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## **Mother Goddesses and Subversive Witches: Competing Narratives of Gender Essentialism, Heteronormativity, and Queerness in Wiccan Ritual and Theology**

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# Mother Goddesses and Subversive Witches:

Competing Narratives of Gender Essentialism,  
Heteronormativity, and Queerness  
in Wiccan Ritual and Theology

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# What is Wicca?

- ▶ **New Religious Movement** founded by Gerald Gardner in **1950s** England
- ▶ Reverence for **nature** and the earth
- ▶ Sacred calendar of eight Sabbats related to the **changing seasons**
- ▶ "**Neo-Pagan**" – part of the Pagan revival
- ▶ Worship of a **God** and a **Goddess**
- ▶ Importance of **Polarity** and Balance



# Counter-Culture: Feminist and Queer Friendly

- ▶ **Second Wave Feminist Movement** in the 1960s, 1970s
- ▶ Women's Leadership
- ▶ Goddess: **Reclaiming** the Divine Feminine
  - ▶ Women's bodies, imagery
- ▶ Counter-Culture and **Anti-Patriarchal**
- ▶ Sacred **Sexuality**
  - ▶ High representation of LGBTQ+ people
- ▶ Reclaiming the **Witch**
  - ▶ Empowering
  - ▶ Validating qualities at odds with the patriarchy



# So What's the Problem?

Research Question: Is Wicca truly inclusive of women and queer people?

- ▶ Gender Essentialism and Benevolent Sexism
  - ▶ there exists some **fundamental difference** between men's and women's qualities and essential natures by virtue of their **biology**
  - ▶ "Women make better parents because mothers are better nurturers"
- ▶ Heteronormativity
  - ▶ Men and women complement each other; **heterosexuality** is presumed and believed to be **natural, ideal**
- ▶ **Exclusionary to queer people, perpetuates archaic gender roles**



# Gender Theory

## Selected Theorists:

- ▶ Judith Butler (1990)
- ▶ Judith Lorber (1993, 1994)
- ▶ Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman (1987)
- ▶ Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000)
- ▶ Sara L. Crawley, Lara J. Foley, and Constance L. Shehan (2008)

## Key Points:

- Gender does not naturally arise from biological bodies
- Gender roles are socially constructed
- Biology does not “naturally” fall into a binary of “male” and “female:” we artificially construct and maintain a system of two sexes
- Both sex and gender fall on a spectrum, not into a binary polarity

# Binary Thought Patterns

- ▶ **Dualism** is the simplest categorization system: **mutually exclusive paired opposites** of either/or, one or the other
- ▶ Positive and negative connotations usually creep in – **the pairs are not equal, but ranked hierarchically**
- ▶ The **gender binary**: strong/weak, rational/emotional, mind/body, active/passive



# Methodology

- ▶ **Ethnographic Participant-Observation at a local Wiccan coven**

- ▶ November 2016 -- March 2017
- ▶ Weekly meetings ("classes")
- ▶ Seasonal rituals
- ▶ Attendance ~8-15 people
- ▶ Four leaders (Council): 3 High Priests, 1 High Priestess

- ▶ **Semi-Structured Qualitative Interviews**

- ▶ Purposive, Availability, Snowball Sampling
- ▶ Online Recruitment via Social Media
- ▶ 18 interviews, 16 usable
- ▶ 16 – 73 minutes, average ~45 minutes
- ▶ Wiccan and non-Wiccan Pagans
- ▶ A variety of sexual orientations and gender identities





# Polarity

- ▶ “Cosmic circuit”
- ▶ “Opposites Attract” elevated to the level of the sacred
- ▶ Balance

Spirit:  
Deity, Soul

Air:  
intellectual and  
creative pursuits,  
communication

Earth:  
the physical body,  
health, finances and  
the home, material  
stability



Water:  
emotion, psychic  
senses, intuition,  
love

Fire:  
passion, drive,  
willpower, lust

# Duotheism

- ▶ Men are from ~~Mars~~ the Sun  
Women are from ~~Venus~~ the Moon
- ▶ *"the feminine aspect, or the Great Goddess, is the **loving, motherly, nurturing, caring** side. [...] Where the God would be that **fatherly, stern, more harsh, stricter** kind of force."*
  - Gregory, High Priest, gay man



# Embracing Polytheism

- ▶ “Masks of the Divine: Male, Female, Both, and Neither”  
– Eldritch, Ritual Leader, gay man
- ▶ Finding the queer deities in myth
- ▶ *“One of the reasons I’m a polytheist is because [...] there’s lots of different genders, and the deities embody different genders as well, so you can ignore obviously the masculine principle and the feminine principle. There’s like [...] this god who embodies this type of masculinity and that goddess embodies that type of femininity and [...] that deity over there is genderqueer, and all the other options in between those positions.”* – Yvonne, Author, genderqueer





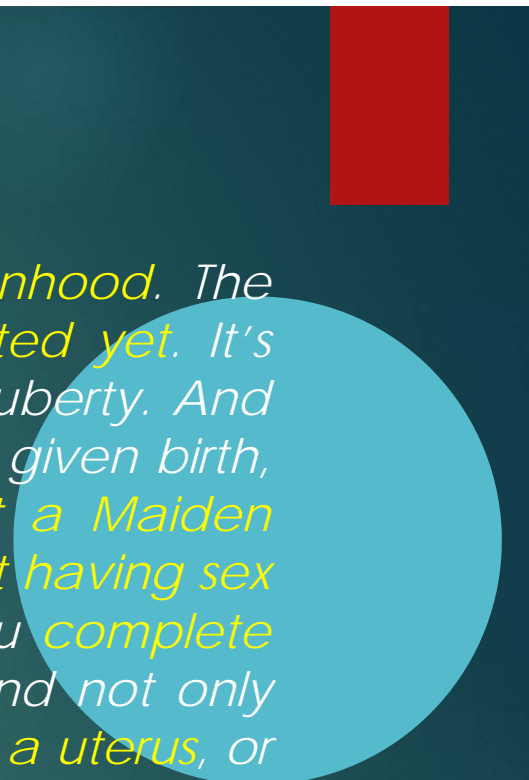
[http://paganjournal.blogspot.com/2014\\_01\\_01\\_archive.html](http://paganjournal.blogspot.com/2014_01_01_archive.html)

# The Triple Goddess

- ▶ Maiden
- ▶ Mother
- ▶ Crone

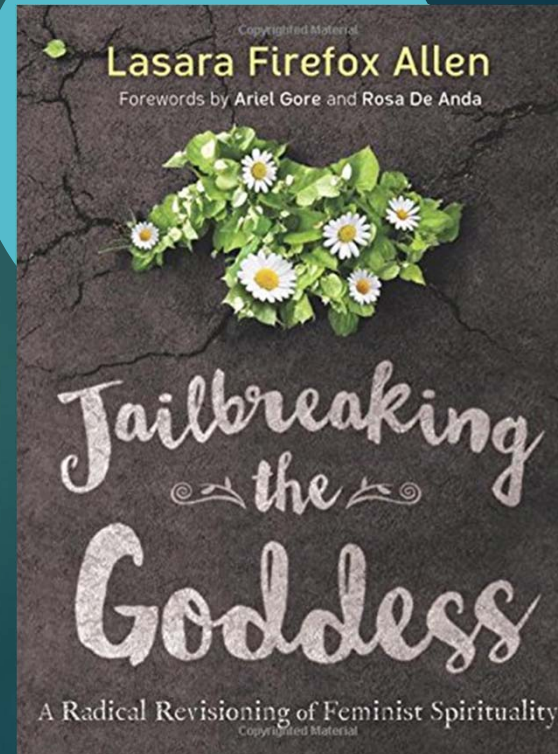




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- ▶ *"It's a very uterus-centric way to look at womanhood. The Maiden is the woman who has never menstruated yet. It's assumed that she will, someday, when she hits puberty. And then the Mother of course is the woman who has given birth, because [...] supposedly as soon as you're not a Maiden you're a Mother because you're supposed to start having sex [...] and then you keep being a Mother until you complete menopause, at which point you are a Crone. And not only does that exclude any woman who doesn't have a uterus, or who doesn't menstruate, or who doesn't have kids [...] but it also basically narrows a woman's purpose down into baby-making."* – Lupa, Pagan author and artist, bisexual woman
  - ▶ Trans women turned away from "women's-only" rituals because they don't know the "blood mysteries"

# New Ways of Understanding the Triple Goddess

- ▶ *"What I like about the Maiden/Mother/Crone model is that there's an implied transition between each of those phases. [...] And so it universalizes the experience of transition. Which is kind of the defining aspect of being trans."* – Quill, Druid, trans man
- ▶ *Jailbreaking the Goddess: A Radical Revisioning of Feminist Spirituality* by Lasara Firefox Allen (2016)
  - ▶ "The Five Faces of the Feminal Divine"
    - ▶ Femella, the primal child
    - ▶ Potens, the woman of strength
    - ▶ Creatrix, the maker
    - ▶ Sapientia, the wise woman
    - ▶ Antiqua, the old dreamer

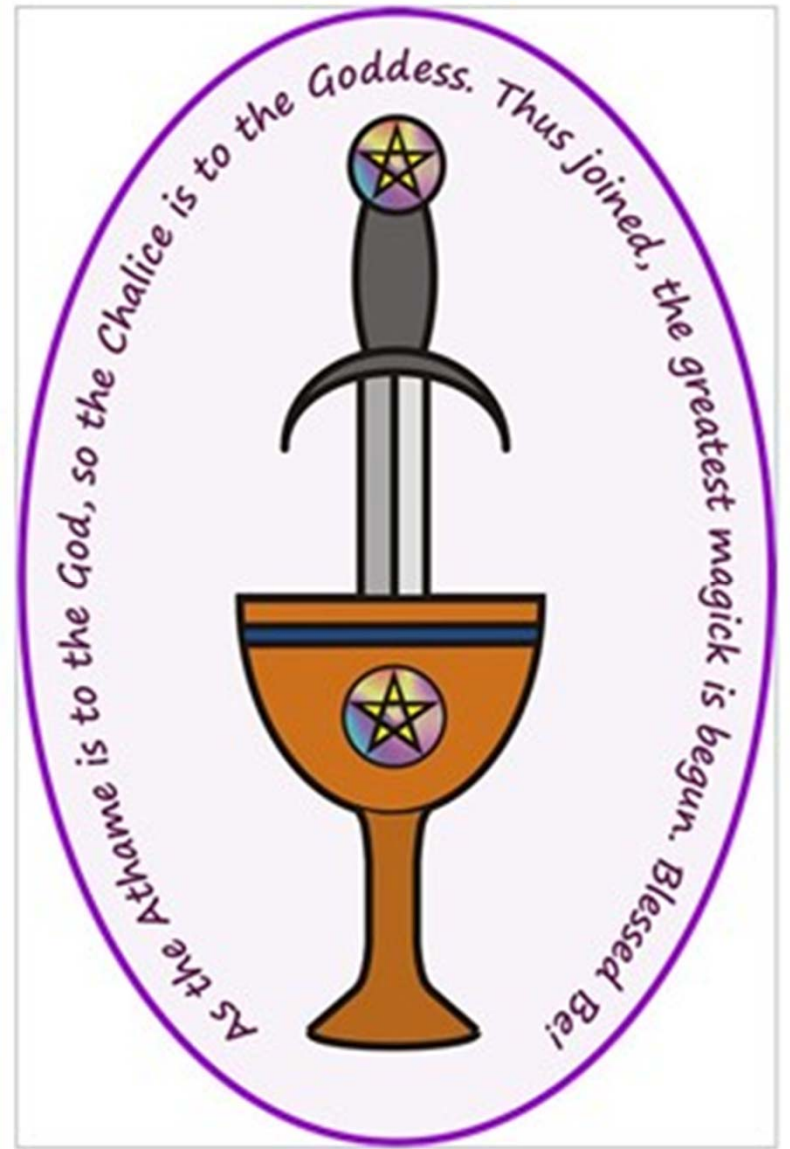


# The Great Rite

- ▶ The Ultimate Creative Act: the sexual union of the God and Goddess
- ▶ A celebration of "the Great Hetero Couple whose loving Creates the Universe" (Adler 2006:366).



[http://thewiccalife.blogspot.com/2011\\_03\\_01\\_archive.html](http://thewiccalife.blogspot.com/2011_03_01_archive.html)







# Beltane and the Maypole

- ▶ May 1<sup>st</sup>
- ▶ The **marriage** of the Goddess and the God, the **consummation**
- ▶ **Phallic pole**, **womb-like hole** (and wreath)
- ▶ *“basically wrapping the **magickal condom** upon the Lord’s penis”*  
-- Kat, covener, bisexual woman
- ▶ Queer people would need to undergo the **“active work of negotiation in order to attune their religiosity with their gender or sexual identity”** (Legape 2013:86).



# Gender Segregated Rituals Alienate Non-Binary People

- ▶ Ritual roles assigned by gender
- ▶ Group dance, weaving in and out: men going one way, women another
- ▶ *"I was not aware that this was going to happen before, and [...] I was standing there for one or two minutes before that part began being like, where do I go? Because I—especially that day I was like I don't feel either right now, I don't feel comfortable with either. It was distressing to me, and in the end I decided [...] okay, people are just going to expect this, I might as well. Just to avoid awkward conversations I didn't really want to have that night. [...] It was [...] that one moment [of] I have to make a choice and I don't really want to make this choice right now."*  
– Dylan, former member of the coven, genderfluid

# Queering Ritual

- ▶ “Genderqueered” ritual roles
  - ▶ Man playing the May Queen, woman playing May King
- ▶ Binaries and polarities more than male/female
  - ▶ Introvert/Extrovert
  - ▶ Self/Other
  - ▶ Lover/Beloved
- ▶ Eldritch’s “Maypole for All”
  - ▶ “hole-ish” and “pole-ish”
  - ▶ Fertility and Creation does not have to be reproduction
  - ▶ Celebrating all family forms



# Conclusions: Ambivalence

- ▶ Not all Wiccans claim to be feminist, or even know what to make of that term.
- ▶ Is Wicca feminist?
  - ▶ Yes, it empowers women – Kayla, bisexual woman
  - ▶ Yes, but it's second-wave, not third-wave (Lupa, Yvonne, Crystal)
  - ▶ Could be, defined itself as explicitly anti-patriarchal in the Women's Movement, but unsure if it has "lived up to the standards it set for itself" – Quill, trans man
  - ▶ "At its worst, yes" – Eldritch, gay man
  - ▶ "NO. Men can practice Wicca too!" – Starr, High Priest, gay man
- ▶ LGB people tend to feel included more so than the T and non-binary people
- ▶ Some Wiccans beholden to the traditional, heteronormative and essentialist ritual forms, others changing and adapting their practices



# Mother Goddesses and Subversive Witches



<https://www.pinterest.com/lemonhead540/wiccawitchcraft/>



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