



# The Priestess Ascending

Subversion and hegemony in Wiccan constructions of gender

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## 1 Introduction and purpose

In the sixties and seventies it seemed to be that the female Pagans had to look pretty and alluring, whilst the men did all of the kind of hard thinking stuff. And I think that this was partly about, quite a lot of the thinking started off, like the Wiccan stuff, with Gerald Gardner and Alex Sanders. They had priestesses who were almost like muses, whereas most of the priestesses I know now are more like project managers. You know, they organise stuff, they're not there to inspire.

The above words, voiced by a young Wiccan woman living in London, describe the changes that have taken place in the construction of femininity, priestess femininity in particular, since the founding of Wicca. Wicca, a Pagan mystery tradition usually attributed to British civil servant Gerald Gardner, is a duotheistic religion popularised in the mid-20th century, traditionally focusing on the worship of the Great Goddess and her son-consort, the Horned God.

As indicated by the above quote, the original gender roles in Wicca were traditional. For Gerald Gardner, the role of the priestess was primarily to inspire her male counterpart by means of her beauty and sweetness of nature. Ritually, the High Priestess was a representative of the Goddess, but was only allowed to hold this office as long as she deferred to the High Priest and male power. Today, however, priestesses are as organisationally powerful as they are ritually important, and viewed as sources of authority and knowledge rather than ornaments or ritual vessels. Priestesses hold more authority than priests in the Wiccan community, and the High Priestess is deferred to above all others.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how modern Wiccans construct priestess femininity, how their views compare to previous constructions of priestess femininity in Wicca and what this indicates about the development of Wiccan gender constructions. Using the theories of Judith Butler and R.W. Connell, I have investigated how views of femininity among modern Wiccans illustrate a development in the construction of femininity from when Gardner published his first texts on witchcraft.

## 2 Methodology

I have used three different methods to study my area of choice: interviews, participant observation, and literature analysis. This approach of using different types of data collection and comparing the findings to previous research is known as method triangulation.<sup>1</sup> When successful, method triangulation can enable a relatively minor study to lend itself to broader conclusions about a phenomenon. This was precisely my aim: to give myself the tools to analyse macro-developments within Wicca. While my main focus has been interviews, participant observation allowed me to form hypotheses regarding the validity of my conclusions while literature analysis allowed me to contextualise and better understand my informants' answers.

The data collection for my study took place mainly in London. As stated above, my primary method of investigation was semi-structured interviews. This method entails the researcher devising a general interview guide beforehand, while remaining free to diverge from it and pursue other relevant issues that may come up during the interview. Semi-structured interviews are suitable for exploring a particular subject while still allowing the informant to speak in his or her own words.<sup>2</sup>

I used a digital voice-recorder to document all of my oral interviews with the exception of one where the noisy surroundings rendered voice-recording impossible. Use of a voice-recording device allows the researcher to focus on interacting with the informant and paying closer attention to non-verbal cues such as eye contact and body language.<sup>3</sup> In my opinion, this makes voice-recording preferable to note taking. Though some may be hesitant to speak when their statements are being recorded, this was never an issue during my study. To the best of my knowledge, all of my informants were very comfortable with me using a voice-recorder.

Naturally, the interview method is not flawless. Interviews are easily affected by factors such as the researcher's personality, the informant's mood and personal chemistry between interviewer and interviewee. Therefore, it is difficult to verify the findings by repeating the procedure as different interviewers may receive different responses on different occasions. In an influential guide to semi-structured interviewing,

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<sup>1</sup> May, *Samhällsvetenskaplig forskning*, Lund: Studentlitteratur 2001, pp. 200-201.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 150-151.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

however, author Steinar Kvale uses the example of the successful illusionist as proof that many people reporting of the same phenomenon is no guarantee of truth.<sup>4</sup>

During my stay in London I found more people who were willing to be interviewed than my brief visit permitted. Lack of resources prevented me from extending my stay, and thus I interviewed some informants via e-mail. One advantage of this is that e-mail interviews do not require transcription, eliminating the inevitable measure of interpretation that transcription entails.<sup>5</sup> However, e-mail interviews can be more difficult to interpret, as the researcher cannot observe and follow up on non-verbal cues.<sup>6</sup> Though I believe face-to-face interviews are in general preferable, the use of e-mails enabled me to interview more people than I would otherwise have been able to. Therefore, I chose to use this method despite its obvious limitations.

I have also conducted a small amount of participant observation. The aim of participant observation is to gain access and insight into social life in order to comprehend it more fully, and hypotheses and theories are often formulated over the course of the study.<sup>7</sup> I took the role of participant-as-observer, participating actively in events but being completely open about my identity and purpose for visiting. During the course of my study, I attended a so-called pub moot where Pagans meet to socialise and discuss topics of interest, and participated in a weekend-long conference celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Pagan Federation. The latter included guided tours, rituals and performances, talks and workshops along with socialising in pubs and nightclubs.

I was in the “field” for a very short time. The data I collected by means of participant observation are a complement to my interview findings rather than the foundation of my study. Although my study is far too small to generate any definitive answers, I believe that my explorations “in the field” helped inform my analysis of my interviewees’ answers, enabling me to form hypotheses regarding whether their views could at all be considered representative of the Pagan community.

### 3 Ethical considerations

Historian Ronald Hutton remarks that researchers writing about Pagan witchcraft or Wicca inevitably become involved in a fierce cultural debate, as these topics are still

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<sup>4</sup> Kvale, *Den kvalitativa forskningsintervjun*, Lund: Studentlitteratur 1997, p. 65.

<sup>5</sup> Svenningsson & Lövheim & Bergquist, *Att fånga nätet*, Lund: Studentlitteratur 2003, pp. 91-92.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

<sup>7</sup> May, 2001, pp. 179-180, 188.

controversial. Outsiders assume the researcher to be either “for” or “against” Wicca, meaning that researchers who show due respect and empathy towards emic worldviews are often accused of being proselytisers.<sup>8</sup>

I concur vehemently with Hutton. While my professors and fellow students have responded with enthusiasm to my choice of topic, others have often reacted with incredulity bordering on suspicion. “Surely, that can’t be a real religion?” and “Are you serious?” have been frequent responses. Moreover, some started talking about cults and brainwashing.<sup>9</sup> The latter response is arguably more troubling given the similarities with claims made during the “Satanic Panic” of the 1980’s and 1990’s where Wiccans were repeatedly accused of practising satanic ritual abuse.

This presents a dilemma. I feel great sympathy towards the people I met in London, who were essential to the development of my thesis. These people treated me with kindness and respect, were often quick to ironise about their own and others’ views of their spirituality, and never tried to convert me or question my beliefs. As a result, I am becoming increasingly annoyed with people who do not question Paganism or Wicca from the point of view of curious outsiders, but who address groundless accusations at people they know nothing about. Though it cannot be my responsibility to refute every unfounded claim against Pagans, I have become aware that this group, to a larger extent than many other spiritual communities, is often subjected to stereotyping, ridicule and baseless criticism.

Kvale discusses ethical considerations in interview research, prompting scholars to consider possible outcomes of research before initiating a project.<sup>10</sup> As a general rule, he states that possible benefits for the people studied should always outweigh the possible damages.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the researcher also has a responsibility to ensure that the knowledge produced is relevant, accurate and unbiased.<sup>12</sup> May maintains that ethical awareness of the underlying assumptions, limits and possible outcomes of a study helps researchers make informed decisions regarding these puzzles, to which there are no given solutions.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Hutton, “Living with witchcraft”, Jenny Blain & Douglas Ezzy & Graham Harvey (eds.), *Researching Paganisms*, The Pagan studies series, Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press 2004, p. 183.

<sup>9</sup> Kathryn Rountree reports of similar experiences when doing research on feminist witchcraft in New Zealand, see: Rountree, *Embracing the witch and the goddess*, London: Routledge 2004, pp. 2, 13.

<sup>10</sup> Kvale, 1997, pp. 104-105.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>13</sup> May, 2001, p. 63.



I believe that research treating Wicca and other forms of Paganism as legitimate religions can partly ameliorate the problem of ridicule, even where the research is critical. In fact, a critical outlook is necessary as portraying one's field of study in an excessively positive light will rightfully result in the research not being taken seriously, thus defeating the purpose of portraying Wicca as legitimate spirituality. I have therefore decided that the positive effects of my study outweigh the potentially negative consequences.

## 4 Methodological challenges: capturing the complexity of spiritual experience

### 4.1 Possible limitations of interview studies

Åsa Trulsson and Sarah M. Pike are sceptical of discourse-oriented studies, arguing that mere description can never penetrate the reality of human life. They contend that participant observation and ritual studies should form the basis of research on contemporary spirituality.<sup>14</sup> Some scholars of Pagan studies have also pointed out that many Pagans are more interested in ritual than theology.<sup>15</sup> Thus, it could be argued that research on Paganism should focus on practice. Trulsson maintains that the tendency for religious studies scholars to focus on texts and beliefs is the result of a normative understanding of religion that uses Protestantism (with its emphasis on faith based in scripture) as a prototype.<sup>16</sup> Pike, who notes that there are often vast differences between discourse and lived religion, endorses the argument for practice-oriented studies.<sup>17</sup>

Both Trulsson and Pike make valid points. My study focuses on discourse, and thus my insight into Wiccan life is limited. Still, practice-oriented studies cannot always shed light on the ideals and considerations that motivate spiritual conduct.<sup>18</sup> Very few are born into Wicca, which has been popularised mostly by people growing up in Protestant

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<sup>14</sup> Trulsson, *Cultivating the sacred: ritual creativity and practice among women in contemporary Europe*, Lund: Department of history and anthropology of religions 2010, p. 48.

<sup>15</sup> Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, New York: Oxford University Press 1999, p.; Davy, *Introduction to Pagan studies*, The Pagan studies series, Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press 2007, p. 398.

<sup>16</sup> Trulsson, 2010, pp. 43-44.

<sup>17</sup> Pike, "Forging magical selves: gendered bodies and ritual fires at neo-pagan festivals", James R. Lewis (ed.) *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft*, Albany: State University of New York Press 1996, p.

<sup>18</sup> Davy, 2007, p. 165.

homes.<sup>19</sup> This may have shaped their understanding of religion in the same way as the very scholars Trulsson criticises. Wicca also draws largely on occult traditions, where theoretical and theological discussions are often of great importance. Moreover, conversation is one of the most basic forms of human interaction,<sup>20</sup> and even people who may emphasise ritual and practice socialise, pitch their ideas and construct their identities through verbal interaction. Therefore, interviews may provide valuable insights in areas where ritual studies do not.

#### 4.2 Limitations of analytic interpretation

In an article about methodological problems she faced when studying the Reclaiming witches of San Francisco, Jone Salomonsen points to another challenge. Throughout her fieldwork she searched for a consistent, underlying and all-permeating system of faith and symbols to read as text. This also applied to her analysis of gender. Salomonsen reasoned that, as the witches' ritual symbol system, language and structure were mainly derived from patriarchal occult orders; the rituals of the Reclaiming witches reproduced the patriarchal biological essentialism of these orders.<sup>21</sup>

Salomonsen notes that her theory, though analytically accurate, does not explain experiences of empowerment in Reclaiming. Despite a tradition of biological essentialism, many practitioners – male and female – have experienced a sense of emancipation from preconceived ideas about gender and spirituality. Therefore, Salomonsen stresses the importance of not only searching for hidden messages and meanings, but also taking religious symbols and emic experiences seriously as concepts with real spiritual value.<sup>22</sup>

I agree that this must be considered, particularly when working with traditions that are not always accepted as legitimate spiritualities. Though I concur with Salomonsen's gender analysis of Reclaiming, it is not necessarily representative of participants' experiences. This does not imply that their views should simply be disregarded expressions of false consciousness. While I believe that my own feminist commitment instils me with a highly beneficial passion for the subject, eagerness to

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<sup>19</sup> Hutton, 1999; Pearson "Witches and Wicca", Joanne Pearson (ed.) *Belief beyond boundaries: Wicca, Celtic spirituality and the new age*, Aldershot: Ashgate 2002b, pp. 142-143.

<sup>20</sup> Berger & Luckmann, *The social construction of reality: a treatise in the sociology of knowledge*, London: Penguin 1991 pp. 42-45, 51-53.

<sup>21</sup> Salomonsen, *Enchanted feminism: ritual, gender and divinity among the reclaiming witches of San Francisco*. London: Routledge 2002, p. 45.

<sup>22</sup> Salomonsen, 2002, pp. 46-47, 50.

uncover injustice must not result in a belief that everything an informant says contains a secret message of oppression.

## 5. Sources

I have interviewed 5 women and one transgender man between the ages of 23 and 48. While some hold official positions in the Pagan community and others are socially central to the Pagan scene, others do not hold such positions. Most of my informants have some type of university education and all of them are white. All but one are involved in Wicca in some form, although some elect not to define themselves exclusively as Wiccan. One of my informants is a practitioner of Heathenry.

The main research questions of a project determine the possible outcomes to a certain extent.<sup>23</sup> Though all of my informants were “gender aware”, is not unreasonable to assume that people who heard about my study but do not have or wish to share an opinion on the matter of gender in Wicca and Paganism chose not to volunteer to be interviewed. Nevertheless, surveys indicate that Pagans are indeed more gender-conscious and supportive of gender equality than the average citizen.<sup>24</sup>

### 5.1 Gender distribution

There are several reasons for which I chose to focus my study on Wiccan women. Academic research and history of religion studies in particular has historically focused on men’s experiences, although this has changed in the last few decades.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, women’s social worlds have been under-explored. Secondly, research on gender in religion has mostly portrayed women as victims.<sup>26</sup> As I will argue, Wicca is a tradition where the grip of patriarchy seems to be exceptionally loose. This indicates a flaw in previous femininity theory, as outlined in the next section. Making visible a microculture with a unique gender system exposes the socially constructed nature of the gender system in society. This also indicates how gender hierarchies interact with other variables, in this case religion, and makes visible how constructions of gender within a

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<sup>23</sup> Kvale, 1997, p. 146.

<sup>24</sup> Davy, 2007, p. 171; Berger, *A community of witches, A community of witches: contemporary neo-paganism and witchcraft in the United States*, Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina 1999, p. 46

<sup>25</sup> May 2001, p. 30; Kinsley, “Women’s studies and the history of religions”, Arvind Sharma (ed.), *Methodology in religious studies: the interface with women’s studies*, Albany: State University of New York 2002, pp. 2-3.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

religion are contingent on its composition of theology, organisational structure and ritual system.

As stated above, I have also interviewed one man, despite it being my original intention to only interview women within the tradition of Wicca. However, the snowball effect brought me into contact with a transgender male, a practitioner of Heathenry. Having interacted with practitioners of many other Pagan traditions, his answers showed a unique perspective on gender and views on masculinity and femininity among Wiccans that differed significantly from those of my other informants. His spiritual explorations seem to have pushed him to reflect on gender in a different way than my other informants, and in some senses his experiences indicate both the limitations of my study and potential problem areas in Wiccan attitudes to gender. This will be discussed towards the end of my thesis.

## 6 Theory

### 6.1 Judith Butler

#### 6.1.1 The performative creation of social reality

When Wicca emerged, it had a traditional outlook on femininity despite the fact that women held positions of authority as priestesses and representatives of the Goddess. Today, Wiccans use a variety of strategies to re-interpret femininity. Discourses of gender and femininity among Wiccans have historically veered between different degrees of essentialism and radical subversion of gender norms, often embodying both elements. Whereas some Wiccans use the terms “masculine” and “feminine” as archetypes, many such constructions of gender still manage to be subversive. In order to explain this paradox, I will be using Judith Butler’s theories of subversion of the gender system, albeit in a somewhat re-interpreted form.

Butler states that all societies that privilege men above women are built on the assumption that there are two stable and separate sexes. She argues that viewing society solely in terms of the power relations between the sexes is a simplification. Furthermore, such an analysis is founded in normative heterosexuality as the division of humanity into binary sexes is based on the anatomical differences that are meaningful in the context of heterosexual desire.

Butler therefore presents a different strategy towards equality than traditional identity politics. Feminist theory has historically assumed that there is a stable category, “women”, with compatible interests that can be represented. This politics of identity downplays differences among women and must always be founded on a common denominator that defines what a “real woman” is. Therefore, representative feminist identity politics are exclusive and reproduce the very essentialism feminism strives to eradicate.<sup>27</sup> Although black and lesbian feminists predated Butler in criticising feminist theories that presumed universal applicability, the influence of Butler’s *Gender trouble* when it comes to shaping subsequent developments in the field of feminist and queer theory is enormous.<sup>28</sup>

It is common among gender theoreticians to distinguish between biologically determined sex and socially constructed gender, contesting the idea that women are biologically destined to have certain characteristics and be suited to certain roles or functions in society. However, Butler argues that such theories seem to presume that there is a link between sex and social situation. Despite these theories not taking social gender to be biologically predetermined, research guided by the distinction between biological and social gender has only uncovered two genders, male and female. Also, such research seems to indicate that these social genders correspond with biological gender, as men are defined as masculine whereas women are defined as feminine.

Thus, Butler argues that this common way of thinking still implies biology as the origin of gendered behaviour. She therefore maintains that sex is as much a social construct as gender, and that there is no natural sex unaffected by cultural and social discourses. In short, biological gender was social all along.<sup>29</sup> Butler says that gender is performative, meaning that gender is something one *does* rather than something that one is. There is no fixed or “true” gender identity that is communicated through expressions of gender.<sup>30</sup> The term “performativity” implies that the act itself creates social reality. An example used by Butler is when an infant is born and someone announces: “It’s a boy!” This is not merely a statement of fact, but one of many performative acts that create the newborn as a boy.<sup>31</sup> Another example is when a minister says: “I now

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<sup>27</sup> Butler, *Gender trouble*, New York: Routledge 1999, pp. 6-9.

<sup>28</sup> Tollin & Törnqvist, *Feministisk teori i rörliga bilder*, Liber: Malmö 2005, pp. 113-114.

<sup>29</sup> Butler, 1999, p. 9-11.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

pronounce you husband and wife.” The uttering of these words is what creates the couple as married.<sup>32</sup>

In terms of gender, Butler states that people become gendered subjects through certain behaviours that create the impression of an underlying gender identity or essence. These behaviours must be constantly repeated in order to uphold the illusion of gendered essence. However, the culturally intelligible forms of gender performance are highly regulated. Consequently, performative acts of gendering rely on imitation of a limited number of established and “approved” ways of “doing gender”. By repeating such acts, one places oneself within a binary gender system where behaviour and desire preferably follow causally from a person’s sex.<sup>33</sup> The set of norms that determine that a person born in a physically male body should display masculine characteristics and form romantic and sexual relationships with women is known as heteronormativity.

### 6.1.2 Subversion of the gender system

Butler claims that the cultural regulations that govern gendered behaviour cannot be entirely discarded, as there is no subject that pre-dates performative action. Instead, the subject is created through constant imitation, and the “solution” must be sought inside the gender system, which by means of its fixedness actually contains the prerequisites for its own undoing. Butler subsequently discusses practises that build on established categories but make visible their arbitrary nature by scrambling them and placing them in new contexts.<sup>34</sup>

One of Butler’s examples of the above is lesbian butch-femme-couplings.<sup>35</sup> Butler states that these couples are often wrongly believed to be displaying an underlying heterosexuality or read as poor imitations of heteronormative gender performance. Butler expresses a different interpretation and writes that, by separating the masculine-feminine relationship pattern from a heterosexual context, butch-femme-couples subvert the gender system by demonstrating that this relationship structure is socially created. Also, the separation of masculine gender performance from genetic maleness

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<sup>32</sup> Tollin & Törnqvist, 2005, p. 115.

<sup>33</sup> Butler, 1999, pp. 40-42.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>35</sup> “Butch” and “femme” are LGBT terms used respectively to denote stereotypically masculine and feminine gender performances. The term “femme” is used of a person with a traditionally female role, and “butch” is used to refer to the traditionally male role, see: “Gender terms and linguistics”, *Butch-femme.com*, <http://www.butch-femme.com/content.php?23-Gender-Terms-and-Linguistics>, 2011-12-12.

contests assumptions that gendered identities are inherent.<sup>36</sup> Causing “gender trouble” by dislocating the constructed continuities between sex, gender and sexuality that are the basis of heteronormativity and patriarchy is a subversive strategy that disrupts and destabilises a system by exploiting that very system’s categories.<sup>37</sup>

I would like to apply Butler’s theory of subversion to constructions of gender and femininity in Wicca. I will argue that Wiccan constructions of priestess femininity originated in gender essentialism and traditional gender stereotypes. However, it is common in Wiccan circles today that women have dominant positions. Traditionally, a High Priestess and a High Priest lead a Wiccan coven, but the former tends to have more authority.

This potential for empowerment and liberation seems to be an important reason for which many women are drawn to Wicca in the first place, although some of my informants express concerns that Wicca will just turn into an inverted form of patriarchy. Nonetheless, the construction of the Wiccan priestess today separates biological femaleness from subordination and passivity; elements that Connell has argued are fundamental aspects of how femininity is constructed.<sup>38</sup> Although the traditional custom of dividing leadership of the coven between a man and a woman implies that the notion of binary genders has not been discarded, women hold positions of ritual and political dominance. This exposes the socially constructed nature of the gendered power structure that places men above women. Wiccans today are also challenging the traditional emphasis on heteronormative gender polarity by searching for new symbols that also represent the experience of lesbian, gay and transgender persons, thus separating the concept of polarity between men and women from that of heterosexual desire. I will therefore argue that Wiccan constructions of gender are complex and contain powerful elements of gender subversion.

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<sup>36</sup> Butler, 1999, pp. 40-41.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>38</sup> Connell, *Masculinities*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press 2005, pp. 16, 83; *Gender & power: society, the person and sexual politics*, Cambridge: Polity in association with Basil Blackwell 1987, pp. 183-185.

## 6.2 R.W. Connell

### 6.2.1 Hegemony and emphasised femininity

In addition to Butler's theory of subversion, I will also be aided by Australian sociologist R. W. Connell's theory of gender. In *Masculinities*, Connell outlines her theory of multiple masculinities, all ordered around patriarchal oppression of women and connected to a hegemonic masculinity. Hegemony refers to the social dynamics through which a group achieves cultural dominance. This in turn implies control over language, ideologies, norms and organisational structures. Hegemonic masculinity is a (or perhaps *the*) cultural ideal: the composition of gender practises, established and institutionalised through ideology, media and politics through which men's domination and women's subordination is sustained.<sup>39</sup>

Connell rejects the possibility of hegemonic femininity and states that femininities are always constructed within a context of subordination to men, although different femininities embody different responses to this. However, all femininities are not regarded as equally valid in the eyes of society. The strategy of compliance and striving to accommodate men's needs is defined as emphasised femininity, and is the most highly valued of all femininities.<sup>40</sup> Emphasised femininity is the culturally privileged form of embodying feminine gender, and as such it is regarded as the most legitimate way of "being a woman". Emphasised femininity is defined by the ability to emotionally validate, support and please men, and is constructed in relation to hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, emphasised femininity could be regarded as the response to the needs of currently established hegemonic masculinity.<sup>41</sup>

At this time in history, hegemonic masculinity is based on power, aggression, authority and dominance over women. Emphasised femininity, on the other hand, is associated with submission, passivity and pleasantness: in short, it does not challenge, question or in any way threaten this order. Attempts to destabilise hegemonic masculinity as opposed to catering to its needs places one outside the framework of emphasised femininity. Therefore, even the most culturally valued form of femininity is

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<sup>39</sup> Connell, 2005, p. 77.

<sup>40</sup> Connell, 1987, p. 183.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.



incompatible with the concept of cultural dominance, and has no chance of becoming hegemonic.<sup>42</sup>

Anthropologist Fanny Ambjörnsson endorses Connell's definition of emphasised femininity (although she uses the term "normative femininity").<sup>43</sup> Though she explores multiple femininities and the dynamics that order them in a hierarchy, Ambjörnsson stresses that the concept of hegemony is not applicable to femininity. Although there are privileged forms of femininity, masculinity is always dominant and using the label of hegemony runs the risk of under-communicating women's constant subordination. Therefore, it is better to speak of emphasised femininity, as this indicates that there are multiple femininities with varying social status, but that these are always subordinate to hegemonic masculinity.<sup>44</sup>

Connell stresses that not all women embody compliance with patriarchy and maintains that there are many different strategies of femininity, including those formed around resistance towards male dominance and heteronormativity. However, she claims that all femininities in one way or another are constructed in the context of male dominance. Therefore, even deviant femininities are inextricably embedded in a cultural system that privileges men over women.<sup>45</sup> Emphasised femininity sustains cultural elevation through hindering alternative femininities from reaching the collective consciousness.<sup>46</sup>

### 6.2.2 Hegemonic tendencies of priestess femininity

Connell's universal assumptions have been criticised for overlooking the vast differences between different cultures and subcultures. Although I stress the value and usefulness of Connell's theory of gender, I will argue that the gender system of Wicca contests claims that femininity cannot be hegemonic, as the social and spiritual scene of Wicca displays processes through which women establish sub-cultural dominance.

Hence, one aim of this thesis is to point to an alternative femininity – the priestess – that is not constructed as a response to male dominance in its own subculture. Certainly, Wicca exists in a patriarchal society, and feminist discourses in the religion are very much constructed in a context of disillusionment with that society. Still, the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>43</sup> Ambjörnsson, *En klass för sig: genus, klass och sexualitet bland gymnasietjejer*, Stockholm: Ordfront 2004, p. 63.

<sup>44</sup> Ambjörnsson, 2004, p. 314.

<sup>45</sup> Connell, 1987, pp. 182-183.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

Wiccan community is a mixed-gender subculture where femininity is privileged. This is highly unusual. Although the construction of the priestess in early Wicca matches emphasised femininity, the gender subversive contributions of a number of feminist authors initiated a destabilisation of the traditional gender system, enabling the hegemonic tendencies of priestess femininity and other a-traditional forms of gender performance among Wiccans today.

I do not claim there to be only one “Wiccan femininity”. I will primarily be discussing the construction of the priestess femininity and its hegemonic tendencies today, leaving an analysis of the power hierarchies between different forms of femininities to future research. I am also aware that the term “hegemony” can be problematic, as Connell uses the term to describe the legitimisation of a gender system built on exploitation and violence. It is absolutely not my intent to imply that the gender system of Wicca is sustained in a similar way. However, I believe the term to be useful as Connell’s theory benefits the understanding of priestess femininity.

The Wiccan priestess is a subculturally dominant femininity. It falls outside the boundaries of emphasised femininity, and exists in a subculture that tends to elevate women above men. Practitioners of Wicca are redefining masculinity and separating it from dominance over women, making a clear break with the ideals of hegemonic masculinity. Wicca celebrates many values that have traditionally been connected with women. Labelling the priestess as a hegemonic femininity might be overstating the case since it is only culturally privileged in this specific subculture, and it is not my intention to downplay structural inequalities between men and women that are very likely to affect Wiccans in other areas of their lives. Nonetheless, I will present the hypothesis that the modern Wiccan scene is one where priestess femininity shows hegemonic tendencies.

## **7 Literature review**

Pagan studies is a relatively new but expanding field of research, spanning across the areas of history, anthropology and psychology of religion. During the preparations for this thesis, I have studied a number of works within this field that will be briefly presented below. Ronald Hutton’s *Triumph of the Moon* traces the cultural origins and

development of Wicca in Britain, and is invaluable to anyone wishing to explore this topic.

Helen Berger's *A Community of Witches*, Jone Salomonsen's *Enchanted feminism* and Kathryn Rountree's *Embracing the witch and the goddess* are anthropological studies of different forms of witchcraft around the Western world that provide insights into the similarities and differences between various forms of witchcraft and their development.

*Belief beyond boundaries*, edited by Joanne Pearson, includes some very useful chapters on Wicca. "The history and development of Wicca and Paganism" and "Witches and Wicca", both by the editor, outline the emergence of Wicca and the development of the image of the witch as a symbol of women's empowerment respectively. AltaMira Press's Pagan Studies series, including *Introduction to Pagan Studies* by Barbara Jane Davy and the reader *Researching Paganisms* are equally valuable introductions to anyone wishing to study Paganism. Sarah M. Pike's article "Forging magical selves: gendered bodies and ritual fires at neo-pagan gatherings", published in *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft* discusses how gendered identities are constructed at Pagan festivals.

Swedish anthropologist of religion Åsa Trulsson has conducted extensive fieldwork among practitioners of what is probably most accurately labelled Goddess spirituality. Though her main focus is ritual creativity, Trulsson discusses the construction of gender in relation to performativity in a few chapters of the book.

## 8 Background

### 8.1 Definition of key terms

#### 8.1.1 Paganism

The focus of my study is constructions of femininity within the Pagan mystery tradition of Wicca. The distinction between Wicca and Paganism is important, especially when writing about gender. Constructions of gender differ greatly across the many Pagan traditions, and my conclusions are not applicable to the entire Pagan community.

As is the case with most world religions, Paganism is an umbrella term comprising several different traditions.<sup>47</sup> However, there is some disagreement as to what kind of spirituality the term 'Paganism' indicates. The British Pagan Federation defines Paganism as "a polytheistic or pantheistic nature-worshipping religion". This emic definition excludes organisations such as the Temple of Set or groups working with, for example, Hellenistic reconstruction. Most scholars would argue that these traditions are also Pagan as their adherents work with pre-Christian deities, though the fact that they are not specifically nature venerating means that they fall outside the PF definition. Despite its limitations, however, I will be using the Pagan Federation's definition. It fits the purpose of my thesis as it sums up what my informants have in common, and allows me to analyse their views as part of the same cultural tradition, although their ideas diverge on many points.

The above definition of Paganism also fits Davy's views. Though Paganism's lack of formal creed complicates the issue of definition, Davy describes Paganism as comprising the traditions of Wicca, Druidry, Heathenry (Germanic Paganism), Shamanism, Reconstructionist traditions<sup>48</sup> and Goddess spirituality. The latter is subject to some controversy, which I will discuss briefly later. It is difficult to make any generalisations regarding Pagan beliefs although, as Davy says, there are certain trends. Most Pagans are polytheists and acknowledge multiple gods and goddesses, and believe that divinity is at least partly immanent. Many tend to have an idealised view of nature (but as stated above, this is not true of all Pagan traditions). Most Pagans have a belief in magic, and some Pagans practise various forms of spell casting.<sup>49</sup>

Although many Pagans honour deities from cultures such as ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome, scholars concur that modern Paganism is not an outgrowth of ancient beliefs and customs but a revival and reconstruction of ancient traditions, shaped by contemporary cultural trends.<sup>50</sup> In this thesis I will thus be spelling modern Paganism with a capital 'P' to mark its separateness from ancient traditions.

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<sup>47</sup> Davy, 2007, p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> Reconstructionist traditions attempt to recreate the religious beliefs and customs of a specific culture, and tend to work exclusively with the traditional pantheon of that culture as opposed to many other denominations within Paganism that are often eclectic in terms of deities. One example of a modern reconstructionist tradition is Asatru, a form of Heathenry (see Gregorius, Fredrik, *Modern asatro: att konstruera etnisk och kulturell identitet*, Lund: avdelningen för migrationsvetenskap, Centrum för teologi och religionsvetenskap 2008).

<sup>49</sup> Davy, 2007, pp. 5, 13-14; Rountree, 2004, pp. 6-7.

<sup>50</sup> Davy, 2007, p. 6.

### 8.1.2 Wicca

The largest tradition within Paganism is Wicca. Most scholars attribute Wicca to Gerald Gardner, a British civil servant who claimed to have been initiated into a coven of witches practising an ancient form of witchcraft. Scholars who have examined these claims agree that Gardner invented the story to make Wicca seem more legitimate. Instead, scholars concur that Gardner assembled the system of beliefs and rituals that came to form Wicca from many different of sources including *fin de siècle* ceremonial magic and the Romantic poets.<sup>51</sup>

By tradition, Wicca is duotheistic, meaning that Wiccans see divinity as manifested in a god and a goddess.<sup>52</sup> Wiccans work together in autonomous groups, so-called covens, which traditionally consist of thirteen people. The main branches in Britain are Gardnerian and Alexandrian Wicca.<sup>53</sup> Gardnerian and Alexandrian covens worship the Goddess and her consort, the Horned God. They emphasise polarity between male and female as well as other opposites such as light and dark and life and death, et cetera. The belief that energy is raised when a man and woman work together is expressed in the fact that a High Priestess and/or a High Priest lead the covens, covens divide into male-female couples for ritual work, and initiations pass from male to female or vice versa. Wiccans also celebrate eight seasonal festivals, referred to as sabbats. Gardnerian and Alexandrian covens have three initiatory grades, the grade indicating a person's skill and experience.<sup>54</sup>

Originally, the terms Paganism and Wicca were used almost interchangeably in England. All Pagan Federation presidents were Wiccan until very recently and the organization's magazine, now called *Pagan Dawn*, was known as *The Wiccan* up until 1994.<sup>55</sup> Today, Paganism is autonomous from Wicca.<sup>56</sup> Wicca traditionally refers to an initiatory mystery tradition, but the term is increasingly used to describe very different

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<sup>51</sup> Rountree, 2004, pp. 6-7.

<sup>52</sup> Davy, 2007, p. 5.

<sup>53</sup> Alexandrian Wicca was established by Alex Sanders and his wife, Maxine Sanders. Alexandrian Wicca is largely based on the Gardnerian tradition, although the Alexandrian tradition focuses more strongly on ceremonial magic (Pearson, "The history and development of Wicca and Paganism, Joanne Pearson (ed.) *Belief beyond boundaries: Wicca, Celtic spirituality and the new age*, Aldershot: Ashgate 2002a, p. 35).

<sup>54</sup> Pearson, 2002a, p. 35.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40-42.

phenomena. Today, many self-style themselves Wiccans without actually being initiated witches.<sup>57</sup>

Pearson argues that Wicca took on a different form when it reached North America and was integrated with the women's spirituality movement, resulting in the birth of feminist witchcraft, becoming less hierarchical and more political.<sup>58</sup> Feminist witchcraft, also referred to as Goddess spirituality, has an ambivalent position in relation to Paganism. Groups are often open to women only, and practitioners of feminist witchcraft generally ignore the male aspect of divinity, wherefore many Wiccans are adverse to its inclusion under the term "Paganism".<sup>59</sup> Davy and Pearson are of a similar mind, claiming that feminist witchcraft is separate from both Paganism and Wicca for the same reason.<sup>60</sup>

I concur that Goddess spirituality is a separate tradition as I would agree that the acknowledgement of both male and female divinities as an integral part of Paganism. This is a crucial distinction in this, as my claims regarding the hegemonic tendencies of priestess femininity do not apply in the same way to Goddess spirituality, although femininity is clearly central to it. The subversive potential of gender constructions within Wicca and Goddess spirituality respectively will be addressed in the final chapter.

## 8.2 Historical and cultural origins

Hutton traces the ideological origins of Wicca to the Romantic poets. As a response to urbanisation, industrialisation and general disillusionment, the Romantics began to idealise ancient Greek culture and religion, and projected onto it everything they felt was lacking in modern society: sensibility, enchantment and closeness to nature. Ancient paganism was depicted as the embodiment of ancient wisdom and free spirituality, ideals that later came to permeate the self-image of modern Paganism and Wicca. Ancient deities such as Diana and Pan were seen as symbols of a society where people lived in harmony with the land.<sup>61</sup>

The Romantic Movement also shaped the Wiccan view of the deities. The Wiccan ideal of the Great Goddess of nature and the moon, comprising all other goddesses is a distinctly modern construction. In ancient times, goddesses represented such diverse

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., pp. 42-43.

<sup>58</sup> Pearson, 2002a, p. 36.

<sup>59</sup> Rountree, 2004, p. 8.

<sup>60</sup> Davy, 2007, p. 7; Pearson, 2002a, pp. 36-37.

<sup>61</sup> Hutton, 1999, pp. viii, 20-21, 27.

concepts as justice, love, wisdom and war, and most were connected to civilisation rather than nature. However, ancient Greeks viewed the earth as feminine and the sky as masculine, and it is this dichotomy that has come to shape Wiccan images of the divine. The Romantic Movement's idealisation of nature, intuition and irrationality – qualities that have traditionally been associated with women – led to an increased interest in nature goddesses. As a result, many of the civilisation-related goddesses were pushed into the background, creating the view of the Great Goddess connected to earth, fertility and the moon and shaping gender constructions in early Wicca.<sup>62</sup> As I will argue later, the notions that femininity is associated with have diversified considerably over time, now including many concepts unrelated to either of these early Goddess characteristics.

Wicca is also a product of the occult revival of the *fin de siècle*. Both Hutton and Pearson stress the influence of occult societies on Wicca, arguing that much of Wiccan ritual structure and symbolism can be traced to the influential English ceremonial magician Aleister Crowley.<sup>63</sup> A potent example of Crowley's influence on Wicca can be found in the Wiccan Rede, the most important moral guideline in Wicca: "An it harm none, do what ye will." This statement is derived from Crowley's Law of Thelema, which reads: "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law."<sup>64</sup>

Pearson states that the growing interest in Western Esoteric currents at the beginning of the 20th century laid the groundwork for the popularisation of Paganism and Wicca.<sup>65</sup> She partly attributes this trend to the first wave of feminism inspiring women to search for alternative gender roles, also in their spiritual practice. During this time, many women were attracted to spiritualism and mixed Masonic orders such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn,<sup>66</sup> where they could be leaders alongside men.<sup>67</sup> History of religions' scholar Henrik Bogdan also claims that these traditions were appealing to women who wanted to liberate themselves from repressive gender roles emphasised by the monotheistic religions.<sup>68</sup>

Despite having women in leading positions, I am doubtful that the occult societies offered quite so radical gender roles as is implied by these authors, and will briefly

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<sup>62</sup> Hutton, 1999., pp. 32-33.

<sup>63</sup> Pearson, 2002a, p. 24; Hutton, 1999.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>66</sup> Pearson, 2002a, pp. 21-22.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>68</sup> Bogdan, "Women and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn", Alexandra Heidle & Jan A.M. Snoek (eds.), *Women's agency and rituals in mixed and female Masonic orders*, Leiden: Brill 2008, pp. 236-237.

return to the issue of gender in *fin de siècle* occultism later on.<sup>69</sup> However, desire for gender equal spirituality seems to have been an important motivation for women to join these traditions in the early and mid-20th century, and still is for many women today.<sup>70</sup> This link between Wicca and a search for female empowerment could partly explain why later influences from American feminism and women's spirituality were so readily accepted into British Wicca, subsequently influencing the construction of the priestess.

## 9 Wiccan priestess femininity from a historical perspective

### 9.1 Gerald Gardner and emphasised femininity

Gardner's two first publications on Paganism and witchcraft were the novels *A Goddess Arrives* (1939) and *High Magic's Aid* (1949). Hutton remarks that the plotlines of both novels indicate Gardner's traditional view of gender. The heroines of both books are young, beautiful and scantily clad, and always defer to the male protagonist.<sup>71</sup> *Witchcraft Today* (1954), Gardner's first non-fiction work on the subject of witchcraft as well as one of the most important Wiccan texts, also reveals his initial aversion towards homosexuality, and he threatens same-sex couplings with the "curse of the goddess".<sup>72</sup> However, the book contains relatively little about femininity, and the Gardnerian *Book of Shadows* is much more illuminating when it comes to Gardner's view of women. Despite honouring the divine feminine and elevating women to the position of religious leaders, Wicca did not originate as a feminist tradition. I will argue that Gardner's view of femininity is congruent with Connell's emphasised femininity.

Even though Wicca was a spiritual forum in which women could achieve significantly more power than what was available to them in many other religious communities at the time, this power did not come without requirements. An examination of exactly how Gardner envisioned the ideal High Priestess sheds light on his somewhat ambivalent attitude towards female authority. The following quote from the Craft Laws will illustrate this point:

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<sup>69</sup> See Hedenborg White, "Revolutionsikon eller Playboygudinna?", *Aura*, in-press, for an analysis of femininity in Thelema, the spiritual and philosophical system founded by Aleister Crowley.

<sup>70</sup> See pp. 24-25.

<sup>71</sup> Hutton, 1999, p. 224.

<sup>72</sup> Gardner, *Witchcraft today*, London: Rider and Company 1954, p. 69.



13.And the High Priestess shall choose whom she will, be he of sufficient rank, to be her High Priest.14.For, as the God Himself kissed Her feet in the five-fold salute, laying His power at the feet of the Goddess because of Her youth and beauty, Her sweetness and kindness, Her wisdom and justice, Her humility and generosity, 15.So He resigned all His power to Her. 16.But the High Priestess should ever mind that the power comes from Him. 17.It is only lent, to be used wisely and justly. 18.And the greatest virtue of a High Priestess be that she recognize that youth is necessary to the representative of the Goddess. 19.So she will gracefully retire in favour of a younger woman should the Coven so decide in council. 20.For a true High Priestess realizes that gracefully surrendering pride of place is one of the greatest virtues. 21.And that thereby she will return to that pride of place in another life, with greater power and beauty.<sup>73</sup>

Lines 13 through 15 refer to the myth of the Goddess's descent into the underworld. This myth details how the God of Death falls in love with her beauty and promises her power if she surrenders to him. The Goddess is lent the God's power after allowing herself to be scourged, and the tale describes how the Goddess's power is not from herself, but must always be lent to her by the male God.<sup>74</sup> Line 15 names "youth and beauty", "sweetness and kindness", "wisdom and justice", "humility and generosity" as the traits that define the Goddess and entitle her to the power originating in the male divine principle. Line 16 clarifies that power is something that must always come from the male principle, and that the High Priestess cannot use it freely. Gardner thus indirectly states that, although the High Priestess is the ruler of the coven, she can only wield her power in such a way that pleases her male counterpart.

Doreen Valiente, a highly influential Wiccan woman initiated by Gardner in 1953 was critical of the Craft Laws, which later caused a split between the two, and accused Gardner of sexism. Gardner, however, did not invent the male-female, active-passive dichotomy, and was not the first to consider the male principle to be the source of all power and the feminine as a tool or shrine for divine energy. On the contrary, the equation of femininity with passivity is prevalent throughout Western history, Western esotericism being no exception.<sup>75</sup> Aleister Crowley, arguably one of the most influential occultists of the century, clearly thought that women could never provide the magical

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<sup>73</sup> Gardner, *Witchcraft and the book of shadows*, Thame: I-H-O books 2004, pp. 226-227.

<sup>74</sup> Gardner, 1954, pp. 47-48.

<sup>75</sup> Salomonsen, 2002, p. 92.

power necessary to fuel a ritual: "For a woman does not carry in herself the principle of new life, except temporarily, when it is given her."<sup>76</sup> Although Gardner places the High Priestess at the centre of the coven, he is thus building on a long tradition of viewing the male as the real source of power and divine essence.

Lines 17 through 20 state that a woman is only fit to be High Priestess as long as she is young, as indicated by the myth of how the Goddess is lent her power because of her youthful beauty (line 14). A reasonable interpretation of this is that the High Priestess is only entitled to her position as long as her sweetness and desirability are able to intoxicate the God or High Priest to the point that he wants to lend her the power that is really his. This way of defining ideal femininity as that which is most appealing to men correlates with Connell's definition of emphasised femininity.

In *The Meaning of Witchcraft*, Gardner elaborates on his views on the perfect woman, and what he writes largely endorses my interpretation of the passage on female authority in the Craft Laws. The following quote confirms my hypothesis that Gardner's idea of the ideal High Priestess is very similar to Connell's notion of emphasised femininity:

It must be clearly realised that not all women are regarded as representatives of the Goddess. It is only those who are recognised as being young and lovely, loving and generous, motherly and kind. In fact, those who possess all those qualities which can be summed up in the one word "sweetness". They should be Man's Ideal; in that way they may be worthy to have the spirit of the Goddess invoked to descend upon them.<sup>77</sup>

As is evident from the above quotes, priestess femininity is very far from hegemonic in Gardner's mind. His writings construct the gender order as originating from the needs of the male, corresponding with Connell's description of the cultural position of hegemonic masculinity. The experienced and authoritative High Priestess that has come to dominate in later decades is very different from Gardner's ideal High Priestess, who is an embodiment of Connellian emphasised femininity. For Gardner, the most important thing is not that a priestess is skilled, educated or proficient in magic, as long as she is physically beautiful, acknowledges her own graceful surrender to the whims of the High

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<sup>76</sup> Crowley, *Magick, Book Four, Parts I-V*, York Beach: Samuel Weiser 1994, p. 169.

<sup>77</sup> Gardner, *The meaning of witchcraft*, London: The Aquarian Press 1959, p. 111.

Priest as the highest virtue, and accommodates the desires and needs of her male ruler. When the High Priestess is no longer attractive to her male counterpart she must resign. Like Connell's concept of emphasised femininity, Gardner's ideal woman is defined by her ability to always be pleasing to men.

## 9.2 Starhawk and the influence of American feminism

Wiccan priestess femininity may have remained within the framework of emphasised femininity were it not for the 1960's and 70's, the time of the sexual revolution and the advent of the second wave of feminism, when Pagan witchcraft reached North America through the works of leading Wiccan authors. Hutton claims that the chief consequence of the exportation of Wicca was its integration into the women's spirituality movement, adding that this assimilation was inevitable as the witch is one of few images of female autonomy and power that Europe has ever produced and America is the source of much feminist thought, radical feminism in particular.<sup>78</sup> In America, however, the witch was originally a political symbol without religious connotations until Hungarian refugee Zsuzsanna Budapest, inspired by radical feminism and the works of Charles Leland and Gerald Gardner, founded Dianic Wicca, a feminist separatist branch of witchcraft focusing exclusively on the divine feminine.<sup>79</sup>

Miriam Simos, alias Starhawk, bridged the gap between separatist witchcraft and the mixed-gender Wicca of the Gardnerian and Alexandrian traditions. Inspired by Z Budapest, radical feminism and feminist theologians such as Mary Daly,<sup>80</sup> she founded the Reclaiming tradition. First published in 1979, her book *The Spiral Dance* has come to replace Gardner's *Witchcraft Today* as the principal must-read among aspiring witches.<sup>81</sup> Starhawk is an initiate of Gardnerian and Faery Wicca,<sup>82</sup> and created a gender-inclusive tradition that emphasised the divine feminine. In her interpretation, the coven became a forum for women's empowerment and the reconstruction of both male and female gender roles, with the Goddess as the primal source of power and the Horned God as the embodiment of a new, non-oppressive masculinity.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Hutton, 1999, pp. 340-341.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 344.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., pp. 345-350.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 345.

<sup>82</sup> Faery Wicca is an American witchcraft tradition developed in the 1970s by Victor and Cora Anderson and Gwyddion Pendderwen. Faery Wicca is less focused on gender polarity than other Wiccan traditions (Pearson, 2002a, p. 38)

<sup>83</sup> Hutton, 1999, p. 346.

Pearson distinguishes clearly between British Wicca and American traditions such as Reclaiming that focus more on political action than on the occult mysteries.<sup>84</sup> I agree that there are significant differences between Wicca in its traditional sense and many of the American witchcraft traditions it has spawned, though I feel that Pearson somewhat overstates the gap between British and American Wicca. As stated above, *The Spiral Dance* is one of the most widely read books on witchcraft in Britain as well as the US. The American synthesis of witchcraft and feminism has greatly affected Paganism and Wicca in Britain, influencing leading Wiccan authors such as Doreen Valiente and Janet and Stewart Farrar.<sup>85</sup> As I will argue later, this blend of spirituality and ideology has affected my informants, and shaped the subsequent development of Wiccan priestess femininity.

Starhawk's views of gender have changed since *The Spiral Dance* was first published, and she is an example of the critique of heteronormative gender polarity and Jungian theory that has mounted in the Wiccan community over the last few decades. Though Starhawk's views by no means represent all Wiccans, similar ideas have been voiced by my informants as well as gay, lesbian and transgender witches who feel that the traditional emphasis on gender polarity is exclusive.<sup>86</sup> The changes in Starhawk's attitude become apparent in the introduction to the tenth anniversary edition of her book:

I believed, along with Jung, that each woman had within her a male self, and each man a female self. Now I find these concepts unhelpful and misleading. Today I don't use the terms *female energy* and *male energy*. I don't identify femaleness or maleness with specific sets of qualities or predispositions. While I have found images of the Goddess empowering to me as a woman, I no longer look to the Goddesses and Gods to define for me what a woman or man should be. For any quality that has been assigned to one divine gender can elsewhere be found in its opposite. If we say, for example, 'Male energy is aggressive,' I can easily find five aggressive goddesses without even thinking hard. If we say 'Female energy is nurturing,' we can also find male gods who nurture.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Pearson, 2002a, pp. 37-38.

<sup>85</sup> Hutton, 1999, p. 365.

<sup>86</sup> Berger, 1999, pp. 43-44.

<sup>87</sup> Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: a rebirth of the ancient religion of the Great Goddess* (20th anniversary ed.), San Francisco: HarperCollins 1999. p. 20.

Starhawk does not deny the existence biological gender, but her critique of a heteronormative view of creation is reminiscent of Butler:

Why are there two sexes? For the same reason we cut the cards before we shuffle the deck. Sexual reproduction is an elegant method of ensuring maximum biological diversity. Yet I would no longer describe the essential quality of the erotic energy flow that sustains the universe as one of female/male polarity. To do so enshrines heterosexual human relationships as the basic pattern of all being, relegating other sorts of attraction and desire to the position of deviant.<sup>88</sup>

Starhawk does not see deities as ideals to be imitated by humans, especially when it comes to gender. As pointed out in the first quote, the Goddess can be an empowering concept to a woman who has grown up in a patriarchal culture that defines divinity as male. However, gendering the ideals one aspires to limits human experience and the traits men and women develop.<sup>89</sup> I believe that priestess femininity may never have developed hegemonic tendencies within Wicca were it not for the influence of Starhawk and similar writers, whose ideas seem to have infused Wicca with a commitment to improving the world and liberating women.

### 9.3 Vivianne Crowley and Jungian gender

#### 9.3.1 Basics

Gerald Gardner's idealisation of emphasised femininity represents the gender roles from which Wicca has developed. Through Starhawk, American feminist theory became integrated into much of British Wicca. I now wish to demonstrate the extent to which the ideal of the empowered and authoritative priestess is different from Gardner's view of femininity, and will here be analysing an example of Wiccan gender theory, post-Starhawk. Vivianne Crowley, a well known Wiccan High Priestess and author of multiple books on Paganism, makes use of Jungian theory in *Wicca: the old religion in the new millennium* (1996). This book has been hugely influential, and is listed among

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<sup>88</sup> Starhawk, 1999, p. 20.

<sup>89</sup> Starhawk, 1999, p. 20.

recommended books on Wicca by the British Pagan Federation.<sup>90</sup> Although not representative of all Wiccans (as will become clear when I present the results of my interviews), Crowley's book is thus a suitable "case study" of modern Wiccan gender construction.

Although becoming increasingly criticised, the gender theories of psychoanalyst Carl Jung have been quite popular in Wiccan circles. According to Jung, each person has an unconscious self, constructed from universal archetypes and repressed parts of the personality. This is referred to as Anima for men and Animus for women, and is usually opposite to the persona, the self that is shaped through social interaction. This dualism tends to be gendered, meaning that men have a repressed feminine side and vice versa. Jung argued that balance must be achieved between the masculine and feminine sides of the personality,<sup>91</sup> but he has been enormously criticised for his sexist and stereotypic view of women. Yet, Crowley re-interprets the patriarchal aspects of Jungian theory quite radically, and builds on the post-Starhawk tradition of challenging Gardner's view of femininity.

### 9.3.2 Independent and demanding

In accordance with Wiccan tradition, Vivianne Crowley describes the Goddess as tripartite, and manifested as Maiden, Mother and Crone. The term "maiden" does not imply chastity but independence, and is the proper title for "a woman not owned by or needing man".<sup>92</sup> This view of maiden goddesses is not uncommon among Pagans and Wiccans, and two of my informants told me of their fondness for the maiden goddess Artemis because of what she symbolises; namely, female potential not related to fertility, motherhood or sexuality. As the above quote demonstrated, this is a view they share with Crowley.

In her second aspect, Crowley's Goddess is the Lover-Mother, the sexually mature queen. This view of the Goddess is also different from Gardner's emphasised femininity, and is described by Crowley as follows:

What kind of man dares to want a woman whose sexuality may be stronger than his? (...) He must be as generous and brave as she. This is the woman

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<sup>90</sup> Pagan Federation, "Pagan books", <http://www.paganfed.org/pagan-books.shtml>, 2011-12-12.

<sup>91</sup> Connell, 2005, pp. 12-13.

<sup>92</sup> Crowley, *Wicca: the old religion in the new millennium*, London: HarperCollins 1996, p. 141.

who has sexual expectations, not the Heavenly Virgin who is content with only adoration. This is the Goddess before whom a man might fail.<sup>93</sup>

As is clear from the above quote, Crowley parts ways with Gardner in that the feminine is no longer defined by its ability to appeal to the masculine. It is not the High Priestess who sacrifices her authority when she is no longer young enough. On the contrary, Crowley consistently uses the Goddess as the starting point, and the God's development is defined and determined by his willingness to acquiesce to the Goddess's requests, both sexual and otherwise.<sup>94</sup> Crowley stresses that women are not to be considered passive receptacles of male power or tools to be used at men's disposal, but independent subjects in control of their own lives.<sup>95</sup>

Crowley writes that society teaches women that they are inferior. She also writes that stereotypic gender roles are limiting to both men and women, as society places restrictions on what types of behaviour are acceptable within the framework of femininity and masculinity.<sup>96</sup> Crowley writes that it is important for women to access their masculine side, Animus, and for men to unite with their feminine side, Anima, in order to achieve balance. Wicca gives women more authority so that they may get to know the sides of themselves that society may have repressed:

One of the most important things which Wicca teaches a woman is a sense of control over her own destiny which she may not have learned in the outer world. (...) It is woman who has ultimate power. In taking on the role of priestess, a woman demonstrates for herself her own inner power and for other women and for other women provides a much needed role of strong womanhood to which they can aspire. When she has experienced this sense of power, a woman's Ego can become strong and from this position of strength she can move forward.<sup>97</sup>

As I interpret the above quote, an unequal power balance tipped to women's advantage is not the ultimate goal. Still, it is a necessary step along the way, allowing women to disengage themselves from the subordination, inferiority and compulsory pleasantness

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<sup>93</sup> Crowley, 1996, p. 145.

<sup>94</sup> Crowley, 1996, pp. 145, 161-163.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

that society expects from them. Only then can women break free of subordination and become whole human beings. Crowley writes:

The image of women offered by Wicca is one of wholeness and strength. The priestess is seen as possessing qualities that have traditionally been monopolized by men: Word, Power, Meaning and Deed.<sup>98</sup>

### 9.3.3 Recreating priestess femininity

I would like to re-emphasise that, although Crowley's view of femininity seems far more representative of Wiccans today than Gardner's, this was not always the case. Far from possessing traditionally masculine characteristics, Gardner's priestess femininity fit the qualifications for emphasised femininity perfectly. Crowley's views of the empowered priestess are radically different. The Goddess is autonomous from male power, and it is her demands that are emphasised. Rather than the female adjusting to accommodate male desires, it is the God who must surrender and sacrifice himself for her.<sup>99</sup> Hence, Crowley's view of the sexes provides an alternative to Gardner's highly stereotypic gender roles. As I will argue in the final part of this thesis, Crowley's views seem far more representative of Wicca today.

R.W. Connell accuses Jung of being unscientific and speculative, and points to dangers in the Jungian view of gender. Jung views the polarity between masculine and feminine as a universal psychological structure present within each human being. Following this mode of thought, these concepts can never be transcended, and the best one can hope for is a shift in the balance between masculine and feminine. A traditionally Jungian view of patriarchy thus holds that it is not the dualism between masculine and feminine that is at fault, but the fact that humanity has undervalued the latter.<sup>100</sup> In this sense, Jung is the opposite of Butler, according to whom the very notion of binary gender is at the heart of patriarchy.

Connell also writes that Jungian theory has been used as an argument against feminism, as it has been stated feminists tilt the balance too far in the other direction and cause men to become soft as they lose touch with their inner masculinity.<sup>101</sup> I agree with Connell that Jung's concept of gender is problematic, and that Jung's own gender

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<sup>98</sup> Crowley, 1996., p. 146.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., pp. 162-164.

<sup>100</sup> Connell, 2005, p. 13.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, pp. 13-14.



constructions were patriarchal. Viewing gender as polar opposites and the psyche as constructed from a polarity between masculine and feminine does not liberate one from the concepts that, historically, have been used to legitimate women's subordination.

However, Crowley's views of gender demonstrate how two sexist views of femininity: Jung's and Gardner's can be radically re-interpreted. By challenging the connections between physical femaleness and the characteristics of emphasised femininity, Crowley's construction of priestess femininity is subversive. Without this kind of re-construction of polarity, gender and priestess femininity, it is likely that the latter would not be exhibiting hegemonic tendencies today.

In Crowley's work, it is not emphasised femininity but the transcendence of it that is the priestess ideal. Crowley encourages women to step into traditionally masculine, dominant roles in order to develop psychologically and become subjects in control of her own destiny. As I have mentioned, Connell writes that the inherent passivity and compulsive "pleasantness" embedded in emphasised femininity prevents it from ever gaining cultural dominance. In Butlerian terms, Crowley's work subverts the connection between physical and social gender and redefines priestess femininity. Thus, priestess femininity here is equated with many of the characteristics that enable a gendered expression to become hegemonic. I will argue that the ideas of Crowley and similar writers have been essential in recreating priestess femininity in Wicca, without whose contributions it would never have developed hegemonic tendencies.

## **10 Fieldwork findings**

I have now provided a background of priestess femininity, and will now present the results of my fieldwork in London, emphasising my interviews with Sophie, Ellie, Zoe, Susan, Lisa and Zaq. If Gardner's views represent one end of the scale, my informants' responses exemplify how priestess femininity is shaped among Wiccans today. I have chosen to structure the chapter thematically, as this will facilitate the reader's understanding of how my informants' views relate to the aims of my thesis.

### **10.1 Polarity**

As stated above, the interpretations of gender polarity have changed throughout the last half-century. Making polarity a literal concept, the early Wiccan authors stressed male to female or female to male initiation, standing alternately man and woman in the circle

and always working together in male-female couples. In different ways, my Wiccan informants are re-interpreting polarity. Most are of the opinion that male-female polarity is not the literal basis of the cosmos. Instead, they choose to see masculine and feminine as an accessible model to apply to what is actually more neutral in order to understand it. Sophie says about polarity:

I don't think that really in the most profound, ultimate sense that the male-female polarity is the basis of the cosmos. I think it's important for my species. (laughs) And also because of how we're socialised, that that's an important distinction. And it is for reproduction. So you could say: "There are blue eyes and non-blue eyes, there are either left-handers or right-handers", and you say: "Ooh, the polarity of left-handers and right-handers" and actually it's pretty arbitrary. But gender somehow doesn't feel it and I don't think our society really understands how much of that is social and how much is inherent.

Sophie is critical of people who interpret the model of polarity to mean that men and women are born with different capabilities. She observes that many in the Wiccan community subscribe to the Jungian model of masculine and feminine archetypes, but does not do so herself, viewing Jung's traditional views on what constitutes masculinity and femininity as limiting.

In Zoe's opinion, the dualism between male and female is just way of viewing polarity, which she compares to magnetism. She explains that positive and negative, north and south are just as accurate descriptions. Zoe likes to work with the gods Apollo and Dionysus who, according to Zoe, have opposite personalities. As such, they too embody the concept of polarity. In the end, Zoe feels that everybody embodies the balance of the polar opposites.

Ellie is ambivalent towards gender polarity. In accordance with Wiccan tradition she worships divinity in the form of a God and a Goddess, but has trouble reconciling this fact with her scepticism towards gender essentialism and her belief that gender is not the most important distinction between people. Still, Ellie theorises that it may be necessary to gender the gods to be able to relate to them, since gender is constructed as an important distinction in society.

Like Zoe, Ellie and Sophie, Lisa sees the male-female polarity as one way of understanding the divine, but does not take it too literally. In her view, masculine and

feminine are just one of many pairs of opposites that one must achieve balance between. Also, Lisa is critical of the Wiccan tradition of seeing masculine and feminine as polar opposites. She stresses that this dualist view is inaccurate, as people exist on a spectrum and not as embodiments of either one of two personality types.

## 10.2 Nature or nurture?

My informants' views diverge on the extent to which they think gender is biologically determined. However, they are all convinced that socialisation is very important. Zoe believes that biology affects the personalities that people develop, but at the same time, she does not think biology is inescapable. Zoe also states that gender is socially constructed, and that a person who has spent their time developing the skills that the opposite sex normally has will be no less apt at those things. Zoe says that gender stereotypes can be harmful as many people do not feel comfortable in traditional gender roles.

Like Crowley, Zoe emphasises the importance of developing one's personality fully, and of exploring different sides of one's personality so as not to lose any abilities. On the subject of deity, Zoe states that a person who is instinctively drawn to very feminine deities should consciously challenge themselves and try to work with traditionally masculine deities also.

None of my informants feel that certain roles or behaviours are more appropriate for men or women, or that the sex one is born into should ever have to limit the choices one makes. On the contrary, they all seem to agree that an essentialist emphasis on biology can be quite problematic. Whatever gender is, a majority of my informants agree that the issue is important. Whether nature or nurture, we are all inherently gendered. Therefore, viewing deity as gendered can help us relate to it. This is congruent with Butler's theories. Butler states that gendering is *the* process through which a person becomes "humanised", without which we are unable to relate. Thus, gendering deity can be a way of anthropomorphising and facilitating a relationship with the divine.

Yet, Lisa warns against overly gendering divinity. While viewing oneself as a representation of the God or Goddess can be empowering, focusing overly on binary gender leads one to ignore the many points on the scale that lie "in-between" what is considered masculine or feminine.

### 10.3 Female authority and women as spiritual leaders

During our conversations, several of my informants described Wicca as attractive to women due to its emphasises on gender equality and feminine authority. While Zoe feels that the authoritative femininity construction of Wicca is a continuation of what she has always felt, Susan and Sophie name this aspect of Wicca as one of their main reasons for being drawn to the religion, and describe their first contact with the notion of priestesses and feminine divinity as revelatory. Sophie speaks with great passion about her experiences reading Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance*:

I almost felt the room go in and out. It was a huge "oh my god"-moment. And I thought, "I've had the wool pulled over my eyes." [...] And I became instantly and absolutely, passionately... [...] I thought, "for this I will die". I could understand the suffragettes, suddenly. They were about the vote and I am about priestesses.

Susan describes similar experiences. When she was young she attended a Christian school, but lost faith when she realised that, although the Christian god is said to represent everything, he is always depicted as male. When Susan discovered Paganism, she felt that it had what Christianity lacked: a feminine image of divinity.

Ellie, Sophie, Zoe and Lisa all mention that the High Priestess is widely thought to be more important than the High Priest. Therefore, women are treated with a certain deference that men cannot quite achieve. Ellie and Sophie state that this distinguishes the Wiccan community from the rest of British society, where it is more rare to see women in positions of authority and there is not the same respect for women's voices.

Sophie mentions several Wiccan couples of her acquaintance, all of which have been involved in the community for many years. Although the men have been practicing Wicca for just as long as their wives, the latter tend to be granted more authority and people listen more carefully when they speak. Sophie is certain that her experience of the Pagan community would have been quite different if she had been a man: "A woman can be a priestess, and priestesses have power in a way that men just don't", she observes.

My informants provide different explanations for women's dominance in Wicca. Ellie states that, as initiation passes from male to female or vice versa, only women could claim to have been initiated by the "founding fathers" of Wicca. The legacy from occult

societies means that it is important whom one has been initiated by. Thus, when Sanders and Gardner passed away, their female initiates were “next in line” in terms of authority.

#### 10.4 Departure from emphasised femininity

Zoe, Ellie, Lisa and Sophie all mention changing gender roles in the Wiccan community. Zoe talks about how, originally, Wicca mainly attracted men as it drew largely on very male-dominated traditions like Freemasonry and ceremonial magic. Ellie endorses this, stating that up until the 1970’s, the image of Wicca was much that of other secret societies. When Wicca originated, Ellie claims, High Priestesses were not as organisationally powerful as they are today. She uses the example of a conversation with an older Wiccan acquaintance on the subject of wearing makeup during ritual.

...the generation above me is still very much of their time. We were talking about whether you wear makeup in ritual or not. [...] there are some that say that you shouldn’t because you should do those things completely clean. But then somebody older said: “Oh, but I thought we were supposed to look beautiful!”. And I was like: “Ah, but you’re presuming that you don’t look beautiful without makeup.”

The same issue was discussed at a pub moot I participated in, where opinions were varied. Many felt that makeup could be used to create a certain atmosphere during ritual, or to connect with a specific deity; for instance, one might wear smoky eye makeup to create a darker mood. An older woman stated that she would not wear makeup if conducting a ritual for the Goddess, but that she always wears makeup when working with the God as she feels that he, being male, probably appreciates her making an effort to look attractive.

Ellie thinks that there may be a generational divide when it comes to the image of the priestess. She states that the High Priestesses of Gardner and Sanders were much like muses. These priestesses were ritually central as representatives of the Goddess, but their role extended to looking beautiful and alluring and being worshipped on a pedestal rather than making organisational decisions or study difficult occultism. Today, however, Ellie says that the priestesses she knows are more like project administrators, having an organisational authority that was not attributed to them 50 years ago.

Sophie describes a similar shift in the construction of femininity, claiming that there used to be a stereotype that only men learned difficult occult subjects like the Kabbalah. This is no longer the case, as Sophie and other women of her generation have made a point of studying these subjects and encouraging younger women to do the same. Sophie is emphatic about this, stating that it is important that women are able to hold their own in the community so as not to fall into traditionally feminine and subordinate roles. The fact that Wiccan women today are highly concerned with technical issues of spiritual life was also apparent from the pub moot mentioned above. The participants eagerly dissected even minor issues, debating how to interpret different aspects of Pagan and Wiccan tradition.

Whereas Gardner (as mentioned above) did not appreciate older women as High Priestesses, Sophie states that aging women have a strong position within the Pagan community today. The already great respect with which women are treated in the Pagan community increases with age, age being equated with experience, knowledge and proficiency.

### **10.5 Men in the Wiccan community**

Several of my informants expressed concern at the declining number of male Wiccans, suggesting several reasons for which men may be hesitant to become Wiccans today. Ellie and Zoe agree that the public image of witchcraft has been feminised, partly due to popular culture consistently portraying witches as female. Also, Zaq and Ellie observe, much of the beginners' literature on Wicca and Paganism is "pink and fluffy" and usually aimed at women, a fact that may impact the number of men that are drawn to Wicca as one usually discovers the tradition through books. They both argue that the feminist movement of the 1970's and the then constructed connections between witchcraft, Goddess spirituality and women's emancipation may have created an image of Wicca as something that is mostly meaningful to women.

Women also have more authority in the Wiccan community, another fact which may be difficult for men to handle. Sophie notes that many of her male Wiccan friends have struggled against the feeling of being drones who will never hold any real power. She theorises that the men that manage it either do not have very strong ego demands, or have their egos taken care of in other departments and thus feel no need to assert

themselves among other Wiccans. Ellie endorses this view, saying that the emphasis on women's authority is likely to be a "complete turn of the head" for most men.

Sophie says that she does not have a problem with the tilted power balance in Wicca, as the rest of society privileges men above women. However, she adds, her attitude in this issue hinges on the rest of society, and that she might have responded differently in a hundred years when the power balance in the rest of society may have shifted. Zoe states that allowing women more power is a nice gesture after thousands of years of patriarchy. Still, she expresses concern that over-stressing the feminine may discourage men from joining Wicca altogether.

Lisa and Ellie are rather critical of women having more authority than men; both stressing that tilting the power balance towards matriarchy is not the same as equality. Lisa describes how people in the Wiccan community expect her to be more dominant than her husband, something that she resents:

I would say that the "empowered woman" is a stereotype in some aspects of the Pagan community. However, I don't actually see this as always real empowerment. Elevation to dominance is a double-edged sword. In my mind equality is the only true empowerment.

The subject of Wicca being female dominated was also discussed at the above-mentioned pub moot, which consisted of 7 women and 2 men. Many of the women expressed appreciation for the witches depicted in the popular TV-series *True Blood*, as several of these witches are male. One interjects that the group of witches only features a few men, and that most of them are either gay or mad. "Just like in real life then!", several of the women joke.

### **10.6 Criticism of heteronormativity**

One of the reasons for which Wiccans today are challenging polarity is its implications for gay, lesbian and transgender persons. Heterosexual symbolism forms the traditional basis of Wicca. Zoe says that, although she herself finds the symbolism beautiful, she understands why many today are searching for alternative symbols:

The first groups that started the Wiccan traditions, I think by pure coincidence they were all straight. And so they built their traditions on their own experiences and didn't really think about what it would be like if you

weren't straight, I just don't think it occurred to them... So they worked with all these images about chalices and knives, and male and female and thought it was very beautiful to work with. Which it is. But it doesn't work for everyone, because it's not everyone's experience. So as time goes on, people recognise that more and more and they build in more and more...

Zoe mentions an occurrence in the US where transgendered women were turned away from a Dianic ritual, sparking heavy debates about transgenderism in the Pagan community.<sup>102</sup> Zoe is deeply critical of the ritual organisers who did not want to admit transgender women, but believes that negative attitudes towards transgenderism is more of a generational issue than due to any inherent transphobia in Wicca or Paganism. People who grew up in a time where transgenderism was almost invisible are set in their ways, and unwilling to change the way they look at things. However, Zoe has faith that this will disappear with the younger generation that seems to be far more open-minded.

Lisa states that, as much as she feels the language of Paganism and Wicca to be more liberating than those of many other philosophies, she is doubtful that it is always empowering to people whose experiences fall outside the frameworks of heteronormativity. She herself is critical of heteronormativity in the Wiccan community, and feels that the emphasis on polarity is in many ways limiting, as it is not representative of reality. She is critical of normative heterosexuality, and rebels against the fact that despite her being bisexual and having had long-term relationships with women, new acquaintances automatically cast her as heterosexual because she is now married to a man.

The heteronormative narrative structure seems to be present in other areas of Paganism as well. Zaq, a practitioner of Heathenry, speaks of his experiences as a transgender male (FTM) in the Pagan community. Zaq works with the chaos god Loki and has very little interest in the Goddess and feminine mysteries, something he feels that other Pagans would be more accepting of if he had been born genetically male. Many Wiccans he has met have had trouble accepting the fact that someone born in a genetically female body has no interest in female deities. Zaq explains this partly by the

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<sup>102</sup> The Lilith ritual organised at PantheaCon, an international convention held yearly in the US, sparked intense debate between practitioners of Dianic witchcraft and transgender advocates. See <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/wildhunt/2011/03/transgender-inclusion-issue-intensifies.html> for a summary of the discussions following the event.



fact that he feels that women who identify as men are more accepted in society, but also that the Wiccan community puts a great emphasis on connection with one's feminine sides. Zaq blames "fluffy bunny authors" and the depiction of Paganism in popular culture for the idea that men can work with chaos and darker forces whereas women cannot.

## 11 Discussion

I have now outlined the results of my informants, and will now be discussing my informants' responses in from the perspective of changing gender roles in Wicca. Below, I will relate the results of my interviews to the ideas of Gardner, Starhawk and Crowley as well as the theories of Butler and Connell, tracing the developments of priestess femininity and concluding with a discussion of the possible consequences of the hegemonic tendencies of this femininity.

### 11.1 Challenging polarity

Despite working in a tradition that emphasises polarity, my informants do not feel that the sex one is born into should determine the choices one makes in life. On the contrary, they are all in agreement that rigid gender roles and over-emphasis on a dualist gender system can be limiting. However, there seems to be a contradiction in terms between literal interpretations of gender polarity as fundamental to magic and non-limiting gender roles. My informants therefore present a variety of re-interpretations of gender polarity. Although this may or may not be their intention, it is my opinion that there are gender subversive elements in many of their strategies to avoid gender stereotyping while retaining the concept of polarity generating energy.

Writers like Starhawk and Vivianne Crowley have gone a long way in challenging the traditional polarities, making way for a re-configuration of femininity.<sup>103</sup> Starhawk used the traditional labels of masculine and feminine in the first edition of *Spiral Dance*, but even then the boundaries between the two were beginning to blur, as the feminine principle was not just depicted as a distillate of beauty, nurturing or motherhood and the masculine principle embodied many traditionally feminine traits.<sup>104</sup> In later editions, Starhawk distances herself further from traditional polarity. While admitting that the

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<sup>103</sup> See pp. 17-19 and 19-21 respectively for discussions of Starhawk and Crowley.

<sup>104</sup> Starhawk, 1999.

polarity between male and female can be used as a model of explanation to understand the incomprehensible, she is critical of using gendering labels to explain the world as this ultimately limits human development and self-expression.<sup>105</sup>

Crowley uses Jungian theory to explain polarity, but removes Jung's originally patriarchal standpoint and argues that women should explore traditionally masculine traits such as dominance, authority and aggression while men should acquaint themselves with compliance and self-sacrifice to develop as people.<sup>106</sup> Although Crowley talks of masculine and feminine archetypes, her work makes these concepts increasingly difficult to define, the same being true of Starhawk's writings. In fact, one could say that Crowley is recommending that women and men strive for the opposite characteristics that society expects people of their sex to display. While men are encouraged to develop the traits that are forbidden to hegemonic masculinity, women should take a lesson from it.

Despite his emphasis on the Goddess, Gardner held the God to be the source of all power.<sup>107</sup> Crowley clearly distances herself from this, instead viewing the Goddess as the starting point in relation to which the God is defined. One might even argue that Crowley's God bears traits of a sort of emphasised masculinity, as the "real man" is defined as the man who partners with the Goddess without dominating or controlling her, and who responds to her needs. In this instance, the Goddess becomes a hegemonic femininity, as her demands determine the logic of the divine (gender) order.

## 11.2 Subversion of the gender system

Priestess femininity could not have been disassociated from emphasised femininity and developed hegemonic tendencies if leading Wiccans had not begun to subvert the original gender system of the religion. In my opinion, Crowley's concepts of gender are subversive, although I take the liberty of re-interpreting Butler's concept of subversion slightly (I would here like to note that, though Crowley destabilises parts of the gender system, the above-mentioned book reproduces the connection between sex and desire aspect of the heteronormativity within Wicca. This is being challenged today, and I will discuss the issue later). Butler's theory states that the gender system that legitimates patriarchy and heteronormativity can only be destabilised "from within". The intelligible

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<sup>105</sup> Starhawk, 1999, p. 20.

<sup>106</sup> Crowley, 1996, pp. 95-96.

<sup>107</sup> Gardner, 2004, pp. 226-227.

ways of “doing gender” cannot be escaped, but the gender system can be subverted if the established categories are separated from their usual contexts. By demonstrating alternatives to the normative connections between sex, gender and desire, the foundations of inequality are disrupted.<sup>108</sup>

Admittedly, using labels such as “feminine” and “masculine” as representative of essential truths is not particularly Butlerian. However, Crowley disrupts the connection between these labels and their usual characteristics, as well as between the labels and the biological sex they are normally connected to. She refers to familiar narratives such as the hero’s quest that are normally used to describe male psychological development, but claims that this myth is just as applicable to women. This creates a conundrum: is it possible to talk about masculinity and femininity if there is no connection between these terms and particular characteristics or biological features? Furthermore, is it meaningful? Regardless of her original intention, Crowley widens the concepts to the point that their distinguishing function is almost extinguished, subverting many of the connections that sustain heteronormativity and patriarchy.

Subversivity can also be ascribed to those of my informants that speak in terms of masculinity and femininity. They describe these notions as archetypal and as elements contained by all people, regardless of the body they are born into. The system of archetypes becomes increasingly vague when it comes to deities. Rather than being attracted to traditional models of femininity, my informants are drawn to a-traditional images of masculinity and femininity such as Dionysus and Artemis. The concept of archetypal, essential gender is thus separated from that of social gender. Moreover, the concept of archetypal gender is separated from physical gender as women are also described as embodying the male principle. Again, this is making use of established categories but rendering them empty and scrambled.

### **11.3 Deconstruction of emphasised femininity**

Gardner’s construction of femininity as characterised by passivity, attractiveness and submission is congruent with Connell’s notion of emphasised femininity. Emphasised femininity, though culturally revered is a configuration of gendered practices that never

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<sup>108</sup> Butler, 1999, p. 43.

threatens to destabilise patriarchy or the cultural dominance of hegemonic masculinity it is equated with passivity, acquiescence and compliance.<sup>109</sup>

Connell states that all femininities are constructed in the context of patriarchy. As in Gardner's Craft Laws, femininity exists only in relation to the culturally privileged form of masculinity. Though there are non-complicit forms of femininity that a woman can step into, divergence from the gender practices comprised by emphasised femininity comes at the price of losing cultural privilege.<sup>110</sup> This was also true in the case of Gardner's High Priestesses who, according to the Craft Laws, forfeited their positions if they threatened to transcend the limits of emphasised femininity.

From what my informants' have told me about the Wiccan community today, the construction of priestess femininity has changed radically since Gardner wrote the Craft Laws. Developing out of something akin to emphasised femininity in the wider society, the priestess is now beginning to display hegemonic tendencies. As I have demonstrated, this can also be verified by studying the changing femininities constructed in Wiccan literature over the last few decades. The works of Starhawk and Crowley are potent examples, subverting the connection between biological and social femaleness by encouraging women to embrace traits that are almost opposite to emphasised femininity instead of telling High Priestesses to step aside when the High Priest no longer finds them alluring. These leading Wiccan authors are producing and elevating a new ideal femininity built on the transcendence of traditionally feminine roles, and imbued with many of the characteristics that have allowed hegemonic masculinity to retain cultural dominance. I believe that this kind of thinking has played a significant part in recreating femininity and imbuing it with hegemonic tendencies.

A second example, located more closely in everyday Wiccan practice but no less fascinating is the use of makeup during ritual. 60 years ago, people like Gardner saw the ability to embody the Goddess determined by conventional beauty standards. Female Wiccans were thus supposed to make themselves look attractive before participating in ritual. Today, this is not something that everyone does. The change is illustrated by Ellie's anecdote about the generational divide in terms of opinions in this matter. Using Butler's theory, makeup is performative.

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<sup>109</sup> Connell, 1987, pp. 183-185.

<sup>110</sup> Connell, 1987, pp. 183-185.

When women wear lipstick and mascara during a ritual and men do not, this perpetuates gender difference by appealing to conventional notions of masculine and feminine attractiveness. Traditionally, Wiccan rituals are conducted “sky clad”, meaning that the participants do not wear clothes. This could be one reason for which the question of makeup becomes important, as lack of clothing means that one performative venue is closed. The issue of makeup is no longer part of a collective concern with the priestess’s appearance as a condition for her being allowed to represent the Goddess, but a matter of personal taste. This is an example of how priestess femininity is being revisioned with priestesses emerging as autonomous subjects rather than the ornaments of the coven.

A third example that shows that the role of women in Wicca has changed regards the study of theoretical and technical occult subjects such as the Kabbalah.<sup>111</sup> Sophie and Ellie both attest to the fact that in the past, the norm used to be that this and similar subjects were male domains. Sophie tells me that in her youth, older men in the Pagan community who found her attractive often approached her. These men offered to teach her these subjects, but always warned her that she, a young girl, would probably find them too difficult. Sophie and Ellie both claim that throughout the last three decades, women have made a point of entering these areas and encouraging younger women to do the same. The women Sophie mentions who share her commitment to this cause are prominent members of the Wiccan community.

By embracing knowledge that is traditionally coded as masculine and making it part of women’s practice, these women are counteracting the popular stereotype of women as irrational and emotional. As stated by Connell,<sup>112</sup> the view that rationality is a masculine characteristic is one of the main defences of patriarchy, and Connell concurs that rationality is one of the main traits of hegemonic masculinity. It is therefore not difficult to realise the subversive power these women’s efforts have in separating femaleness from the feminine stereotype of irrationality. Stretching the framework of femininity to encompass knowledge of advanced occultism ensures that women are gradually being constructed as crucial to the accumulation and passing on of knowledge within the community. Arguably, at least partly controlling the reproduction of knowledge in a community is key to the establishment of hegemony.

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<sup>111</sup> The Kabbalah is a mystical tradition that combines orthodox Judaism, Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, and Aristotelianism.

<sup>112</sup> Connell, 2005, pp. 164-165.

#### 11.4 Transcending heteronormativity?

Heteronormativity is the assumption that biological gender, social gender and sexual practice should be organised so that biological men exhibit masculine behaviours, and desire and form relationships with biological women, or vice versa. Based on this definition, Wicca begun as a heteronormative tradition as is obvious from Gardner's clear connection between biological gender, gender roles and heterosexual practice. However, these connections seem to be at least partly disintegrating within the Wiccan community. As demonstrated above, the connection between biological femininity and traditionally feminine roles are being continuously deconstructed, enabling the hegemonic tendencies of priestess femininity.

The matter of normative heterosexuality in Wicca is a complex one. The voices of gay, lesbian and transgender members of the Wiccan community have sparked debate and fuelled a search for alternative and non-limiting symbols.<sup>113</sup> The centrality of sexual polarity within the religion seems to have motivated the revisioning of polarity as a concept.<sup>114</sup> As illustrated by Zoe's example of Apollo and Dionysus, many Wiccans are open to finding polarity between two deities of the same sex.

However, the elevation of certain types of femininity could be problematic in the case of transgender men. Zaq observes that he and other Pagan men are often encouraged to "embrace the woman" within, something that angers Zaq. Starhawk and the feminist influence on witchcraft has largely focused on reclaiming a lost goddess and women's spirituality for women to be empowered by.<sup>115</sup> It is possible that the emphasis on reclaiming femininity, despite its liberating effects for many Pagans, can be problematic when physically female Pagans do not feel inclined to embrace "the woman within", as this may be interpreted as disapproval of women's empowerment.

The debate around the exclusion of transgender women from the ritual at PantheaCon is a related but different example. Whereas Zaq is sometimes encouraged to embrace femininity, implying that femininity is archetypal and "up for grabs" rather than biologically determined or essential, the Dianic witches at PantheaCon who turned

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<sup>113</sup> Berger, 1999, p. 43-44.

<sup>114</sup> For reinterpretations of heteronormative polarity in Wicca, see Landstreet, "Revisioning polarity or, what's a nice dyke like you doing in a polarity-based tradition like this?", *Gaywitch.org*, <http://www.gaywitch.org/Musings/AlternateCurrentsRevisioningPolarity.aspx>, 2012-12-14 and Faerywolf, "The queer craft: rethinking magical polarity", *Feritradition.org* <http://www.feritradition.org/witcheye/queercraft.html>, 2012-12-14.

<sup>115</sup> Salomonsen, 2002, pp. 214-220; Berger, 1999, pp. 37-40.

away transgender women from the ritual did so because that they did not feel that people growing up without the experience of a female body, menstruation and pregnancy could properly comprehend the experience of being a woman. This implies a view that gendered experience is, ultimately, contingent on being born with certain physical attributes.

Based on my study, I cannot draw any conclusions as to the prevalence of transphobia in the Wiccan community, or whether it affects transgender men more often due to the hegemonic tendencies of femininity within the community. I will leave it to future research to explore the issue of transgenderism in Wicca and Paganism more thoroughly. A study of the experiences of transgender people in the Pagan community would certainly deepen the understanding of how polarity, gender and sexuality are interpreted.

### 11.5 Men in the Wiccan community

In the founding days of Wicca, men outnumbered women among practitioners of the religion. Today, the gender balance is quite the opposite. Likely as a result of the feminisation of the image of Wicca, partly due to influence from radical feminism and the women's spirituality movement, women are now in majority. This poses a set of challenges to practitioners of Wicca, some of which were outlined by Zoe, Ellie, Sophie, Lisa and Zaq.

Firstly, the connection between the witch as a cultural symbol and women's empowerment, established in America during the 1970's<sup>116</sup> may have created the impression of Wicca being "women's business". As the image of Wicca as a women's tradition is more strongly rooted in popular culture than in older Wiccan literature, it is plausible that the trend of feminisation will continue unless something happens.

Sophie points to the experiences of male Wiccans. She says that many struggle with the knowledge that they will never hold power in the way that a priestess can, and adds that quite few men seem to be able to deal with this though, as Sophie observes, the situation would likely be the opposite at a British law firm where a woman would never carry the same gravitas as a grey-haired man. Interpreted through Vivianne Crowley's discussion of psychological development, men being made to come to terms with

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<sup>116</sup> Hutton, 1999, pp. 340-341.

subordination could be a path to enlightenment.<sup>117</sup> However, there is also the risk that many men simply choose to leave Wicca for another spiritual path that offers greater opportunities in terms of authority.

Wiccans' general firmness on the point that their spirituality is not for everyone and that for that case they do not wish to convert people is incompatible with the concept of restructuring the community to appeal to a greater crowd. Nevertheless one could argue that there may be some undesirable consequences should the power gap widen. One such possible disadvantage has been indicated above: namely, that under certain circumstances, transphobia may increase in the community.

Ellie and Lisa are concerned that the emphasis on the Goddess and priestesses will lead to a gender system that is just as imbalanced as patriarchy, albeit tilted in the opposite direction. This may indeed be a legitimate concern. I feel that the hegemonic tendencies of priestess femininity within Wicca have positive aspects in that they expose the arbitrariness of patriarchy and show that gender power structures are socially constructed rather than biologically predetermined. The hegemonic tendencies of priestess femininity as characterised by Starhawk, Crowley and my informants is also subversive of heteronormativity in that physical femaleness is separated from traditionally female roles.

Yet, the fact that Wiccan priestesses have proven to be just as capable leaders as men implies that male and female leadership is not so different after all and as male dominance has a troublesome history, it is quite possible that female dominance would have similar consequences eventually if one assumes that women are no more caring, nurturing or motherly than men. I absolutely do not claim that this is the case in the Wiccan community today, but merely wish to register my concurrence that any form of hegemony will inevitably develop less charming traits.

Helen Berger argues that witchcraft traditions that include both men and women are far more likely to survive than all-women's groups. Spiritual practices that are able to draw both men and women are also easier for participants to integrate into everyday life as children of both sexes, spouses and lovers can be part of the tradition as well. This decreases the risk of conflicts of interest within families as one parent must stay home and tend to the children while the other attends rituals. Berger also claims that witchcraft traditions in which both men and women participate are more likely to

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<sup>117</sup> Crowley, 1996, p. 146.



impact the construction of gender within society at large, as these groups become a “social laboratory” for the redefinition of both femininity and masculinity.<sup>118</sup>

A related aspect pointed out by Connell among many others, is that gender is always relational. This means that categories only become meaningful when they exclude certain phenomena. In this case, the categories “woman” and “feminine” are only meaningful in the context of a gender system, the opposite end of which consists of the categories “man” and “masculine”.<sup>119</sup> The exclusion of men from a tradition does not mean that the concept of gender is eradicated, however, as the community still exists in a society where men also live. This is demonstrated by the opinions of representatives of Dianic witchcraft at PantheaCon who, despite belonging to a feminist separatist tradition, have notions of what constitutes femaleness and maleness respectively.

However, it is also illustrated by the case of PantheaCon that separatist communities, under the wrong circumstances, run the risk of developing skewed views of the opposite sex. In Dianic witchcraft, there are no men *inside* the tradition. As such, men become outsiders, running the risk of them being defined as “the Other”. As is often the case when a group of people separate the world into binary categories of “us” and “them”, differences within the categories are disregarded while differences between the two categories are overstated. This became can be applied to the Dianic witches who did not accept transgender women at a women-only ritual. In Butlerian terms, these women’s actions were the precise opposite of gender subversion as their decision to exclude transgender women was built on the assumption that genetic femaleness is linked to certain roles and experiences in life. Evidently, separatist groups like identity politics, risk perpetuating the dualist understanding of gender that is the foundation of patriarchy.

### 11.6 Towards hegemonic femininity?

For the cultural dominance of hegemonic masculinity to be disrupted, the heteronormative gender system must be subverted. In different ways, prominent authors and today’s Wiccans are disconnecting femaleness and feminine characteristics from their traditional location in the gender system. Thus, space is made for a radical revisioning of priestess femininity and a differently gendered hegemony.

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<sup>118</sup> Berger, 1999, pp. 13-14.

<sup>119</sup> Connell, 2005, pp. 43-44.

In several ways, my informants' responses point to the hegemonic tendencies of priestess femininity within Wicca today. Zaq notes that he is repeatedly questioned for not being interested in the feminine aspect of the divine. This could be seen as a symptom of lingering gender essentialism among Wiccans who feel that Zaq should identify with the biological gender he was born into. Still, Zaq does not believe that transgender women (MTF) are prompted in the same way to embrace their inner man. Therefore, it is possible that the criticism Zaq encounters is a symptom of the subcultural emphasis on femininity.

Lisa, Zoe and Ellie disapprove of how many in the community put a greater emphasis on the Goddess than the God. Lisa observes that the "empowered woman" seems to be a stereotype in the Wiccan community, and that people expect her as a Wiccan woman to be more dominant than her husband. Sophie stresses that a man can never hold the same authority within the community, as the role of the organisationally and ritually more important priestess is limited to women.

Throughout Wiccan history, priestess femininity has been re-interpreted to comprise concepts such as authority, knowledge, experience and power. In Ellie's view, this may be partly due to the fact that women were "closest to the throne" when Gardner and Sanders passed away, as Wiccan initiation passes from male to female (or vice versa). I believe it is possible that women such as Valiente who had the experience of patriarchal rule of Wicca were more than ready to embrace American feminism and inject it into British Wicca.

As is apparent by the answers of Lisa, Zoe, Ellie and Sophie, women tend to be more important within the Wiccan community, and the High Priestess has more power than the High Priest. Wiccan priestess femininity has been re-interpreted as synonymous with the above-mentioned values. It is not unlikely that the system at some point becomes self-perpetuating: when women's voices are valued higher, works by female authors may be more acknowledged, strengthening the associative link between femininity and authoritative knowledge, and consequently women's voices are valued higher. Thus, femininity is undergoing a process of hegemonisation within the Wiccan community, the outcomes of which are difficult to predict.

## 12 Conclusions

Using Judith Butler's theory of gender subversion and R.W. Connell's theories of gendered hegemony, I have attempted to demonstrate how the construction of the priestess, the culturally privileged femininity within Wicca, has developed since founder Gerald Gardner published his first books on witchcraft. Gardner's view of the priestess was congruent with Connell's notion of emphasised femininity as built on compliance, physical beauty and nurturing, and defined by its ability to cater to the emotional and material needs of the culturally dominant, hegemonic masculinity.

Today, priestess femininity is showing hegemonic tendencies. The term "hegemony" denotes the processes through which a group of people establish cultural dominance. Cultural dominance implies "control" over language, ideologies, norms and organisational structures. As such, the hegemonic group determines the internal logic of the culture. While hegemony is perhaps too strong a term to describe the processes taking place in British Wicca, its culturally privileged form of femininity, the priestess, is certainly displaying hegemonic tendencies.

I have also argued that modern Wiccan constructions of gender are subversive, even those that build on originally essentialist notions. Wiccan ideal femininity creates disruption in the gender system by separating biological femaleness from its usual social context. Although Connell argues that subordination and self-definition in relation to hegemonic masculinity is an ever-present facet of femininity,<sup>120</sup> Wiccans have managed to create a microculture where femininity becomes a subject in its own right, no longer defined by its relation to masculinity. In fact, author and High Priestess Vivianne Crowley inverts the gender system and defines masculinity by its relation to femininity.<sup>121</sup>

Wiccans' search for more inclusive symbols also separates the concept of polarity or difference from physical gender. Instead, polarity is increasingly sought in other dimensions of existence. An example of this is how one informant uses the gods Dionysus and Apollo as representative of polarity. These types of re-configurations challenge the patriarchal and heteronormative values of Gardner.

By exposing the arbitrary nature of the gender system that is built on the polarity between masculinity as defined by authority, mind, rationality, dominance et cetera,

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<sup>120</sup> Connell, 1987, pp. 183-185.

<sup>121</sup> Crowley, 1996.

against femininity as representative of intuition, body, irrationality and subordination, Wiccan constructions of gender are subversive. By means of this subversion of established notions of gender and femininity, priestess femininity has been linked to characteristics that enable subcultural dominance, thus creating the potential for a hegemonic femininity.

### **13 Summary**

The image of the priestess in Wicca, a duotheistic Pagan mystery and witchcraft tradition founded in the mid-20th century by British civil servant Gerald Gardner, has changed dramatically during the last few decades. Wiccans work together in so-called covens; autonomous groups traditionally consisting of thirteen people, lead by a High Priestess and a High Priest. Gardner envisioned the ideal priestess as submissive, sweet and nurturing, never standing in the way of her male counterpart. This ideal High Priestess was more of a muse than an organisationally powerful force in her own right. During the 1970's, Wicca was integrated with American radical feminism, enabling a revisioning of priestess femininity. Wiccans are subverting the traditional associations between physical femaleness and traditionally feminine traits, making it a cultural ideal for women to appropriate traditionally masculine and dominant characteristics. This subversion of the gender system has enabled priestess femininity as equated with the stereotypically male attributes of authority, proficiency and knowledge to be elevated to a subcultural ideal, with the consequence that women today are more important than men in the Wiccan community. In different ways, this may affect the future gender balance and views of LGBT issues in the Wiccan community, as well as constructions of gender in wider society.

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