 2012.

<sup>111</sup> Mogg Morgan, personal communication, 25 February 2013.

<sup>112</sup> Power, *Pagans and Witches*, 30; 'Jennifer,' personal communication, 5 March 2013.

<sup>113</sup> Djurdjevic, *India and the Occult*, 111–112.

<sup>114</sup> Power, *Pagans and Witches*, 30, 31, 32.

<sup>115</sup> Power, personal communication, 25 February and 27 March 2013.

<sup>116</sup> Fitzgerald and Chumbley, "Sabbatic Cultus," republished in Chumbley, *Opuscula Magica II*, 103.

<sup>117</sup> Nicholaj de Mattos Frisvold, personal communication, 27 and 29 May 2013 and 15 October 2017. For more on Frisvold see Geir Uldal and Geir Winje, "Occultism in Norway," in *Western Esotericism in Scandinavia*, eds. Henrik Bogdan and Olav Hammer (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 337–339; on AMOOKOS see Djurdjevic, *India and the Occult*, 120–123.

<sup>118</sup> Evans, *History of British Magick*, 214. This was presumably at the Friends of the Museum of Witchcraft event, and it is possible Evans misunderstood what Chumbley told him.

it until the mid-1990s, does not recall Chumbley's involvement.<sup>119</sup> Similarly, the Cultus has no evidence suggesting Chumbley was an IOT member and Schulke notes that in his experience, Chumbley was disdainful of chaos magick.<sup>120</sup> Chumbley contributed to *Chaos Magick International* in the early 1990s and the IOT's leader Ian Read assisted in designing the *Azoëtia*, so there may have been an opportunity to join at that point, but if he did then it appears that his membership was neither deep nor long-lasting and may have left him with the negative view of chaos magick that he later displayed.

Following the culmination of the *Azoëtia*, in 1992 Chumbley began work on the second instalment of his *Trimagisterion: The Dragon-Book of Essex*. To accomplish this, he underwent "the Fourteen Great Ordeals", a series of magical workings with a strong ophidian focus that were part of a Sabbatic subsystem he referred to as "the Crooked Path". He was assisted by four members of the Column of the Crooked Path, an inner cell of Cultus members whose membership alternated over the years. Ten spiral-bound copies of the grimoire were produced in 1997 for those who had taken part in the rite; it was republished for a wider readership in 2014.<sup>121</sup> Meanwhile, Chumbley created a stand-alone grimoire titled *Qutub: The Point*, published by Xoanon in collaboration with Fulgur in 1995. *Qutub* represented the first of Chumbley's "specialised adjuncts", grimoires independent of his *Trimagisterion*.<sup>122</sup> The grimoire displayed Chumbley's interest in Near Eastern traditions like Mandaeanism, Yezidism, and Sufism, with Gregorius suggesting that Chumbley's understanding of the latter two derived largely from the work of the idiosyncratic Sufi teacher Idries Shah (1924–1996).<sup>123</sup> Chumbley's second-published "specialised adjunct" was *One: The Grimoire of the Golden Toad*, released by Xoanon as a limited edition of 77 copies in 2000. The grimoire detailed Chumbley's performance of the toad-bone rite—a ritual practised by the nineteenth-century Toadmen—over the course of a lunar month in the summer of 1999.<sup>124</sup> Chumbley claimed that he had first heard of the rite from the "teacher of my own initiator", after which he read up on it in the work of George Ewart Evans and Lilius Rider Haggard.<sup>125</sup> He followed this grimoire with an essay discussing the historical development of the rite, published in *The Cauldron* in 2001. Although not appearing in a peer-reviewed outlet, the essay reflected Chumbley's growing interest in scholarship.<sup>126</sup>

## Chumbley's Final Years: 2001 to 2004

Complementing his activities as a magician, Chumbley pursued the academic study of religion, completing an undergraduate degree in the Study of Religions and Tibetan at central London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in 2001. Here, he devoted his dissertation to the evidence, particularly from Sufi and Tibetan Buddhist contexts, for mystics embarking on their spiritual path following oneiric initiatory experiences.<sup>127</sup> Chumbley's teachers considered him an excellent student and regularly gave his essays high firsts; they agreed he could proceed to a PhD programme without the intermediate master's degree.<sup>128</sup> He embarked on his doctoral research soon after, giving his thesis the provisional title of "Dream incubation as meditation between the human and divine: A study of oneirogenic ritual in ancient to early medieval Graeco-Roman and Near Eastern religions". Brian Bocking, a specialist in Japanese religion, was his initial primary supervisor, although at the end of the 2003–2004 academic

<sup>119</sup> Peter Carroll, personal communication, 14 October 2017.

<sup>120</sup> Schulke, personal communication, 2 September 2018.

<sup>121</sup> Howard and Fitzgerald, "An Interview," republished in Chumbley, *Opuscula Magica I*, 130; Chumbley, *One*, 57–58; Schulke, "Ophidian Sabbat," 116–117; Cultus Sabbati, *Eikostos*, 22–26.

<sup>122</sup> Howard and Fitzgerald, "An Interview," republished in Chumbley, *Opuscula Magica I*, 138; Cultus Sabbati, *Eikostos*, 16–21.

<sup>123</sup> Gregorius, "Luciferian Witchcraft," 242.

<sup>124</sup> Chumbley, *One*, 58–59.

<sup>125</sup> Howard and Fitzgerald, "An Interview," republished in *Opuscula Magica I*, 139–140.

<sup>126</sup> Later republished as Chumbley, *Leaper Between*.

<sup>127</sup> Subsequently published as Andrew D. Chumbley, *Mysticism, Initiation and Dream* (Richmond Vista, CA: Three Hands Press, 2012). Chumbley mentions the course in a letter to Power, see Power, *Pagans and Witches*, 36.

<sup>128</sup> Brian Bocking, personal communication, 16 February 2013.

year, Chumbley transferred to Cosimo Zene, a specialist in South Asian religions.<sup>129</sup> The two developed a friendship; Chumbley was open to Zene about his occultism, but “very discrete” about it around SOAS more broadly.<sup>130</sup> Impressed by Chumbley’s research and literary style, Zene invited him to serve as teaching assistant for his undergraduate course on “Mysticism in the Great Traditions”, but the latter passed away before this could happen.<sup>131</sup>

As well as undergoing an academic training, Chumbley was happy to discuss his ideas with other academics, including (as noted at the start of this chapter) Ronald Hutton. He maintained an email correspondence with fellow magician-cum-PhD student Dave Evans, although the two only met once in person. This was at a December 2003 lecture that Chumbley gave for the Friends of the Museum of Witchcraft in Cornwall. Devoted to the topic of initiation in the early modern cunning craft, it was one of the only public lectures Chumbley ever gave.<sup>132</sup> Chumbley also used the internet as a means of interacting with the growing body of occultists reading and working with his material. Using the username “Chalkedris”, he was active on various Yahoo! Group message boards, posting adverts to Xoanon’s publications on such groups as The Witches’ Sabbath, Solitary Traditional Witchcraft, and Canadian Coven Leaders. He also joined the 1734 tradition email group founded by the American occultist Joseph Wilson (1942–2004).<sup>133</sup>

In tandem with his academic studies, Chumbley continued producing Sabbatic texts. In 2002, Xoanon re-issued the *Azoëtia*, this time as the “Sethos Edition”. In the preface to this version, Chumbley related that he hoped to “maintain the integrity and youthful naiveté of the original” but that he had included various refinements, inspired in part by messages received in dreams.<sup>134</sup> He also began work on the third and final volume of the *Trimagisterion*, known as *The Auraeon*, which focused on a magical current he termed the “Immediate Way”; he passed away before it was published.<sup>135</sup> In addition, he authored various hand-written and hand-illustrated occult texts which he called the “Monadic Transmissions”, each kept in a wooden box along with a talisman and a letter to their eventual owner.<sup>136</sup>

In 2001, Chumbley and Schulke established Xoanon as a limited company, and that year published the latter’s first grimoire, *Ars Philtron*.<sup>137</sup> In 2003, Chumbley, Schulke, and Soror S. I. established Three Hands Press, a “sister publishing house” to Xoanon for essays and monographs outside the latter’s focus on grimoires.<sup>138</sup> As these developments attest, Chumbley was increasingly concerned with expanding and promoting the Cultus’ output. He perhaps hoped to establish it as a significant player within the occult milieu, inspired by the example of Grant’s Typhonian Order. In doing so, he accorded Schulke an increasingly prominent place, and it was little surprise that he selected the latter to be his successor as Magister of the Cultus in the event of his passing.<sup>139</sup>

On 15 September 2004, his 37th birthday, Chumbley died following a heart attack brought on by a severe asthmatic fit. To what extent he expected such a fate is unknown, but he often commented to Howard that he would not make “old bones” and shortly before his death had revealed that he felt his time running out. Howard speculated that his belief in an inevitable early death might have been the reason he worked so diligently in life.<sup>140</sup> Howard noted that Chumbley’s death left “a void in the

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Zene however only learned *how significant* Chumbley was in the occult milieu from Sabina Magliocco—one of this volume’s contributors—after his death.

<sup>131</sup> Cosimo Zene, personal communication, 15 December 2012 and 21 February 2013.

<sup>132</sup> Evans, personal communication, 30 October 2012.

<sup>133</sup> I owe this latter point to Stuart Inman, personal communication, 7 and 8 November 2012.

<sup>134</sup> *Andrew D. Chumbley, Azoëtia: A Grimoire of the Sabbatic Craft (Sethos Edition) (Chelmsford: Xoanon, 2002), v–vii.*

<sup>135</sup> Howard and Fitzgerald, “An Interview,” republished in Chumbley, *Opuscula Magica I*, 137.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 138; Cultus Sabbati, *Eikostos*, 87–89.

<sup>137</sup> Howard and Fitzgerald, “An Interview,” republished in *Opuscula Magica I*, 139; Daniel A. Schulke, “Foreword,” in *Eikostos: Xoanon Publishing 1992–2012* (Hercules and Macclesfield: Xoanon, 2012), ix.

<sup>138</sup> “Three Hands Press,” Xoanon, <http://xoanon.co.uk/three-hands-press/> (accessed 14 October 2017); Schulke, personal communication, 2 September 2018. Soror S. I. is a different individual to the aforementioned Soror I. S.

<sup>139</sup> This latter point confirmed by Howard, personal communication, 23 February 2013.

<sup>140</sup> *Howard, Children of Cain*, 186.

lives of his family, friends and everyone who had the pleasure of knowing him”.<sup>141</sup> According to Bocking, Chumbley had been a “brilliant student, way ahead of virtually all of his peers”, and his death was “a great loss for academia”.<sup>142</sup> Zene and several other SOAS academics attended Chumbley’s funeral, which was administered by Schulke. With Schulke and Soror I. S.’s support, Zene tried to attain a posthumous PhD for Chumbley based on the work already produced, but was ultimately unsuccessful.<sup>143</sup>

## Conclusions

The death of a founder can be a significant marker for a religious movement. In the case of the Cultus Sabbati, the transition was smooth, with Schulke taking over as Magister and continuing the group’s outreach via Xoanon and Three Hands Press. In ensuing years, it released new editions of Chumbley’s work and previously unpublished material. His widow became Magistra of the Cultus in the United Kingdom, and in 2010, the group established a presence in Canada.<sup>144</sup> Chumbley’s work has also had a wider influence; various Sabbatic practitioners have emerged who are not affiliated with the Cultus, while his ideas have inspired occultists of non-Sabbatic traditions like Wicca. A three-piece noise band calling themselves the Cultus Sabbati—albeit unaffiliated with Chumbley’s group—were active between 2006 and 2013, relating that Chumbley’s writings provided the ritual framework in which their music was produced.<sup>145</sup>

Along with Grant and Gardner, Chumbley is one of the most important post-Crowleyan figures to have emerged from Britain’s occult milieu. While drawing upon earlier traditions of folk-magic, his Sabbatic tradition represents an innovative development that has attracted a growing following in Britain and North America. Despite this, he remains a man about whom comparatively little is known. If this chapter has demonstrated anything, it is that there is much scope for further research. Chumbley’s rich oeuvre warrants deeper scholarly exegesis, so that we might better understand the manner in which he utilised older sources, created novel developments, and generated his own innovative synthesis. His art too, merits greater exploration. More detailed research into specific parts of his biography would also be welcome, with particular attention to the folk-magical lineages into which he claimed admittance. Similarly, examinations should not restrict themselves to Chumbley himself but should branch out to take in the work of Schulke and other Cultus members. This course of action is crucial for providing scholars of religion with a wider and richer understanding of the history of modern Western witchcraft, a history that extends far beyond the boundaries of Wicca.

---

<sup>141</sup> Howard, “A Seeker’s Journey,” 11.

<sup>142</sup> Bocking, personal communication, 16 February 2013.

<sup>143</sup> Zene, personal communication, 21 February 2013; Schulke, personal communication, 2 September 2018.

<sup>144</sup> Schulke, personal communication, 24 September 2017.

<sup>145</sup> John Doran, “Positive Feedback: Cultus Sabbati Interviewed & Free Album Download,” *The Quietus* (9 February 2011), <http://thequietus.com/articles/05668-cultus-sabbati-interview-album-download> (accessed 9 November 2012, archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6C345onig>) and Mark Masters and Grayson Currin, “The Out Door: Overlooked Records 2011,” *Pitchfork.com* (5 August 2011), <http://pitchfork.com/features/the-out-door/8012-the-out-door-16/2/> (accessed 9 November 2012, archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6C355g7on>).

# 11. Witches Still Fly: Or Do They?

## Traditional Witches, Wiccans, and Flying Ointment<sup>(11)</sup>

Chas S. Clifton<sup>1</sup>

From the early 1950s to the mid-1960s, Gerald Gardner and his associates, coveners, and students monopolized the modern witchcraft narrative. To achieve this, they claimed that their religion was the survival of the ancient pagan witch-cult described in the work of Margaret Murray.<sup>2</sup> In the mid-1960s, however, a contributor to *Pentagram*, a British “witchcraft review”, asserted that there were “two extremes of the Craft—Witchcraft Ancient and Modern, so to speak”.<sup>3</sup> The former term covered the so-called traditional witches or older hereditary Craft,<sup>4</sup> while the latter referred to Wiccans. In other words, a counter-movement had arisen, seeking to define itself in opposition to Gardnerian Wicca .

The writer, who used the pseudonym Taliesin, goes on to construct a set of oppositions that endure today: that Wiccans allegedly create “an atmosphere of sweetness and light coupled with good clean fun, all under the auspices [*sic*] of a Universal Auntie”, whereas his group is more spiritually daring, prepared to “leap into the clear light of today”, whatever that might mean, and “search for our souls”. The Wiccans are “dogmatic” while the traditionals are a force for good, opposed to war and blind Progress. In a footnote, Taliesin claims that he confronted Gardner about the ritual use of *Amanita muscaria*, the fly agaric mushroom, and that the latter “knew nothing about it and did not himself believe that it ever formed part of the Old Religion”. But Taliesin asserts that a “late fifteenth century recipe for a sort of tea brewed from the mushroom exists” and that he himself has ritually drunk it.<sup>5</sup>

In this exchange lies the opposition that I wish to develop further: how self-described non-Wiccan witches have made the use of entheogens—particularly the alleged flying ointments—into a badge of their form of witchcraft, in opposition to Gardnerian Wicca , which only briefly acknowledges flying ointment. On the so-called traditional side, I rely primarily on three English practitioner-writers: Robert Cochrane (1931–1966), a leading anti-Gardnerian of the early 1960s; Michael Howard (1948–2015), who published a Pagan magazine, *The Cauldron* , from 1976 until his death; and a contemporary writer and publisher, Peter Grey. In the early 1990s, Howard made the case for hallucinogenic plant use thus:

---

<sup>1</sup> Colorado State University–Pueblo, Pueblo, CO, USA

<sup>2</sup> Murray supported Gardner to the extent of writing in her introduction to Gardner’s *Witchcraft Today* , “Dr Gardner has shown in his book how much of the so-called ‘witchcraft’ is descended from ancient rituals.” Gerald Gardner, *Witchcraft Today* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1973 [1954]), 16.

<sup>3</sup> Taliesin, “‘Ancients’ and ‘Moderns’,” *Pentagram* 3 (March 1965), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Taliesin refers to “my mother and my aunt”, but of course they are not named.

<sup>5</sup> Taliesin, “‘Ancients’ and ‘Moderns’,” 1n1. One of Gardner’s leading initiates, Doreen Valiente, argued that Gardner was indeed knowledgeable about herbal hallucinations but just did not discuss them with everyone. Doreen Valiente, *The Rebirth of Witchcraft* (London: Robert Hale, 1989), 132.

<sup>(11)</sup> © The Author(s) 2019  
Shai Feraro and Ethan Doyle White (eds.)  
Magic and Witchery in the Modern West  
Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15549-0\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15549-0_11)

The use of natural hallucinogens by witches, past and present, represents a legitimate and established form of Western shamanism. Unfortunately, this important aspect of historical witchcraft and its links with shamanism in other countries has been sadly neglected by most historians and anthropologists and also by many modern Crafters. The shamanic elements relating to the use of hallucinogenic plants with the medieval witch cult and present-day traditional witchcraft suggest a survival of beliefs and practices over an extended time... This fact is, of course, not palatable to those historians who would prefer to regard medieval witchcraft as a Christian delusion and modern Witchcraft as a recent invention.<sup>6</sup>

What further complicates the story is that most of the evidence for flying ointments themselves come from the witch-trial period, being either testimony elicited under torture, and hence of dubious value, or a narrative injected into the trial by the prosecutors and judges themselves, although there are a few exceptions that are useful. Modern “traditional witches” and ethnobotanists alike tend to gloss over how tainted by torture the historical record is.

## Who Is “Traditional”?

From the mid-twentieth century on, Wicca became, in Ronald Hutton’s words, “the only full-formed religion which England can be said to have given the world”.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Wiccan groups are found not just in the Anglosphere, but in most of Europe and parts of Latin America, Asia, and Southern Africa. Particularly in the United States, Wiccan priests and priestesses perform legally recognized marriages and other civil rites, serve as prison and hospital chaplains, attend interfaith gatherings, and give invocations at public meetings. In the public arena, the word “witch” is often downplayed or treated as something to be reclaimed, similar to “queer”.<sup>8</sup>

Within North American Wiccan discourse, the term “traditional” is often applied to those forms of Wicca with initiatory lineages going back to 1950s or 1960s Britain, most notably the Gardnerian and Alexandrian lines, named for their originators, Gerald Gardner (1884–1964) and Alex Sanders (1926–1988), as well as others claiming a parallel history, for example, Central Valley Wicca. Consequently, these are often collectively called “British Traditional Witchcraft” in North America. Further complicating the discussion is the fact that contemporary Pagan witches use “tradition” to mean something like “denomination” in Protestantism, so that one might follow a “tradition” that was consciously created last month. Meanwhile, “Wicca” has expanded to cover a great many groups and individuals that are “Gardnerian” only in the sense that much of their theology and practices are rooted there. As historian of Wicca Aidan Kelly once remarked (and I paraphrase), if you create a ritual circle and call the Quarters, you are Wiccan. Here, however, I use “traditional” in the sense advanced by Howard: non-Wiccan witches who sometimes claim a hereditary initiation or at least claim to follow practices older than Wicca, which blossomed in the early 1950s. The only thing murkier than witchcraft terminology are witches’ historical claims.

For those who call themselves “traditional witches”,<sup>9</sup> these Wiccan public ministerial functions are “modern dazed paganism”, to use a phrase employed by Peter Grey in his 2013 book *Apocalyptic Witchcraft*.<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere, Grey, echoing “Taliesin” 40 years earlier, scolds the public Wiccans:

We have bargained to get a seat at the table of the great faiths to whom we remain anathema.  
How much compromise have we made in our private practice for the mighty freedom of being

---

<sup>6</sup> Michael Howard, “Flying Witches,” in *Witchcraft and Shamanism*, ed. Chas S. Clifton (St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 1994), 37.

<sup>7</sup> Ronald Hutton, *Witches, Druids and King Arthur* (London: Hambledon and London, 2003), 229–230.

<sup>8</sup> For further examples and discussion, see the chapter “The Rhetoric of Wicca,” in Chas S. Clifton, *Her Hidden Children: The Rise of Wicca and Paganism in America* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Frequently but not always lowercase.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Grey, *Apocalyptic Witchcraft* (London: Scarlet Imprint, 2013), 156.

able to wear pewter pentagrams in public, at school, in our places of employment. How much have the elders sold us out, genuflecting to the academy, the establishment, the tabloid press. In return for this bargain we have gained precisely nothing.<sup>11</sup>

Elsewhere in the book, he writes:

Now Ronald Hutton says not simply harm none, but be harmless. Having seen the Nigerian witch killers and the Satanic Panic of the eighties, he argues that we are better off to live in a disenchanted world and escape on the weekends to our imaginal worlds of whimsical delight.

I say, fear us.

I say that the power of the witch is in having every option open. Witchcraft will not lie beneath, will not be disarmed. Women know this. We do not want to be inside, having inter-faith meetings with the hand-wringing monotheists whose holy books sanction our stoning, murder and rape.<sup>12</sup>

This British definition of “traditional”, meaning a non-Gardnerian, non-Wiccan witch, has gained some traction in North America, to the point of being parodied, which in the contemporary Pagan milieu is a sign of recognition. For example, blogger Seth David Rodriguez, in a humorous post, titled “How to Be a Traditional Witch on the Internet”, lists various must-dos such as these:

5. Get yourself a fuck load of jars of herbs and roots and barks. All herbs are good, all really deadly poisonous, toxic and hallucinatory herbs are better.

6. Get yourself accounts on Instagram and Tumblr to post photographs of your altar, books and traditional witch stuff. Instagram and Tumblr are great platforms to share photographs of every single ritual or spell you work (including plenty of ones that you don’t)...

7. Just some tips for those altar photos: Make sure you aren’t holding back with the skulls, include as many as you can, you really can’t have enough. If you want to include some of your crystals on your altar, that is OK, but no more than say three crystals, and always make sure that there are way more skulls than crystals on the altar, otherwise the altar could risk looking Wiccan (Cain forbid!) and a lot less traditional witchcraft.

8. Liberally sprinkle your altars with as many toxic and deadly herbs and plants as you can. This is a really powerful way of demonstrating how much of a fuck you don’t give about accidentally killing yourself because you’re not afraid of death or the darker aspects of life because you’re a traditional witch for crying out loud!<sup>13</sup>

If, then, we reserve the term “traditional witch” for those persons who are avowedly non-Gardnerian and often non-Wiccan (using the broad definition above), then we see persons and groups less concerned with coven structures, participation in umbrella Pagan groups, or presenting themselves to the world as followers of a fully formed polytheistic religion. Many of its leading spokesmen—and they tend to be men—are or were often solitary practitioners. (Cochrane was a notable exception, as for a brief time in the early 1960s he pitched his group as a deliberate rival to Gardner’s first coven.) In truth, most communication about modern traditional witchcraft takes place through social media, books, and small-circulation “zines” such as Howard’s *The Cauldron*.

Gardnerian Wiccan ritual chiefly involves a combination of worship and spellcasting within a ritual circle, ideally facilitated by trance possession of the high priestess. Trance work is important—if less ritualized—in traditional witchcraft as well, and more often facilitated by entheogens. In his book *Children of Cain: A Study of Modern Traditional Witches*, Howard quotes his mentor and the founder of the “Sabbatic Craft” tradition, Andrew Chumbley, on trance:

---

<sup>11</sup> Peter Grey, “Rewilding Witchcraft,” 2014, <https://scarletimprint.com/essays/rewilding-witchcraft>.

<sup>12</sup> Grey, *Apocalyptic Witchcraft*, 8.

<sup>13</sup> Seth David Rodriguez, “How to Be a Traditional Witch on the Internet,” *Rodriguez Mystic* blog, 15 June 2016, <http://>

The location of the Witches' Sabbath [is] 'the crossroads of waking, sleeping mundane dreaming'... It is a place that can be accessed by the initiated practitioner in sleep, in dreams or trance. This concept of the witch meet, the faery convocation of humans and spirits, and the atavistic myth of the Wild Hunt forms the ritual and spiritual basis for the mythos, imagery, symbolism and practice of the Cultus Sabbati and the Sabbatic Craft traditions.<sup>14</sup>

Practitioners of traditional witchcraft are prone to taking seriously the stories tortured from accused witches in past centuries. Following Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg, Howard regards these pain-addled tales as "memories of ancient shamanic rites and goddess worship".<sup>15</sup> In fact, reading those accused persons' testimony shows few goddesses and much food—forced by the torturers' arts into fantasizing about witches' sabbaths, these frequently hungry folk were more likely to produce visions of endless, bounteous food and drink than to re-create ancient paganisms. Many traditional witches, however, accept—on some level—the tales of witches flying to the sabbath on "broomsticks, forked sticks, pitchforks, hurdles, distaffs, fennel stalks and on the backs of animals such as goats, rams and wolves".<sup>16</sup> Since the modern imagination rejects the idea of literal, bodily flight (as did some early modern thinkers), then the "flight" must be a metaphor for astral or imaginal travel:

One explanation that links it with the modern practice of the Sabbatic Craft is that witches had the psychic ability to leave their bodies at will and to travel to other locations and the Otherworld. In occult terminology, they could project their astral or spirit bodies and 'travel on the astral.'<sup>17</sup>

As a shortcut, Howard continues, "The evidence suggests"—the book is short on evidence throughout—that these alleged historic witches used psychoactive plants in the form of *Unquentu sabbati*, "given to them by the Man in Black (the Devil or male leader of the covine)"<sup>18</sup> when they were initiated into the witch cult".<sup>19</sup>

Thus the spokespeople for the new traditional witchcraft have adopted the witch-hunters' narrative: the existence of non-Christian witches, their communal meetings (whether in this reality or another), the organizational structure (e.g., the idea of initiation into a group led by a "devil"), and the use of flying ointment in a metaphorical or literal sense—most commonly the latter. Within the new traditional witchcraft, the use or at least the advocacy of flying ointments is seen as a quasi-political statement. Grey writes in *Apocalyptic Witchcraft*:

The Empire [elsewhere "the Corporate State"] has several other witch hunts that run concurrently. First is the War against Drugs. As witches, our use of entheogens, plant medicine and even organic and home-grown food places us on that watch list.<sup>20</sup>

In Grey's view, the Sabbat is a non-physical gathering, and "the first flight is very often a spontaneous event". Subsequently, however, the Sabbat is sought deliberately through entheogen use:

Many have engaged in the futile search for soma, the missing entheogen or admixture that ravished women up in flight and carried them away to a sexual carousel of beautiful youths.

---

rodriguezmythic.blogspot.com/2016/06/how-to-be-traditional-witch-on-internet.html.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Howard, *Children of Cain: A Study of Modern Traditional Witches* (Richmond Vista, CA: Three Hands Press, 2011), 191.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Some modern traditional witches favour the spellings *covine* or *cuvien* over *coven* as another way of setting themselves apart from Wicca.

<sup>19</sup> Howard, *Children of Cain*, 195.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Grey, *Apocalyptic Witchcraft*, 80.



There are accounts of this being a deep sleep, a narcolepsy, a catalepsy that reminds us in particular of *amanita muscaria* [*sic*] and the ecstasies of the Tunguskan shaman laid out stiff as frozen hide. Somewhere we hear the slow muffled beat of the reindeer skin drum heart. Is it the drugs that allow us to find our way back to the rendezvous on the naked heath?<sup>21</sup>

Grey's "many have engaged" includes scholars, practitioners, and scholar-practitioners. Both inquisitors and today's witches share a literary history and possibly some of the same assumptions. The records of the European witch trials provide numerous mentions of flying ointment, and this chapter offers only a small selection. It is important to realize that not every ointment was treated as psychotropic. Rather, many trial records assume that the ointment received its power from its giver, the Christian Devil.

In one of Western literature's most famous ointment-based transformations—a literary precursor to the witch trials—a young woman becomes an owl while a young man becomes a donkey. The location is Thessaly, a region of north-central Greece famous for its witches. The storyteller is "Lucius Apuleius", who describes himself as an ethnic Greek living in Roman North Africa, and his story is *The Transformations* [or *Metamorphoses*] of *Lucius Apuleius of Madaura*, better known as *The Golden Ass*. The English poet and novelist Robert Graves, who translated it in the 1940s, glossed its title as a nod to the professional street-corner storytellers of the Roman Empire, who would say to passers-by, "Give me a copper [coin] and I'll tell you a golden story".<sup>22</sup> The real Apuleius, who lived from about 125–180 CE, was in fact a native North African Berber from what is now Algeria (then the Roman province of Numidia), the son of a prosperous provincial magistrate, who travelled to Egypt, Greece, and Rome to study philosophy, law, and rhetoric. Later critics assigned the given name Lucius to him simply because it was the name of his book's protagonist. He was initiated into various mystery religions, including those of Asclepius and Dionysus, and wrote several works on philosophy, magic, and natural history.

*The Golden Ass* is notably the only novel to survive from the early Roman Empire. Stanford classicist John J. Winkler calls it "a philosophical comedy about religious knowledge".<sup>23</sup> As Lucius-the-narrator continues his life as a donkey, he hears many stories and suffers various misadventures until he is at last returned to human form by the goddess Isis, whose priest he then becomes.

"Witches would change themselves into dogs, birds, or flies, the better to carry out their deeds; they would shrink their bodies to enter houses and use the entrails of the dead to make their spells", writes Julio Caro Baroja, summarizing Greco-Roman witchcraft.<sup>24</sup> Apuleius' owl-witch, in other words, was a trope in both high literature and folktales, and every fantastic claim made about Thessalian witches of the second century would be repeated 1300 years later during the peak of the European witch craze, not the least because *The Golden Ass* was read over the centuries.

## A Pipe of Oyntment: Alice Kyteler

In the 1950s, Gardner used the 1324 prosecution of Alice Kyteler<sup>25</sup> as one of his chief examples of the supposed underground witch religion of the Middle Ages. For although witch trials were more a phenomenon of later centuries, this case from southeastern Ireland contained many typical details and some that were not: the use of flying ointment, an apparent coven, a mysterious "black man" who is also described as demon, the sacrifice of red roosters, folk magic, and one execution by burning at the stake. To the authorities involved, the real story was a typical medieval clash between local, aristocratic authority and the Catholic Church, the latter in the person of the bishop of Ossory, Richard Ledrede, who provides the most complete account of events in his "A Contemporary Narrative of the Proceedings

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>22</sup> Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, trans. Robert Graves (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), ix.

<sup>23</sup> Bill Donohue, "Apuleius Unbridled," *Reed Magazine* (June 2013), 33.

<sup>24</sup> Julio Caro Baroja, *The World of the Witches* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 28.

<sup>25</sup> Pronounced "kit-ler", at least in Ireland today.

against Dame Alice Kyteler, Prosecuted for Sorcery in 1324”.<sup>26</sup> Gardner, however, relied on a document published two centuries later, *Holinshed’s Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, released in two volumes in 1577 and 1587, which are best-known today for being William Shakespeare’s chief source for his historical plays.

When Gardner writes that Lady Alice was charged with “having a staff which she anointed with ointment and galloped through thick and thin—presumably an ordinary fertility dance”,<sup>27</sup> he probably had Holinshed’s text upon his desk, for the original reads (setting aside some of the procedural language):

In these daies lived in the diocesse of Ossorie the Lady Alice Kettle, whom the bishop asscited to purge herself of the fame in enchantment and witchcraft imposed upon hir to one Petronill and Basill hir complices. She was charged to have nightlie conference with a spirit called Robin Artisson, to whome she sacrificed in the high waie nine red cocks and nine peacocks eise... At the first conviction [the accused] abjured and did penance, but shortlie after they were found in relapse, and then was Petronil burnt at Kilkennie, the other twaine might not be heard of<sup>28</sup>... In rifling the closet of the ladie [Alice’s bedchamber], they found a wafer of sacramental bread, having the divels name stamped thereon instead of Jesus Christ, and a pipe of ointment, wherewith she greased a staffe, upon which she ambled and galloped through thick and thin, when and in what manner she listed.<sup>29</sup>

Gardner, as may be seen, lifted a key phrase of his argument directly from Holinshed. Like Murray, he ignored those parts of the account that did not uphold his reading, which was that there was a coven with Lady Alice as its priestess and a man known as Robin as its priest, the “man in black”. “Most likely she was in communication with an Irish branch of the Fairy or Little People who celebrated rites similar to those used in England and to those of Dionysus in ancient Rome”, he asserts.

The action [sacrificing chickens and peafowl] seems like a description of a number of Bacchantes who used to tear animals to pieces in the Dionysian frenzies... There was another charge of sacrificing red cocks to Robin, who is described as being “Aethiopia”—in other words, a negro.<sup>30</sup> It would be very unusual to find a negro with an English name in Ireland at that time, so I presume that Robin mixed soot with his protective ointment so as not to be recognized. They were probably members of a local cult who carried out magical ceremonies to bring themselves luck. There were thirteen people accused [*sic*] but Robin was never arrested, so the “tricky spirit” was probably of a high rank or churchman. Thus we may presume that a witch cult which had some resemblance to the cult of Dionysus was in full swing at that date and consisted of both Irish and English members.<sup>31</sup>

Gardner’s “thus we may presume” covers a slew of assertions presented without evidence, while leaving out such inconvenient details as the supposed Eucharistic host stamped “with the devil’s name”. As he does elsewhere in *Witchcraft Today*, he explains away the flying ointment as face paint worn commando-style; a grease applied to the body during naked dancing on cool nights, similar to the way that ocean endurance swimmers used to coat themselves with lanolin or other grease; or a powerful erotic scent.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, there was no flying on a staff or other wooden object, because witches, he writes elsewhere in the book, used poles, staffs, or broomsticks merely for walking sticks or pretended

---

<sup>26</sup> Collected in L. S. Davidson and J. O. Ward, eds., *The Sorcery Trial of Alice Kyteler* (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1993), together with other related documents.

<sup>27</sup> Gerald B. Gardner, *Witchcraft Today* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1973 [1954]), 97.

<sup>28</sup> In other words, they had fled.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Davidson and Ward, eds., *The Sorcery Trial of Alice Kyteler*, 81–82.

<sup>30</sup> This “Aethiopia[n]” is not found in Holinshed, so Gardner might have had another source as well.

<sup>31</sup> Gardner, *Witchcraft Today*, 97.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 53–54.

to ride them in their “fertility dances”.<sup>33</sup> He explains away the description of Robin Artisson as a demon or spirit “from the depths of the underworld”<sup>34</sup> by asserting that he was human, “probably of high rank”, and introduces the notion of Little People, a pre-Celtic race of pygmies, strictly on his own. Although it has a folkloric base, this concept appears nowhere in contemporary accounts of Kyteler’s case, but it was dear to Gardner, and he devotes an entire chapter to it.

Kyteler may have been born circa 1260–1264 and was probably in her fifties at the time of her trial. The chief record of events is not trial testimony but Bishop Ledrede’s own “narrative of the proceedings against Dame Alice Kyteler”, a one-sided account written by a conscientious but contentious prelate. Early in 1324, Ledrede visited Kilkenny, where he held an inquest. “Persons of standing in the community were summoned and sworn... to speak the truth. The truth they spoke was not what they themselves had seen and heard, but rather what public opinion held to be true”.<sup>35</sup> While Kyteler and her son William were both rich from moneylending, Alice having inherited wealth from her previously deceased husbands, some of her adult stepchildren had turned against her. They accused her of being a poisoner and a sorceress who enchanted their fathers into giving her their wealth. Their accusations go far beyond Holinshed’s edited version: Dame Alice was the head of a group of women who denied Christianity, sacrificed chickens to demons at crossroads, worked evil magic, and cooked foul potions and ointments (made from body parts, herbs, and worms) in a dead man’s skull.<sup>36</sup> Her present (fourth) husband, Sir John le Poer, was at death’s door due to her poisoning, her accusers said, but well enough to wrest Alice’s keys away from her, whereupon servants opened her chests and found various horrible potion ingredients—Holinshed’s “pipe of oyntment”—which were taken to Bishop Ledrede as evidence.

Furthermore, Alice Kyteler allegedly had sex with a demon called Son of Art or Robin Artisson, who appeared in various forms—cat, black dog, black man (*aethiopsis*)—and had two companions larger than himself, “one of whom carried an iron rod in his hand”.<sup>37</sup> Although not mentioned in the bishop’s version, the *Annales Hiberniae* of James Grace, compiled 200 years later from earlier sources, claimed that Alice and her fellow witches smeared an ointment on a wooden beam, which would then carry them anywhere.<sup>38</sup> It is likely that these gruesome tales came not from the stepchildren but from Alice’s maid, Petronilla, who was tortured into confessing and later burned to death.

There were also two men arrested, Robert of Bristol and Johannes Galrussyn. William Outlaw too was summoned, and he appeared before the bishop in full armour, together with “hordes of retainers”, also in armour. Nevertheless, the bishop read the charges, now expanded to include usury, perjury, adultery, murder of clergy, and more. In the centre of Kilkenny, the bishop had a sack of “potions, powers, oils, nails, her, herbs, worms, and countless other horrible items” burned, all taken from Alice’s home.<sup>39</sup>

Outlaw and his lawyers fought the charges, but he eventually pleaded guilty to aiding and abetting heretics. He was briefly imprisoned, then released on condition that he pays for a new cathedral roof. During this time, as noted, the (Irish?) maid Petronilla of Meath was tortured, confessed to sacrificing to demons, and so on, whipped, and burned. She may be the only source for the story of Robin Artisson. According to the bishop’s narrative, other “heretics and soothsayers belonging to that pestiferous society of Robin Artisson were dealt with according to the law”, through public confession, flogging, and exile, while some fled. He does not name names.<sup>40</sup> All of this process took from spring through early winter;

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 52–53.

<sup>34</sup> So Bishop Ledrede describes him. See Davidson and Ward, eds., *The Sorcery Trial of Alice Kyteler*, 63.

<sup>35</sup> Davidson and Ward, eds., *The Sorcery Trial of Alice Kyteler*, 26n4.

<sup>36</sup> The average male cranial capacity might be 1400 ml, or about three U.S. pints. But would bone have withstood the heat of cooking, or would the skull be set in a *bain marie*?

<sup>37</sup> Davidson and Ward, eds., *The Sorcery Trial of Alice Kyteler*, 29–30.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 50–56.

<sup>40</sup> The lack of details leads L. S. Davison to suggest that they actually never were punished but like Alice, escaped. See Davidson and Ward, eds., *The Sorcery Trial of Alice Kyteler*, 10.

the execution of Petronilla is recorded on 3 November 1324. Alice Kyteler, meanwhile, skipped bail and escaped to England, taking with her Petronilla's daughter, Baslia.<sup>41</sup> She was never heard of again.

## Flying Ointment or Medicine?

In 1600, officers of the law searched the home of a miller in Lower Bavaria and found something suspicious. As narrated by the German legal historian Michael Kunze, this was a typical case of accused persons naming others under torture. The named persons were a miller, his wife, and his attractive daughter, who leased a water mill owned by a nearby convent. The mill itself had an uncanny reputation: it stood in a relatively lonely spot, and supposedly an earlier miller had prospered by making a pact with the Devil, who brought customers in return for the miller grinding human bones and horse droppings during the night—which suggests the alleged ingredients of some of the non-entheogenic but merely gross witches' ointments. "According to another story, the convent mill changed its tenants so often because it was inhabited by witches in the form of cats".<sup>42</sup> And there were other eerie tales, enough that it seems logical that this miller and his wife were accused of witchcraft too. Their accusers had nothing to lose, for they were a family of vagrants. Members of this accusing family, the Pappenheimers, who are the book's real focus, claimed under interrogation to have seen the miller and his wife at witches' sabbath, and quite likely the daughter too.

The court took some time to decide whether these accusations were worth pursuing: "Within the council there were conflicting views on whether accusations made by criminals, even if they tallied, represented sufficient grounds for the arrest of those accused". The more zealous faction carried the day, however: since witches were very good at camouflaging their activities, "it was always permissible, in the opinion of lawyers, to arrest and submit to torture any person who had been denounced and named by several associates".<sup>43</sup> In these courts, Kunze notes, the *Malleus Maleficarum* trumped other legal codes that set higher standards for eyewitnesses. The witch-hunter's bible specifically permitted "the evidence... of disreputable persons against others", which fit the instance of the Pappenheimers' accusations towards the miller's family. After further debate, a decision was made, and three officers on horseback were dispatched to the convent mill.

The dwelling's ground floor contained one large room for cooking and other activities. But in a "closet" built under a staircase the officers found a second, smaller hearth.<sup>44</sup> The miller's wife said it was for heating milk, because if she put milk on the larger hearth, the cats got into it. In Kunze's telling, this hearth excited suspicion:

On the cold hearth there stood a pot containing a stiff paste, a congealed liquid, or something of the kind. [The officers] put a sample into a container they brought with them. They also looked closely at the firewood piled up beside the hearth. It consisted of dry hazel branches—that, too, was highly suspicious, for hazel wood was used for all kinds of magic. They pocketed a few of the twigs.<sup>45</sup>

Weeks later, the miller, his wife, Anna, and their daughter, Agnes, were arrested and imprisoned in Munich. Following a day of torture, the miller was returned to his cell. He was found dead the next morning, and the prosecutor pronounced that the Devil had broken his neck. The judges moved on to his wife. Threatened with torture, she insisted that the ointment was "what she used to rub on her

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 9–10.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Kunze, *Highroad to the Stake: A Tale of Witchcraft*, trans. William E. Yuill (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 232.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 235–236.

<sup>44</sup> How was this enclosed hearth ventilated? The record does not explain.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 245.

fingers after heavy manual work”.<sup>46</sup> After torture, she confessed to being a witch and in possession of an ointment given her by the Devil, with which she anointed a pitchfork, and after saying the right magic formula, could fly invisibly into her neighbours’ homes to steal food. The same ointment, smeared on humans and animals, would kill them. Her husband and daughter were witches too; they attended the witches’ feasts, and all the rest. When Agnes, the nubile daughter, learnt that her mother had denounced her as a witch, she crumpled, but still she had to endure all the torture and interrogations as well before the inevitable end.

Let us assume that rather than lying to protect her witchcraft, Anna told the truth the first time she was asked, when she was no doubt frightened but had not been tortured. How could homemade (or village-made) medicine be construed as flying ointment? Christian Räscht raises the same question when discussing a traditional recipe based on poplar that included some plants associated with flying ointment:

In the early modern era, this sort of poplar salve was widespread and very beloved, and was used as a general pain medicine as aspirin is today. It was probably found in most households. This, however, had the drawback that at any time it could be identified by the Inquisition [*sic*] as a witches’ salve and would be considered proof of witchcraft.<sup>47</sup>

Most of the herbs associated with flying ointment are in the Solanaceae or nightshade family, which includes food plants, spices, ornamentals, and wild plants ranging from petunias to potatoes, not to mention tobacco and aubergine. Potatoes and tobacco were brought to Europe from the Western Hemisphere in the late sixteenth century; chili peppers arrived sooner, after Columbus’ second voyage, but were not initially widely diffused in Europe. Nevertheless, Europeans were quite familiar with other solanaceous plants, including belladonna, henbane, and mandrake, which have associations both magical and medical.

*Atropa belladonna*, also called deadly nightshade, has the most sinister reputation. It grows through most of Europe and is widely recognized as bearing poisonous berries. Maud Grieve (1858–1941), an English herbalist, noted that it appeared in Geoffrey Chaucer’s work as *dwale*, which seems related to Old Norse and Germanic words meaning to sleep, become stupefied, or to hinder or delay. She quotes the famous sixteenth-century English herbalist John Gerard (c. 1545–1612) as urging readers to “banish therefore all these pernicious plants out of your gardens and all places near to your houses where children do resort”, and mentions contemporary instances of children being poisoned by the berries.<sup>48</sup>

Belladonna and mandrake (*Atropa mandragora*) both contain the alkaloids hyoscyamine and atropine. Atropine was traditionally used for dilating the pupils of the eye to facilitate examination and surgery and as a heart stimulant, among other uses. Generations of medical students have memorized a saying about atropine overdoses, which leave the victim “hot as a hare, blind as a bat, dry as a bone, red as a beet, and mad as a hatter”—in other words, displaying hot skin with decreased sweating, blurry vision, and hallucinations. The earlier model of herbalism, however, did not separate the alkaloids but used the whole plant—leaves, roots, or berries—sometimes mixed with wine or vinegar. Gerard claimed that the leaves, “soaked in wine vinegar”, produced sleepiness when laid on a person’s forehead, while his contemporary, Thomas Lipton (c. 1585), wrote “Dwale makes one to sleep while he is cut or burnt by cauterizing”.<sup>49</sup> In other instances, it has been mixed with wine or ale to stupefy the drinkers so that they may be robbed or killed.

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>47</sup> Claudia Müller-Ebeling, Christian Räscht, and Wolf-Dieter Storl, *Witchcraft Medicine: Healing Arts, Shamanic Practices, and Forbidden Plants*, trans. Annabel Lee (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions 2003 [1998]), 133. Secular authorities, such as those who persecuted the Bavarian miller’s wife, were even more likely to use such evidence than was the Catholic Church.

<sup>48</sup> Maud Grieve, *A Modern Herbal*, 2 vols. (New York: Dover, 1971 [1931]), 584.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 585.

Another group of solanaceous plants with similar properties are the daturas, a worldwide genus, also known as thorn apple, Jamestown weed, or Jimsyn weed. Grieve remarks that it was rare in Britain in her day but occasionally cultivated as an ornamental. Yet she remarks (without naming any sources):

In early times, the Thornapple was considered an aid to the incantation of witches, and during the time of the witch and wizard mania in England, it was unlucky for anyone to grow it in his garden.<sup>50</sup>

More important in regard to the miller's wife, Grieve notes *datura's* use as an ointment:

Applied locally, in ointment, plasters or fomentation, *Stramonium* will palliate the pain of muscular rheumatism, neuralgia, and also pain due to hemorrhoids, fistula, abscesses and similar inflammation.<sup>51</sup>

Mandrake and henbane, the other well-known solanaceous plants, had similar uses to deadly nightshade and the daturas, primarily as an anodyne and soporific.

The availability of potentially psychoactive drugs was no surprise to early modern investigators. Several doctors and lawyers conducted their own experiments, events that have been seized upon in recent times to make the case for an actual flying ointment, one that used plant-based entheogens rather than baby fat, parts of animals, and other ingredients seemingly chosen for shock value. Anthropologist-cum-neoshaman Michael Harner (1929–2018) and other researchers return again and again to these examples. One was that of Andrés Laguna, personal physician to Pope Julius III, who observed the trial of a married couple in the region of Lorraine in 1545. They confessed under torture. Laguna noted that a jar “like that of Populeón [white poplar ointment]” had been seized from their home, and from its smell he concluded that it included mandrake, henbane and their relatives. Pulling some strings, he obtained a large sample, “which I later, in the city of Metz, used to anoint from head to toe the wife of the hangman”. This woman fell into a deep “sleep” with “her eyes open like a rabbit”. After 36 hours, she was conscious but not pleased. “Why do you wake me at such an inopportune time?” she demanded of the doctor. “I was surrounded by all the pleasures and delights of the world”. Turning to her husband, whom she had suspected of infidelity, she announced that she had been in the arms of “a lover younger and better than you”.<sup>52</sup>

Another account cited by contemporary researchers on shamanism is that of Johannes Nider (1380–1438), a Dominican priest and theologian. In his book *Formicarius* (“The Anthill”), a sort of preacher’s manual, he discussed witchcraft and other social ills, but he is sceptical about tales of witches bodily flying to their meetings. (He does, however, assert that they worship the Devil, perform evil acts, and so on.) The book contains many contemporary reports to buttress his theological positions, and in the chapter on witchcraft, he tells how another Dominican priest encountered a woman “who was so out of her senses that [she] believed herself to be transported through the air during the night with Diana and other women”. Determined to convince the woman that she was wrong, the priest and other witches watched as she climbed into a large dough-kneading basin (presumably naked), rubbed herself with ointment, and fell into a trance. Her entranced movements, however, upset the large basin, and she fell onto the floor and banged her head. The priest used this sudden upset to convince her that her travels were purely imaginary; unfortunately, Nider does not say what was in the ointment.<sup>53</sup>

In these and other cases, however, flying ointment is not integrated into a discussion of a larger underground religion. Nider’s work was incorporated into later witch-hunting manuals. The woman with the kneading basin was not on trial, and she is presented as an example of an individual delusion,

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 804.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 806.

<sup>52</sup> Michael J. Harner, “Hallucinogens in European Witchcraft,” in *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, ed. Michael J. Harner (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 135.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 131–132.

albeit one with a long history in ecclesiastical records, notably the tenth-century *Canon Episcopi* and its predecessors, which spoke of “certain wicked women... seduced by the fantastic illusion of the demons” who believed that they had ridden through the air with a goddess named Herodias or Diana.<sup>54</sup> Nider’s second-hand story, therefore, is of particular interest, because it is one of relatively few that is not witch-trial testimony. As a Dominican, his first concern was always heresy, rather than the “delusions” of persons who said they could fly. To Ginzburg—and to traditional witches who look to historians for academic blessing—the account confirms their belief: “But there also emerges from [Nider’s] pages the as yet unfamiliar image of a sect of male and female witches quite distinct from the isolated figures, whether casters of spells or enchanters, mentioned in the penitential literature or medieval homiletics”.<sup>55</sup>

By contrast, Andrés de Laguna and several others, who looked at alleged ointments from a pharmacological rather than a diabolic perspective, seem more interested in a naturalistic explanation. The Neapolitan physician and polymath Giambattista della Porta, writing about 1560, says that while witches “mix in a great deal of superstition, nevertheless it is apparent to the observer that these things [being carried off to the sabbath] result from a natural force”.<sup>56</sup> In other words, lower-class people are abusing drugs, but they are not necessarily worshipping the Devil, nor being empowered by him.

## Anthropologists, Ethnobotanists, and Other Entheogenic Explorers

Parallel to the study of Wicca and Pagan witchcraft by historians of religion lies another sub-discipline in which the psychotropic reality of flying ointment is a given. Many writers on entheogens, from Aldous Huxley to Gordon Wasson to Terence and Dennis McKenna, postulate connections between entheogens and the origins of spiritual traditions.<sup>57</sup> Richard Evans Schultes (1915–2001), perhaps the United States’ leading ethnobotanist—professor of biology and museum director at Harvard University—endorsed the idea that “toxic and narcotic plants [were] highly valued in medieval European witchcraft... Inebriating plants made up an integral part of the witches practice, and their influence lasted, although somewhat diluted, until relatively recent times”.<sup>58</sup>

The revived interest in shamanism in the West during the latter part of the twentieth century produced an acceptance of a flying ointment-shamanism-witchcraft complex in medieval and early modern Europe. For example, Dennis McKenna (the ethnopharmacologist younger brother of Terence McKenna, the visionary writer on entheogenic philosophy), writes matter-of-factly that plants in the *Datura* and *Brugmansia* species “are widely used for *brujeria* [witchcraft] both in European witchcraft and in indigenous practices... Their ability to evoke an unseen world populated by disembodied or wraithlike spirits may form the basis for such belief systems in both the Western and indigenous traditions”.<sup>59</sup> Elsewhere, he writes of exploring the topic with a friend whom he met in Berkeley in the late 1960s, John Parker, “scholar and keeper of esoteric knowledge”:

Among the topics we’d be exchanging thoughts on that spring were witches’ flying unguents... topical concoctions that usually contained extracts of belladonna or henbane, sometimes with very toxic plants like monkshood (*Aconitum* spp.) or even hashish and opium. Such ointments

<sup>54</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches’ Sabbath* (New York: Random House, 1991), 90.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Harner, “Hallucinogens in European Witchcraft,” 138.

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, R. Gordon Wasson, Stella Kamrisc, Jonathan Ott, and Carl A. P. Ruck, *Persephone’s Quest: Entheogens and the Origins of Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986.) Ott is credited with coining the term “entheogen” (manifesting the divine) to replace “psychedelic,” whose meaning had become blurred in popular culture of the late 1960s.

<sup>58</sup> Richard Evans Schultes, “Foreword to the English Edition,” in *The Witch’s Garden*, ed. Harold A. Hansen and trans. Muriel Crofts (Santa Cruz, CA: Unity Press, 1978), x–xi.

<sup>59</sup> Dennis McKenna, *The Brotherhood of the Screaming Abyss: My Life with Terence McKenna* (St. Cloud, MN: North Star Press, 2012), 172.

were allegedly the secret to how witches could fly to their rituals on a broomstick... they used the broom as an applicator, to apply the unguent to their labia where these substances could be readily absorbed. The resulting state of delirium and disorientation produced by the tropane alkaloids, combined with the cardiac arrhythmias induced by the monkshood, would induce a feeling of rising and falling, and rushing headlong through the air—hence, of flying. The participation in the eldritch and orgiastic rites of the witches’ Sabbath was, under this model, a pure confabulation, as the witches fell into a dreamlike stupor.<sup>60</sup>

The semi-pornographic idea of the broomstick as dildo-applicator also appears in Michael Harrison’s *The Roots of Witchcraft*, published in 1975, and so something that a young investigator of traditional hallucinogens might have encountered.<sup>61</sup> In fact, it shows how the evidence of the witch trials has been condensed and simplified in the modern imagination.

Dennis McKenna and three friends tried a re-created ointment that Parker made for them, but after two hours, “we realized the unguent had failed to produce the desired effects”.<sup>62</sup> In the experiment, however, they had followed a long tradition of attempting to re-create flying ointments based on reports from centuries earlier.

## Conclusion: Flying Ointments and Secretism

As the examples in this chapter briefly illustrate, flying ointment can be seen as a literary plot device (*The Golden Ass*), as a multi-faceted element in the witches’ sabbath narrative (Alice Kyteler and Anna, the miller’s wife), and as something pharmacologically similar or identical to known folk medicine (Anna, Maud Grieve). The story of flying ointment is more complicated than to say merely that it was a hallucinogenic preparation used by witches in centuries past. Furthermore, the solanaceous plants can produce frightening effects; after getting “the full spectrum of tropane alkaloid poisoning” at age 17 when he ate datura seeds, Dennis McKenna concluded that datura was “hallucinogenic” but not “psychedelic” (or entheogenic) and never touched it again.<sup>63</sup>

The hallucinogenic Solanaceae have that reputation. According to the Danish botanist Harold A. Hansen, who gives some conjectural recipes for flying ointment, the German historian Karl Kiesewetter died from his experiments with these plants in the early twentieth century—although possibly the culprit was aconite instead.<sup>64</sup> The German folklorist Will-Erich Peuckert (1895–1965) also tried them, saying in a 1959 lecture that he and a colleague had achieved similar results—the sensation of flying to the sabbath, and that a colleague had similar results. (The experiment took place in about 1927.)<sup>65</sup> Among modern traditional witches, a legend has grown up that Robert Cochrane used belladonna, one of the Solanaceae, when he took his own life in 1966, although Evan John Jones, the covener who inherited leadership, told me that Cochrane used “whisky and sleeping pills”.<sup>66</sup> The atropine poisoning version, however, is preferred by Howard, who notes that Cochrane suffered a nervous breakdown in 1961 and reported suicidal thoughts throughout the early 1960s—exactly the years of his meteoric career as a witch.<sup>67</sup> Other unattested accounts suggest that he encouraged coveners to experience with a wine incorporating solanaceous herbs.<sup>68</sup>

Very few writings on modern traditional witchcraft actually tell how to make and use flying ointments, although a seeker willing to dig a bit can find some recipes—and various herbalists sell “flying ointments”

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 188–189.

<sup>61</sup> Michael Harrison, *The Roots of Witchcraft* (London: Tandem, 1975).

<sup>62</sup> McKenna, *Brotherhood of the Screaming Abyss*, 189.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>64</sup> Harold A. Hansen, *The Witch’s Garden*, trans. Muriel Crofts (Santa Cruz, CA: Unity Press, 1978), 95.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 98–99.

<sup>66</sup> Personal communication, December 1999.

<sup>67</sup> Howard, *Children of Cain*, 73.

<sup>68</sup> For example, Valiente, *The Rebirth of Witchcraft*, 133.



as well, leaving out the more potent herbs. The discourse about flying ointments and plant-based entheogens generally might instead be viewed as a form of “secretism”, as defined by Paul Johnson in his study of Candomblé, *Secrets, Gossip, and Gods*. Traditional witchcraft falls into his second category of secret societies—not completely hidden geographically, but whose members keep secret their religious affiliation.<sup>69</sup> In essence, the important thing is not the content of the secret, but the fact that one or one’s group has secrets, and that other people know it. “The location of secrets was no longer in objects but in discourse”, Johnson writes of Candomblé after the religion became more public in the mid-twentieth century.

Now secrets become a sort of currency of prestige; the “houses” that possess the most secrets are respected for their historical and magical foundations, and “secretism” allows followers of the religion to be public figures while keeping a “closed” ideology. Likewise, traditional witches can write books and blogs while claiming to possess secret traditions of their own, yet enjoy the relative safety of the secular society—a point that Hutton has made in regard to Pagan witchcraft overall. Claiming to have these secrets is one way in which modern traditional witches can make a claim that Gardnerian-derived Wicca cannot. On the other hand, it should be said that some modern traditional witches are willing to admit that they and the Wiccans are part of a divided whole, in Peter Grey’s words, that both were invented based on ancient sources, and that they should emphasize their similarities, for “Our emails are, after all, read by the same intelligence agencies... Our wells poisoned by the same fertilizers, fracking and pharmaceuticals. We must never forget our enemy”.<sup>70</sup>

---

<sup>69</sup> Paul Johnson, *Secrets, Gossip, and Gods: The Transformation of Brazilian Candomblé* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 27.

<sup>70</sup> Grey, *Apocalyptic Witchcraft*, 9–11.

## 12. Afterword<sup>(12)</sup>

Ronald Hutton<sup>1</sup>

I feel honoured, moved and rather unworthy to be presented by Shai Feraro and Ethan Doyle White with this wonderful gift, of an excellent collection of chapters by a succession of gifted scholars, from different academic generations, and nations, and working in different areas of Pagan Studies. It pleases me the more that its appearance, to mark the twentieth anniversary of that of my own book, *The Triumph of the Moon*, will be accompanied by a revised second edition of the latter, brought out by Oxford University Press and intended to recognise, within a strict word limit, the developments in the history of modern Pagan witchcraft during those two decades. As that revised edition has already been delivered, this set of chapters takes those developments still further and opens the way to yet more in the third decade of the current century. At the end of its first decade, a preceding collection was published to mark the tenth anniversary of my own book, to which I also contributed an Afterword, and used that opportunity to reflect on the current state of Pagan Studies at that time. The invitation to perform a similar office here affords me the chance to carry out a rather different exercise with reference to the contents of this volume, by looking at the manner in which Paganism itself and Pagan witchcraft in particular have developed since *Triumph* first came off the press in the last year of the old century.

Two features of that development in particular seem to stand out: an ever greater diversity of form and tradition within Paganism, including witchcraft, and an ever greater public acceptance of it. The multiplication of forms of Pagan witchcraft, as of other forms of Paganism, is partly the result of the lack of any effective central regulating agencies, and the practical autonomy of the groups which comprise the tradition at the local level. In an era in which market forces rule an increasing span of the planet and of human activity, it represents one of the most truly free of markets in belief. That multiplication also, however, reflects the extraordinarily rich and varied sources of inspiration on which Pagan witchcraft draws, a phenomenon which is in large part the theme of the present volume. It is worth taking stock of those, at the present time, and I shall divide them chronologically into successive “orders” of material; though by so doing I emphatically do not wish to imply that any of these divisions are superior, in terms of worthiness and authenticity, to any of the others.

The first, logically enough, consists of the evidence for ancient paganism left by cultures which actually practised it, usually taking the form of literary texts, inscriptions, sculptures, paintings and carvings, as well as of objects used in ritual. Of necessity, these derive almost completely from those societies which had acquired writing and the habit of making visual representations of deities and religious scenes before the Christian takeover: those taken into the Roman Empire and those of Mesopotamia. The second order of material is composed of representations of ancient paganism and of ancient pagan times produced during the centuries in which Christianity was both dominant and intolerant of rivals—between the sixth and eighteenth centuries. This is especially important for those societies which have little reliable evidence surviving from their pagan past, and which covered more or less the whole

---

<sup>1</sup> Bristol University, Bristol, UK  
Ronald Hutton  
**Email:** R.Hutton@bristol.ac.uk

<sup>(12)</sup> © The Author(s) 2019  
Shai Feraro and Ethan Doyle White (eds.)  
Magic and Witchery in the Modern West  
Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15549-0\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15549-0_12)

of Europe outside the Roman Empire and included peoples like the Anglo-Saxons who settled within the former bounds of that empire. This order of material is especially rich in Ireland and Iceland, but also represents parts of Britain and of Continental Europe. Its legacy for modern Paganism, including witchcraft, is as important as that which was bequeathed by the ancient world itself. Most of it is literary, consisting of wonder-tales, poems, romances and sagas, but occasionally artistic representations from this period, such as the Venuses painted by Botticelli or Velasquez, take their place in modern Pagan iconography.

The third order of inspirational material is made up of scholarly and creative literature published when denominations of Christianity still commanded the nominal allegiance of the bulk of the European population, but were losing or had lost their element of compulsion and were starting to yield ground to a more pluralist, tolerant and freethinking range of cultures. This was between the mid-eighteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries, and here British material begins to predominate. For the formation of modern Paganism, it is the most important source matter category of all, and it is no coincidence that most of the contributions to the present volume are concerned with it in one way or another. The majority of the items in the first two orders of source material were filtered through it, in the sense that they reached Paganism in editions, translations and reproductions made during this period. In addition there are plenty of new literary and artistic productions from that period which were inspired by stories and images in the ancient and medieval sources, above all in poems, novels and paintings. Scholarly work from it acted as a major conduit for other streams of influence. The use of folklore in Paganism has depended almost wholly upon the records made by genteel Victorian and Edwardian collectors; indeed, it could hardly be anything else, as most of the seasonal and other folk customs which survive into the present day in Britain do so in forms conditioned by or modelled on the information provided by those collectors.

The same collections have proved to be the main source of information for another cultural stream which has connected with Paganism, and which Helen Cornish shows in this volume to be increasingly important in Pagan witchcraft: cunning craft, or traditional folk magic. I dismissed this as a major formative influence when I wrote *Triumph*, because none of the cunning folk of England between 1740 and 1940 seemed to be pagans and were very often demonstrably devout Christians, while their most important theoretical role was to combat alleged witches, by breaking or reversing their curses. In doing so, however, I probably underestimated the legacy of cunning craft in providing techniques of operative magic, such as scrying and the making of charms, which have been adopted by Pagan witches. The point here, however, is that the means by which that legacy has been transmitted to those witches has been overwhelmingly through the publications of folklorists. Cunning folk have left manuscripts of spells and other records, which survive in archives, but they seem relatively little used hitherto by modern witches. It is also possible that some of the latter were directly trained by old-style cunning folk, but—as both Ethan and I have found in the case of Andrew Chumbley—this is hard to prove. The cunning women and men celebrated by Pagan witches tend to be precisely those most prominent in the books of folklore.

The impact of works published in this vital 200 years is found in other areas as well. Hugh B. Urban convincingly demonstrates here the impact made by Hindu tantric ideas and rites on the founding figures of Wicca, yet the latter encountered those not in the original texts but filtered through the work of authors such as Sir John Woodroffe. Sabina Magliocco notes the influence exerted by literary texts from this time in her valuable chapter on the role of fairies as figures in contemporary Pagan spirituality. The major part played by ceremonial magic in the formation of Pagan witchcraft again highlights the importance of such a mediating function, as the medieval and early modern grimoires which proved most formative were encountered in editions prepared by Victorian and Edwardian magicians; and the latter often produced syncretic compilations based on their own tastes such as Samuel Liddell Mathers's edition of the *Key of Solomon*, which proved to be the most influential single text of all in this respect. Sarah M. Pike traces the enduring impact of nineteenth-century Romantic views of nature upon young Pagan environmentalists, and Manon Hedenborg White makes a fascinating study of how parallel forms of Pagan witchcraft almost evolved in America and Britain using some of the same sources as Wicca.

The records of early modern witch trials were hardly ever encountered by modern witches at first hand, but as filtered through the writings of scholars such as Jules Michelet and Margaret Murray. In addition there is of course the direct influence on the character and beliefs of Pagan witchcraft exerted by individual books from this time which became almost canonical in that role such as *The Golden Bough* and *The White Goddess*.

There is now, moreover, a fourth order of source material for Pagan witchcraft, and that consists of Pagan witchcraft itself. To a great extent the single biggest body of material for the creation of new forms of that witchcraft is comprised by its earlier forms, and especially Gardnerian and Alexandrian Wicca and the work of Robert Cochrane and his associates. Aspects of the processes of appropriation, negotiation and creation involved in the development of recent traditions of Pagan witchcraft are studied here by Léon A. van Gulik and Ethan Doyle White. Ethan's careful analysis of the influences on Andrew Chumbley, and his subsequent career, shows in addition how very hard it can still be to write the history of this witchcraft even when it is as recent as the period since 1980, as so many claims made by leading practitioners remain hard to verify. In addition to receiving influences from the past, Paganism, including forms of witchcraft, is of course given shape, focus and identity by the contemporary cultural influences within which it forms. In cases such as Jenny Butler's Ireland, they are national, and in that of Shai's Pagans against Nukes and 1980s ecofeminists, inspired by the controversy over nuclear weapons which engulfed Britain, with other Western countries, in the first half of the 1980s. Chas S. Clifton's ground-breaking consideration of modern attitudes to the flying ointment allegedly used by some of those accused in late medieval and early modern witch trials invites the reflection that such an interest in that ointment is hard to imagine without the popularity of psychedelic drugs which developed in the course of the 1960s.

These remarks fulfil my intention of reflecting upon the increasing diversity of Paganism, and now there remains my other intention, of considering the greater public acceptance of it during the past two decades. This continues a trend which was already apparent by the 1990s, and to which I referred in the first edition of *Triumph*. Although there are still some communities in which it is dangerous to become publicly known as Pagan, across most of the Western world it is no longer likely that this development will result in practitioners being dismissed by employers, having their children taken into care, being harassed by police and social services, being denied religious rights in prison, hospital or the armed forces or having their windows broken and insults daubed on their doors and walls. All these were very real threats for much of the late twentieth century. The mass media have generally moved from treating Pagan witchcraft in particular as scandalous, shocking, titillating and menacing, to acknowledging it as glamorous and sometimes empowering while still suggesting that aspects of it might still be dangerous, to regarding it as, in itself, no longer newsworthy.

At the opening of this century, when a British Pagan was accused of a crime, police and prosecutors frequently used that person's religion as a mark of their bad character, and it was the defence team who called in people like me as expert witnesses to reassure the jury that Paganism did not in itself predispose its followers to misbehaviour. Since 2010 it is more likely that the prosecuting team will call in such witnesses to give the jury that reassurance, and so deny any claim on the part of the accused that their Paganism encouraged or excused their transgression. In the academy, Pagan Studies are now established as a recognised sub-discipline of Religious Studies, parallel to the now similarly established one of Esoteric Studies. Such studies are carried on by a recognised and continuous international group of scholars which is constantly refreshed by the appearance of able young colleagues and often publishes in the same journals and forms panels at conferences. The present volume is one testimony to its dynamism. In a number of nations, Pagans are now officially appointed as university, hospital and prison chaplains or visitors, and are in increasing demand as celebrants of rites of passage. It is worth asking, given all this success, what remains to be done to achieve full public acceptance for this complex of religions.

The answer is a huge amount. In many ways, Pagans have made in almost 70 years, though with less extreme risks, the same journey that British Quakers made in their first 70 years of existence. By the opening of the eighteenth century, Quakers were no longer vulnerable, as they had been a generation

earlier, to being imprisoned, transported to the colonies or beaten up by armed vigilantes, and could carry on their religion in peace. On the other hand, that religion also barred them from any high public employment. In a similar manner, Pagans are now rarely regarded as a threat to society at large, but their religious beliefs still mark them down, in mainstream culture, as people not to be taken seriously or entrusted with positions of considerable responsibility and authority. What they have achieved is not acceptance, but a classic example of Herbert Marcuse's "repressive tolerance". The critical weakness of Paganism at the end of the 2010s is that nobody in a position of real power or influence is openly on its side. In other words, no leading actor, musician, novelist, poet, politician, business person, television personality, academic or industrialist publicly professes one of its forms (and it seems that few if any in each category do so privately either). The academy is a microcosm of this situation: when all has been said about the healthy state of Pagan Studies, it remains true that there is no university department yet dedicated to them, no institutional research centre and no established professorial chair. In Britain, the birthplace of more forms of Paganism than any other nation, there are actually fewer scholars of Paganism, or Pagans, now in tenured university posts than there were at the beginning of the century.

Why are things like this? A large part of the answer lies in the sheer weight of prejudice against Paganism which still exists in our parent societies and is in itself a powerful deterrent to any ambitious and able person either to adopt a Pagan identity or to profess one once adopted. Much of this prejudice is a hangover from Christianity, which has represented its triumph over ancient paganism as not merely one of true over false religion, but of civilisation, decency, charity and progress over barbarism, savagery, superstition and ignorance. That rhetoric has left a powerful taint, and the increasing number of citizens of Western nations who self-identify as having no religion often retain that aversion when they have abandoned all other vestiges of a Christian faith. Doctrinaire atheists and rationalists, moreover, frequently admit a grudging willingness to concede the perpetuation of the great historic established faiths which entered the modern world, as matters of private belief, but react with hostility to the multiplication of religions by the appearance of new or revived forms. Pagan witches compound this problem with an enormous additional one, of identifying both with Paganism and with witchcraft; and when all the measures have been taken to redeem the image of the witch as an icon of feminism, nature-worship, alternative medicine and folk wisdom, that image still remains one of the most potent figures of pathological evil and menace which traditional Western culture has bequeathed to the present (and which has parallels in many other parts of the world).

It is precisely the fact that traditionally both paganism and witchcraft have been perceived as phenomena in opposition to cultural norms that has given them such a strong counter-cultural appeal in late modern society. They are excellent symbols of and vehicles for creative transgression in thought and deed; but here lies a second major reason for their lack of appeal to the leaders and opinion-formers of the societies in which their modern forms have appeared. The whole point about a counter-cultural stance is that it is in opposition to the mainstream and so appeals to those who reject that mainstream, and not to those who inhabit it. Modern Pagans and witches commonly identify their religious traditions with the poor, persecuted and marginalised, and the losers of history: with the victims of the early modern witch trials, or the druids resisting (and being vanquished by) the Romans, or female commoners being oppressed by patriarchy, or a Norse heathen culture which briefly terrorised the Christian world before being defeated and converted. As I remarked in my Afterword to the tenth-anniversary edition of essays that followed *The Triumph of the Moon*, there is remarkably little inclination among Pagans to align themselves with the hugely influential ancient civilisations of Greece and Rome, which would have some purchase on the educated Western elite imagination and encourage some respect and sense of kinship on the part of the latter. Nor is there much interest in the Romantic poets and artists of the nineteenth century who were direct ancestors of the modern Pagan movement and likewise represent points of connection with the cultural mainstream. Instead Paganism is instinctually a complex of religions associated with woods, shadows and the margins.

The third main reason for the weakness of Paganism in the contemporary world, I would suggest, is precisely that richness and diversity of character on which I remarked earlier. This is echoed in its

generally atomised structure and reflects the often rebellious, individualist and exploratory nature of many of those attracted to Pagan traditions. This is entirely understandable and natural, but both institutions of authority and members of the general public seeking ritual and magical services often find it easier in practical terms and more reassuring in instinctual terms to deal with formalised and accredited representative bodies, preferably on a national scale. This is especially true when it comes to the official recognition of chaplains and visitors and the engagement of celebrants. Moreover, the diverse and fissiparous nature of all forms of Paganism means that even within one tradition of it (and especially within Pagan witchcraft), there is no general agreement concerning the nature of deity, ritual or authority within groups; the appropriate relationship with the natural environment and with ancestors (or even what is signified by each of those); the need for representative bodies; the ideal form of gender relations and sexual politics; the identity of ancient or modern role models; the history which underpins the tradition; or the attitude that should be taken by Pagans towards the wider society around them. All that Paganism seems to have in common across all of its varieties is that to some extent its adherents are inspired by the pre-Christian religions of Europe and the Near East—through the four orders of source material identified above—and the nature of that inspiration can be almost endlessly varied, and divisive. No wonder society at large, and especially its controlling and opinion-forming elites, frequently cannot make much sense of Paganism and tends still to discount, deride or suspect it.

Having said all that, Paganism, both in general and in its constituent forms and traditions, still has enough common beliefs to present a strong, comprehensible and acceptable identity to the world. Most adherents to it, in each tradition, seem to agree that divinity is both female and male, or female rather than male, and that this should be reflected in its celebrants, with priestesses playing a large, equal, dominant or sole part in rites. Most likewise believe that in some sense and to some extent there is an inherent sanctity and animating spirit (or range of spirits) in the natural world. Another bonding belief is an acceptance that deities do not give laws to humans but encourage them to express their own talents and fulfil their own destinies to the maximum possible effect, while avoiding the causing of harm to others, including the planet, in the process. All of these unifying principles are present in Pagan witchcraft, and to a great extent emerged from it. That witchcraft has in turn presented the world at large with a number of very strong images and symbols—the quartered circle as a working space which must first be consecrated in the name of the four elements; the goddess as Maiden, Mother and Crone; one or two gods of nature as the most important male deity form, and consort of the goddess; and the image of the witch priestess as a timeless embodiment of female power and nature-based wisdom and spirituality. These have a potential to leak into popular culture, as indeed they have already started to do, a process noted in its early stages in *The Triumph of the Moon*. That all this has not made more of an impact on wider society may be ascribed to the weaknesses in Paganism suggested above; but it may do yet.

That likelihood is increased by the current health and vigour of the various forms of Paganism, much stimulated by the revolution in information technology. New and marginalised forms of religion and spirituality often display remarkable staying power: one thinks here of nineteenth-century varieties such as Spiritualism and various radical Protestant Christian sects, and of ceremonial magic of the Golden Dawn tradition, and later of Scientology and various strains of mystical Hinduism and Buddhism introduced to the West. In this sense time would appear to be on the side of Paganism, as are the opportunities presented by the birth of new generations born to Pagan parents, including Pagan witches. If the circumstances discussed above frequently act as a disincentive for existing celebrities and power-brokers to embrace Paganism, there is a growing chance that second- or third-generation Pagans who keep to their family beliefs may manifest talents which will carry them into the first division of authors, performing artists and fine artists.

At this point some readers may wonder if I have departed from my accustomed role as a historian for one as an advocate, seeking ways to promote and enhance the people and beliefs whose development I have attempted to trace—much as some of the readers of *The Triumph of the Moon* accused it of being either an attempt to discredit and destroy Pagan witchcraft or else an apology for and advertisement

of it. I would resist that suggestion, on the grounds that having written the history of a particular phenomenon I feel able to extend that into a consideration of its present condition and nature, suggesting its shortcomings as well as its strengths. The fact that I feel able to turn to that is itself in part an indication that one result of being presented with this collection is that I feel that the writing of the history of Paganism is currently in good hands. This book is further evidence of the existence of a network of scholars existing within the academy or in co-operation with it, who regard that history as an important component of the story of the modern West, and who exist in a harmony with each other based on a common understanding of the nature of what is being studied and of the task of studying it. That is perhaps the most precious gift of all.

# Index<sup>1</sup>

## A

Alexandrian Wicca/Alexandrianism/Alexandrian  
Anderson, Cora  
Anderson, Victor

## B

Babalon  
Barker, Cicely Marie  
Beth, Rae  
Bocking, Brian  
Buckland, Raymond

## C

Cameron, Marjorie  
Cauldron, The  
Celtic  
Chambers, R. W.  
Chaos magick  
Christianity/Christian  
Chumbley, Andrew D.  
Church of All Worlds (CAW)  
Cochrane, Robert  
Cochranian Witchcraft/Cochranianism/Cochranian  
Cohn, Norman  
Collins, Andrew  
Costin, Simon  
Cottingley fairies  
Cox, Zachary  
Cozens, Philip  
Crowley, Aleister  
Crowley, Vivianne  
Crowther, Patricia  
Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly  
Cultus Sabbati  
Curwen, David

---

<sup>1</sup> Note: Page numbers followed by 'n' refer to notes.



## D

Diana  
Dianic Witchcraft/Dianicism/Dianic  
Druid

## E

Earth First!  
Earth Mysteries  
Eco-feminism/eco-feminist  
Entheogens  
Environmentalism  
Esotericism/esoteric  
Evans, Dave

## F

Fairies  
Farrar, Janet  
Farrar, Stewart  
Feminism/feminist  
Folklore  
Fortune, Dion  
Frazer, James  
Frisvold, Nicholaj de Mattos

## G

Gardner, Gerald  
Gardnerian Wicca/Gardnerianism/Gardnerian  
Ginzburg, Carlo  
God  
Goddess  
Goddess Spirituality  
Golden Ass, The  
Grant, Kenneth  
Graves, Robert  
Gray, William  
Great Rite  
Greenham  
Grey, Peter

## H

Hanegraaff, Wouter  
Harding, Mark

Harner, Michael  
Heathenry; Heathens  
Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn  
Hinduism  
Howard, Michael  
Hubbard, L. Ron  
Hutton, Ronald

## J

Jackson, Nigel Aldcroft  
James, M. R.  
Jones, Prudence

## K

Kabbalah/Kabbalic/Kabbalist  
Kalas  
Kelly, Aidan A.  
King, Graham  
Kipling, Rudyard  
Kyteler, Alice

## L

Leland, Charles Godfrey  
Lévi, Éliphas  
Lewis, C. S.  
Lovecraft, H. P.  
Lovelock, James  
Lucifer  
Luciferianism/Luciferian  
Luhrmann, Tanya

## M

Magic  
Massey, Gerald  
Matthews, Caitlin  
Matthews, John  
McKenna, Dennis  
McNess, James  
Michelet, Jules  
Montalban, Madeline  
Mother Earth  
Murray, Margaret  
Museum of Witchcraft

## N

Neuburg, Victor B.  
New Age

## O

Occult  
Occultism  
Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO)

## P

Paganism  
Paganlink  
Pagans Against Nukes (PAN)  
Pan  
Parsons, Jack  
Pennick, Nigel  
Pipes of Pan, The  
Power, John

## Q

Qabalah, *see* Kabbalah/Kabbalic/Kabbalist

## R

Reclaiming Witchcraft/Reclaiming  
Redgrove, Peter  
Rees, Ken  
Reuss, Theodor  
Romanticism/Romantic

## S

Sabbath  
Sabbatic Craft  
Sanders, Alex  
Satanism/Satanic  
Schulke, Daniel  
Shuttle, Penelope  
Sjöö, Monica  
Spare, Austin Osman  
Spiral Dance, The  
Staley, Michael  
Starhawk

Stewart, R. J.

## **T**

Taliesin

Tantra

Tara

Tarot

Thelema/Thelemite/Thelemic

Tolkien, J. R. R.

Traditional Witchcraft/Traditional Witches

Triumph of the Moon, The

Typhonian

## **V**

Valiente, Doreen

## **W**

Western

Wicca

Williams, Jean

Williamson, Cecil

Witch trial

Witchcraft Today

Witch-trial

Woodroffe, John

Wytte, Joan

## **Y**

Yorke, Gerald

## **Z**

Zell-Ravenheart, Oberon

Zene, Cosimo

The Library of Unconventional Lives

Shai Feraro and Ethan Doyle White  
Magic and Witchery in the Modern West  
Celebrating the Twentieth Anniversary of 'The Triumph of the Moon'  
2019

<[www.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15549-0](http://www.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15549-0)>

First edition

ISBN 303015548X, 9783030155483

Palgrave Macmillan

**thelul.org**